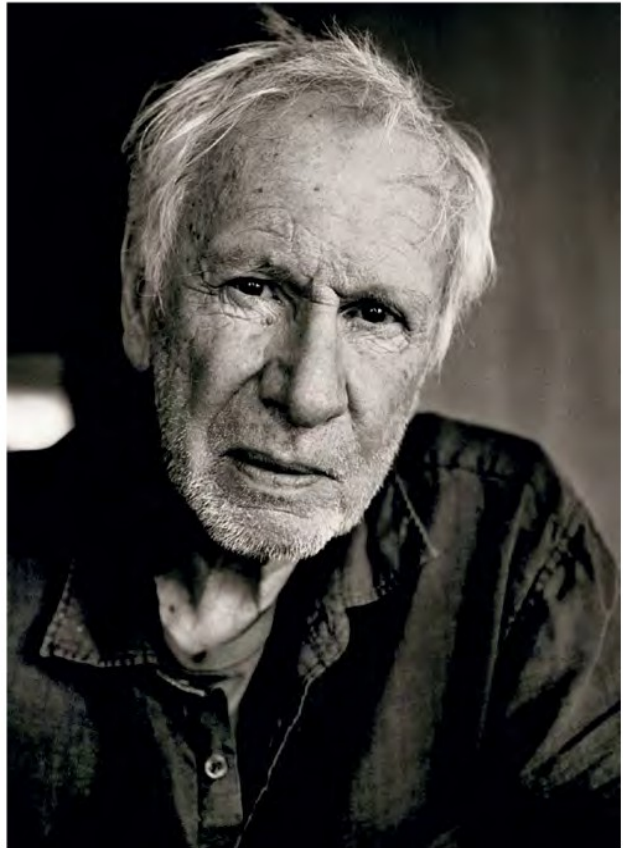


The oneiric journeys of Jean-François Laguionie

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Jean-François Laguionie's cinema is an invitation to travel into the unknown. It can be done both literally — since the protagonists of his films traverse mountains, deserts and oceans, lands full of surprising adventures and fantastic characters; and figuratively — as Laguionie's films are surreal journeys through unexplored corners of imagination, where the boundaries between the real and the unreal are virtually non-existent.



JEAN-FRANÇOIS LAGUIONIE

Jean-François Laguionie's films have captivated audiences and jurors across the world, as evidenced by such awards as the César or the Palme d'Or at Cannes. The Krakow Film Festival has honoured the director twice, and now — almost sixty years after the award of the Silver (1967) and Golden Dragon (1969) — the time has come to confer the Dragon of Dragons on him in recognition of his achievements.

A meeting that changed everything

Becoming an animator was not his plan for life. Born in Besançon, France, in 1939, Jean-François Laguionie was involved in drawing, painting and theatre. Initially, he enrolled in the programme of theatre stage design at L'École de la Rue Blanche in Paris. Later, he studied acting, also in the French capital, where in 1963 he met Paul Grimault (1904-1994), one of the country's most important animated film directors. This meeting made Laguionie decide to change the path of his artistic development. Grimault became his mentor, provided him with a film studio and taught him not only animation techniques but

also ways of constructing a narrative. Above all, he showed Laguionie that animated film need not be entertainment only, but it could also become the art of telling stories about people and feelings.

Laguionie's interest in painting was reflected in his animations, which, on the one hand, drew on Surrealism by inviting the viewer into a dreamlike and mysterious world, and on the other, were inspired by Impressionist landscapes, their ephemerality and delicacy. Laguionie would play with illusion like Rene Magritte, distort reality like Salvador Dali and portray colourful groups of characters like Georges Seurat. He often employed gouache, which allowed him to achieve vivid colours, build tension using light and shadow and create fairy-tale landscapes, which were equally prominent as characters in his films — in particular when they included the sea or the ocean.

Surreal voyages across the seas and oceans

Laguionie likes to set his stories in seascapes, which not only influences the visual aspect of the animation but opens up additional narrative possibilities. Such was his first animation, 'The Lady and the Cellist' (1965). The sea waves play a key role in the plot. Gentle and romantic at first, they then become intense and agitated to finally reveal the beauty of the underwater world, while at the same time telling the story of the transience of moments and the fragility of humans in their clash with nature. In this film, Laguionie used cut-out stop motion animation. The contrast between painterly landscapes employed as a backdrop and simple, cut-out characters became the characteristic of the majority of his short films.

The ocean plays the lead role in 'Rowing Across the Atlantic' (1978), a winner of the César and Palme d'Or. The story of a couple crossing the Atlantic alone entrances the viewers with its poetic aesthetics and surreal sense of humour. In it, just like in many of Laguionie's other films, prominence is given not to the destination but the journey itself and the relationship between the characters, which will resonate beautifully in 'A Boat in the Garden', made in 2024. Famous ships and boats occupy a special place in Laguionie's work. The Titanic appears in 'Rowing Across the Atlantic' and biblical Noah's Ark, which is to protect the protagonists from an impending flood when rebuilt, becomes a key element in the animation under the same title. Building a ship is the starting point of the aforementioned 'Boat in the Garden' (2024), in which the parents of an 11-year-old boy create a replica of the ship of a famous sailor, Joshua Slocum. Boats have become a symbol of human attempts to subdue nature, while their construction and sailing together

pinpoints human weaknesses and becomes a lesson in patience. The coast provides the stage for another feature-length animation, 'Louise by the Shore' (2016), in which the protagonist misses the last train departing from a seaside resort. The tranquil depths of the water witness her relentless attempts to break free from loneliness, flee to her memories and slowly come to terms with her fate.

Mechanisms of power and manipulation

Alongside dreamlike, unhurried tales of relationships or journeys into oneself, Laguionie is equally keen to use metaphor to depict the mechanisms of power and manipulation, show social stratification and the absurdities of war. The short film 'The Mask of the Devil' (1976) is of note in this context. Laguionie invites the audience to a colourful town, full of the weirdest characters as if from James Ensor's paintings, living in fear of a monster. The director shows a fear-based system of power used as a tool to control society. This disturbing picture also reveals that evil may lurk in places where it has never been expected.

The characters of 'A Random Bomb' (1969) did not expect evil until they found an unexploded bomb in their town. How did it get there? In this animation, Laguionie depicts the chaos caused by war and stigmatises the dehumanisation of military action. In order to capture such difficult themes, he reaches for a large dose of grotesque and the absurd. 'The Painting' (2011) is also about relations in society. The viewers are transported inside an unfinished work of art, whose inhabitants are divided into three groups according to their degree of 'completion' by the artist. This allegory of class society, hierarchy and the domination of the privileged over the weak, is at the same time a love story containing elements of adventure cinema, a measure used increasingly more often by Laguionie in the next stage of his work.

Long distance stories

Regardless of numerous festival awards, what enabled Laguionie to sail into the wide waters of cinema and television was feature-length work. The director started making feature films in order to tell more complex stories, develop characters and explore new worlds. His first feature-length picture was 'Gwen, or the Book of Sand'. It is a road movie filled with adventures as well as a reflective and unhurried piece of art, full of fantastic phenomena and creatures. The film heralded the director's cinematic productions that

would not take the easy way out. Since then, Laguionie has focused on feature-length films only. They include those for the youngest audiences, such as 'Black Mor's Island' (2004), 'The Prince's Voyage' (2016) or 'A Monkey's Tale', in which the adventure story was more than just entertainment for children. 'A Monkey's Tale' became a metaphor for class differences as well as a coming-of-age story for the main character. Alongside this work, Laguionie created sentimental and nostalgic films, such as the aforementioned 'Louise by the Shore' and 'A Boat in the Garden'.

They captivated the youngest audiences thanks to his charming line and subtle humour, while for adults they brought universal reflections on old age, transience and the realisation of dreams, with many references to his short productions. Visually, his animations also hark back to the director's first films. 'The Painting' looks as if it was painted using gouache, while 'A Boat in the Garden' retains the aesthetic of hand-painted animation. In the process of creating his subsequent pictures, Laguionie has never lost what festival audiences and critics have come to love him for since his debut — the ability to create films that are clever and yet full of surprises, contain abstract humour and push the boundaries of imagination.