

KEYNOTE SPEECH

Christian Beetz, 2018

This year's VIENNA.DOKU.DAY focuses on the following themes: How is documentary film evolving in the modern age from digital television and VoD, and what are the challenges for filmmakers, producers, broadcasters and sales agents?

Dear filmmakers, lovely team and supporters of the VIENNA.DOKU.DAY, many thanks for your invitation.

You asked me to share my thoughts with you about the changes emerging in our industry as a result of the new players on the VoD market.

But let me just take a moment before I get to the subject of documentaries. We are currently facing one of the biggest changes we have seen in society in recent times. Our society's structures are based on an idea of modernity and the emergence of an enlightened Europe. The period of time between the Middle Ages and the modern era saw the bourgeoisie gain self-confidence. Debate and criticism replaced blind faith in authority. These were the bases of great spiritual movements like its belief in universal human rights. The Renaissance was born, and with it the quest for a better world of education and culture—considered to be the highest forms of good.

Today we face another period of political and social change: the transition into a digital society. It feels as radical as the Neolithic revolution or indeed the industrial revolution. It's impossible to know exactly what lies ahead, but all around us we can see the disturbing increasing of fake news, populism and fascist tendencies... Everything seems to be changing, provoking fundamental questions about people's attitudes towards the world and their fellow citizens.

As a filmmaker myself, I find myself committed to the project of the Enlightenment, and I ask myself how we should respond to these times.

To me, documentary film is one of the greatest ways of revealing social attitudes and influencing the world. Through documentaries, we reflect and examine our environment in many different ways. They are a lens through which we seek to understand man and nature. To me, documentaries are culture. They are an art form. They are one of the most profound and captivating ways of communicating with the world.

But coming back to the subject of this event: How is documentary film evolving in the modern age from digital television and VoD, and what are the challenges for filmmakers, producers, broadcasters and sales agents?

Well how am I supposed to know that? I can't see the future! I'm a producer of documentaries and interactive formats, most of which I develop and produce for international audiences.

So before we look at the future, let's first have a look at the status quo. What is the current set up for producing documentary films?

The strongest and biggest partners of documentary films are cultural public film funds and our public broadcasters. They were born out of Enlightenment ideas, and are meant to strengthen the so-called 'third force' in a democracy and provide people with a sense of orientation. Through their transmission-technology, they can reach everyone, whether they be in the countryside or the city, are old or young, rich or poor.

Unfortunately the public broadcasters have increasingly neglected their basic social responsibility to provide everyone with culture and information (even if there are still a handful of courageous commissioning editors). They used to be a mass medium, but now they are more niche, focusing primarily on an older audience. Quotas are their currency and they only refer to those who stay at home and watch TV.

The younger generation is consuming content differently. 2018 has been the year in Germany where for the first time people under 30 look more to streaming platforms than to TV.

Streaming is hot shit. Media library usage is getting bigger and bigger, S-VoD platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime are the new players.

The great thing for us filmmakers is that these providers also come from Arthouse and also love documentary films. If you're sitting in a bar today, you can say proudly that you're a documentary filmmaker if your films are streaming on these services. And the best thing about it is, that it can happen in any pub in the world, whether you're in Austria, Spain, Brazil or America.

Younger people under the age of 60, watch documentary films again! This is great stuff!!!

The streaming services Netflix and Amazon Prime have opened up the world of documentaries once more to a large audience. They are interesting partners. They show us filmmakers that what we do is important and can reach an international crowd.

Documentaries also hold value for them. They pay several million for award-winning documentary films, or even put down the cost of producing them when commissioned—in contrast to our public broadcasters.

Dear friends, paradise has emerged! And those still grumbling that only American content is available... just wait until the adoption of the new EU directives, which demand a 30% European quota in productions.

It could not be a better time for our industry. New providers need new films, and many care for and even love the Arthouse film.

The newcomers to the market are both dynamic and flexible. Just last month, Netflix's new European office opened in London. Europe is now in focus. The intention is to produce more. All seems to be great, but the documentaries themselves have changed as a result of these new providers. The films look different. Why is that so?

To answer this we must understand the business model of subscription streaming platforms. Unlike cinema and television, the services do not rely on how many people have seen the film. Individual tickets do not need to be sold, and ratings aren't necessary.

So it's all about the attention... it's about how many people discuss the film and want to see it. It's about how the film reflects the brand. It's about how many people buy a Netflix subscription or get on Amazon Prime (which in itself could lead them to buying more online).

Everything is different on these platforms! This all effects the selection of topics, the narrative style and also the way the films are produced.

Have a closer look at this.

The topics: streaming services operate globally and have a global audience. In their fight for attention, they address specific topics. These are big names and musical legends, rather than interesting new discoveries.

What we find on these platforms is loud rather than quiet. It is more violence than reconciliation. It is big rather than small, more coarse than fine, more global than regional. We have to understand this. Many of today's documentary films will not appear on these streaming services, yes, but luckily there are still our old partners—public broadcasters and the cinema.

The narrative style and the story telling change a lot, too. Documentaries are more entertaining, visually powerful and emotional. Music is used to evoke feeling. This drive in emotional storytelling means that character-driven narratives have increased dramatically on VoD platforms. Stories now tend to be reduced to a few characters.

Take a look at the series 'Chef's Table'. If a male chef comes across as unsympathetic, in comes the music and the daddy-complex. Another example is the design series 'Abstract'. Here, too, we learn more about the human side of the designer than we do about the product being designed. More emotions, less brain-work. The observational documentary is not seen here. But for these documentaries luckily, there are still our old partners—public broadcasters and the cinema...

The serial format is booming at the moment at these platforms. They have the space for intricacies and told over many hours. As our world becomes increasingly complex, the genre has developed to reflect those complexities. For whole weekends, or sleepless nights, you can follow these stories. Personally I really enjoy them. But if you they're not for you, luckily there are still our old partners—public broadcasters and the cinema...

Let's have a look on the production side. The ways of production are also changing. Films are becoming more complex and much more expensive to produce. More time is required for development. Every level must be more elaborate, including image and sound. This makes documentary films much more expensive.

There is no space on streaming services for cheap and quickly-produced films. But luckily we still have our old partners—public broadcasters and the cinema...

The world of documentaries has undergone extreme change in just four years... since the beginnings of Netflix and Amazon Prime. But not everything that has emerged is necessarily better. We can't fool ourselves here. The new players are not subject to a public contract, but are profit-oriented corporations based on audience requests.

It is worth considering monopoly these platforms could have over documentary storytelling.

I hope that these changes will impact our partners, film funding agencies, public broadcasters and cinemas... in a positive way. What can we do to maintain this exciting situation? So that finally a competition between the public broadcasters and new, more dynamic players arises? So that the films end up where they find their audience?

Young people are watching documentaries again. Have the courage to change the funding systems and broadcasting slots. I can only agree with last year's speaker, Mr Arne Birkenstock, on all points. Documentary films, as the DNA of public service broadcasting, must not only pay lip service to the public. They must also be reflected financially and in broadcasting slots and in PR. There is also a large audience in TV and in the media libraries, who are interested in documentary films.

It takes more courage to find new paths for documentary film.

- Why not properly promote a documentary at the sum of its production costs?
- Why not even show the documentary as an event in the cinema and TV at the same time, without a media library?
- Why not provide documentary or non-fiction series just for the library?
- Why not finance or promote the documentary at 100% of its production costs and put it online, like Netflix is doing?

We need to remember why we are making documentaries and how we can reach an audience with them again.

The world is changing. It is becoming more commercial, it is becoming more confusing. Look at Brexit and Trump, the countdown of the climate change, the elections in Brazil. Our Enlightenment project is under extreme pressure.

But this should not be a reason for us to break, rather encourage us to band together and pin our colours to the mast. Documentaries are more important now than ever before.

Let's share this day by discussing how we can make good documentary films together for the largest possible audience.

Many thanks