

Sex, flies and videotape

Forget dry documentaries, it's character and imagination that brings science to life in film

Alexis Gambis is on a mission to bring scientific ideas to the public through film, challenging stereotypes about scientists along the way. Amanda Geffter talked to the film-maker, scientist and director of the Imagine Science Film Festival, which is taking place from 15 to 24 October in New York City

How did you become interested in films about science?
My mother is a film-maker and my father is a painter and was an engineer before that, so I grew up in a world of science and art. I did my first degree in biology, my master's in computational biology and my PhD in molecular biology and genetics at Rockefeller University in New York. I loved it, but I felt I was more of a communicator. One night it just came to me: I want to make films. I started taking film classes and showing up in my lab with cameras. People looked at me like I was crazy. I said I wanted to make a film about fruit flies and no one understood. But it was like a religious awakening for me. Now the science serves as the raw material for my films.

What made you want to incorporate science and scientists in your films?
Science is a core element in everything that happens in the world. People are fascinated by it, but intimidated. I think it's

PROFILE

Alexis Gambis is artistic director and founder of the Imagine Science Film Festival. He has a PhD in molecular biology and genetics, for which he studied neuronal cell degradation in fruit fly eyes



MARCIO FARRIA

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important for films to show who scientists are outside the lab, to portray them as real people who go out at night, and who have hobbies and relationships. I also think it's important to focus on the process of research, not just the end point of discovery. The process is where imagination comes into play.

How did the Imagine Science Film Festival come about?
It began as a film series I coordinated while I was doing my PhD. I wanted to promote

discussions about science and film so I contacted venues around the city, hoping to expand the programme to a city-wide festival. New York has so much science and film, it was a natural fit; it seemed crazy that this didn't already exist. We found most of the films ourselves and screened them mostly in academic venues. This year, the second year of the festival, we received around 300 film submissions from more than 30 countries, from which we selected 50 films. We are broadening out to more non-academic venues to reach a larger and more diverse audience.

What type of films did you look for?
There are a few other science film

festivals around the world, but the films they show are mostly documentaries meant for TV. They are very pedagogic. We're trying to do something different. Our goal is to encourage the incorporation of science into storytelling, whether it is a documentary or fiction. The films are not directly about science but about people and places. All our films have a basis in storytelling, but the science has to be credible. We have one film called *Ginger*, about a redheaded boy. Scientists explain to him that redheads are going extinct, so he goes around trying to get as many girls as possible. It's a funny British comedy and the science is subtle.

After the festival, what's next?
I want to get scientists more involved in film-making and create workshops that pair scientists with film-makers to work together on a film. We will fund them and show their work at the festival. I also want to start a production company. I'm working on a new film about "the fly room" at Columbia University, where modern genetics was born. The story is about the geneticist Calvin Bridges, a communist who believed in free love and had many affairs. The film contrasts his crazy personal life with the meticulous work he did in the lab, although he was studying mating and fruit fly sex. He died before he reached 50 from a sexually transmitted disease. ■

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Watch Alexis Gambis's short film *Dr. Funque and His Petri Dish* at www.newscientist.com/topic/books-art/