

Of calendars and industries: IDFA and CPH:DOX

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This article focuses on the strategies developed by two Northern European documentary film festivals – International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) and Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival (CPH:DOX) – to position themselves in the international festival ecosystem and develop a differentiated identity.[1] Over the past ten years I have been conducting research at documentary film festivals,[2] and no matter which country they come from most documentary professionals mention IDFA as the most important event in Europe, if not in the world. In its 28th edition, which took place from 18-29 November 2015, IDFA gathered 2,427 professionals from all continents. Two weeks earlier I attended CPH:DOX, an event that is much younger but with ambitious aspirations. CPH:DOX celebrated its 13th edition from 5-15 November 2015 and attracted more than 1,400 industry delegates. A closer look at the 2015 editions gives an account of recent trends in international documentary festivals, characterised by a concentration of events in autumn and an increasing presence of industry activity.



Fig. 1: The main venues at IDFA (Pathé Tuschinski Cinema) and CPH:DOX (Cinemateket: Danish Film Institute).

Rearranging calendars: Finding a position in the international circuit

The autumn season is a busy one for documentary film festivals. October features DOKLeipzig (Germany), Jihlava (Czech Republic), and DocLisboa (Portugal) in Europe, Yamagata (Japan) in Asia, and Hot Springs (USA) and Docs DF (Mexico) in the Americas. November has a high concentration of documentary events, including Zinebi (in its 57th edition) and Festival dei Popoli (in its 56th edition), though neither can compete with their Northern counterparts and instead remain as more regional events. International connections and collaborations among documentary film festivals have grown in the last years. However, there is no official coordinating body to regulate their relationships. Moreover, FIAPF accreditation is not indicative of the actual international and industrial impact of documentary festivals.[3] Initiatives such as DocAlliance (including CPH:DOX as a member) serve as long-term partnerships but are more focused on programming and distribution strategies rather than organising the festival calendar.[4]

Understanding the festival ecosystem as a circuit serves to better explain the dynamics of circulation of both films and professionals.[5] Documentary professionals travel from event to event in search of films for their own programmes or funders for new productions.[6] This is even clearer in the documentary realm, where there is a cultural elite of ‘usual suspects’ who have been gathering at these events for the last ten years. During the industry talk Master and Talent at IDFA, Russian filmmaker Victor Kossakovsky reflected on his participation in festivals through the years and how he met people like Tue Steen Müller, former director of the European Documentary Network (present in the audience), who eventually became old friends.

A filmmaker who owes his reputation to IDFA, Kossakovsky made the most of this festival edition (and vice versa). His film *Varicella* was included in the competitive section and won a honorable mention for Best Children's Documentary. This film had been presented in the IDFA forum the previous year and once finished served as a presentation of a bigger project: a series of documentaries that he was presenting in the pitching forum this year as well. Kossakovsky is probably one of the filmmakers with which the festival has built the longest and most stable relationship. Discovered by IDFA in 1993 with *The Belovs* (which won the main competition award), he has subsequently been a regular attendee as filmmaker, tutor, jury member, or speaker – a clear example of the importance of festival participation and involvement in its industrial activities for the continuity of documentary careers.

Many professionals present at CPH:DOX were travelling directly to IDFA. The number of Canadian and US delegates in Copenhagen was remarkable, including representatives of Hot Docs Documentary Film Festival (Toronto, Canada) and South by Southwest (Austin, USA). The specialised circuit is not the only reference for documentary professionals as they also travel to major events or A-list festivals. After the mandatory appointment at IDFA many follow to Sundance, Rotterdam, and Berlinale, which take place between January and February.



Fig. 2: Official websites of IDFA and CPH:DOX announcing upcoming dates for the next editions.

In view of the operational challenges presented by the autumn calendar CPH:DOX recently announced the decision to change the festival dates to 16-26 March 2017, skipping its 2016 edition. The promotional videos displayed at the press desk already indicated this ambition, with the festival promoting itself as the third largest documentary festival in the world. This change is part of a wider international strategy implemented by the Copen-

hagen Film Festivals foundation, which runs both CPH:DOX and its fiction counterpart CPH PIX (the latter is also changing its dates from April to October[7]). According to CPH:DOX director and founder Tine Fischer, professionals are concerned about the proximity of IDFA (as well as DOKLeipzig),[8] and the reason for this move is the ‘undue pressure on industry delegates’,[9] whose presence in Copenhagen has increased sharply in recent years. Copenhagen Film Festivals director Steffen Andersen-Møller’s declarations also underpin the high aspirations of the festival organisation as willing to compete on equal terms with IDFA:

[t]he ambition of CPH:DOX to be a leading international documentary event is intact and will require more space to unfold its potential. Ideally, it will ensure that CPH:DOX opens the year, and IDFA closes it.[10]

As a result this change will affect festivals taking place in spring, such as Thessaloniki International Documentary Film Festival (11-20 March 2017) and Visions du Réel (15-23 April 2017). Documentary markets such as Sunny Side of the Doc (La Rochelle, France, taking place in June) and MIPDoc (Cannes, France, celebrated in April) could also interfere with the industry aspirations of CPH:DOX. The role of documentary film festivals as a meeting point for professionals is therefore a key aspect to assess their international impact.

Industrial matters: Fostering production and distribution

Another calendar move related to industry delegates was implemented by IDFA this year. The awards ceremony moved to Wednesday, when the main industry activities finished. The strategy proved to be a success, as the Melkweg concert hall was full with professionals and guests. This is another example of the importance of professional participation in documentary festivals, as most of the ceremonies and special events are not open to the wider public. Industry sections have become a key part of documentary programming since the incorporation of the first pitching forums and markets in the 1990s. IDFA is certainly a pioneer in this sense, and its model has been copied by documentary film festivals worldwide.[11] In its 2015 edition the festival showed that activities targeted at professionals are certainly not only a big success in terms of attendance but also create a parallel festival which expands throughout the first week.

Although a big audience festival IDFA certainly prioritises industry activity. The 144 pages of the IDFA program were indicative of its scope, and the creation of a smartphone app to manage agendas certainly facilitated its navigation. The possibility to book tickets directly in the app instead of waiting at the festival desk improved the festival management, though this was also one of the reasons for many half capacity sessions that were listed as sold out. This gives an account of the priority of industry delegates over the regular audience. Among the most relevant industry activities of IDFA are the industry talks and sessions, the Docs for Sale market, and the IDFA Forum. In addition to these more formal events other social encounters are organised, such as the successful Guests Meet Guests sessions at Café de Jaren. Other personal services are offered to all accredited guests such as free consultancies with industry experts, the First Aid Doc Clinic, and Meet the Staff (a festival matchmaker to help you connect to other professionals attending IDFA). All these events profit from the presence of guests with strong experience in documentary production and distribution. The festival is really efficient in promoting knowledge exchange among its visitors.

Docs For Sale, the documentary market established in 1996, was located at the Arti e Amicitiae building in 2015. It provides a list of films on sale (including titles out of the festival programme). As demonstrated by the 17 sales agents present during this edition, this is a key place for exhibition and distribution deals. Documentaries in the catalogue can be viewed in the video library, also online – even for those representatives who cannot attend. Instead of a threat the possibility to watch films online could become an opportunity, as it can increase the time available for negotiations; therefore professionals can concentrate on networking and closing deals. The overcrowded cafe on the ground floor of the building only accessible to Docs for Sale accredited guests and the ongoing negotiations that take place throughout the whole week just confirm this trend.

Industry talks looked at the future of the business models, with new professional roles (such as ‘producer of marketing and distribution’), funding models (like crowdfunding, which has proved to be more of a promotional platform than a real source of income), or Video on Demand (VOD), with companies like Netflix appearing as the future of independent distribution.



Fig. 3: IDFA Forum pitching session and John Reiss presenting the industry session: 'Producer of Marketing and Distribution' in Amsterdam.

Other talks related to distribution were offered within the IDFA Academy programme (a four-day training programme for emerging filmmakers and producers). One of the most interesting topics raised was how to assess the impact of documentary, not only in terms of income but also in social outputs. Case studies analysed included Eszter Hadjú's and Sandor Mester's *Judgment in Hungary* (2013) and Anita Khanna's and Rehad Desai's *Miners Shot Down* (2014). Academic research on this topic is already being conducted in the United States, for example the project led by the professor Patricia Aufderheide from the School of Communication at American University in Washington D.C., also founder of the Center for Media & Social Impact, who was the moderator of the IDFA talk 'Evaluating Impact'.

The most important industry event at IDFA is the IDFA Forum. This pitching session has served as a training tool for many European documentary professionals in the last decade. The 2015 selection included 59 projects from 31 countries. This is not an event for amateurs, as most of the productions already have a minimum of 100,000 euros in place and seek new funders to cover the whole budget. Again, one of the most interesting aspects of the forum is not the 'official performance' but the social networks that flourish around it. Apart from the public event the festival organises one-to-one meetings between filmmakers and funders (including television channels, film funds, film institutes, and NGOs).

The influence of television broadcasters in the documentary realm is still apparent, although the amount of deals closed at pitching forums (including pre-sales and pre-productions) has decreased since the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008. Among project presenters were those backed by strong national institutions such as the Danish Film Institute or Chiledoc – or the festival's old friends, such as Kossakovsky. The profile of commis-

sioning editors invited to pitching forums also gives some clues about the conformation of the festival identity through the promotion of specific thematic and aesthetic trends. Since its inception IDFA has included representatives of the big funders of documentary in Europe (traditionally public television). Among the panel members of the pitching forum were representatives of major international broadcasters such as BBC, ARTE, PBS, and Al Jazeera English. Other funders included the Ford Foundation (a new player in the documentary realm) and the Tribeca Institute.

Although smaller in scope the CPH:DOX pitching forum has increased its importance in recent years and, as the date change suggests, both the festival organisation and industry delegates attending believe in increasing its potential. The board of prospective funders in Copenhagen this year included representatives from major European broadcasters such as ARTE, ZDF, NDR, BBC, and DR. Other attendees included film funds from all over Europe, as well as Ford Foundation, Tribeca Film Institute, Sundance Institute, Fondation Cartier, and Tate Modern. The four categories in which CPH:DOX organises the project presentations also contributes to shaping its identity. While F:ACT prioritises relevant social and political topics the other three sections FICTIONNONFICTION, CINEMA, and ART are more focused on the aesthetic approach. This highlights the festival's profile as a supporter of documentaries between the boundaries of art and experimental film, which explains the presence of Fondation Cartier and Tate Modern, closely connected to the artistic realm and a *rara avis* in traditional documentary pitching forums, where television broadcasters are the major players.

The potential of Copenhagen to be a major industrial player in the European documentary realm is also due to the fact that the European Documentary Network (EDN) has its headquarters in the city (to be accurate, in the same building of the CPH:DOX main venue: the Danish Film Institute). Initiated in 1996 as an association of documentary professionals who took up the baton of the documentary office of the MEDIA programme of the European Union, EDN has been an active force behind the incorporation of industry sections in several European documentary film festivals. EDN has a long-term strategy for European documentary and has been compiling information about the industry for more than twenty years. Given the changes in funding schemes for documentary in Europe, EDN members are concerned about the sharp decrease in investment, especially by public broadcasters. This is why they are organising a congress that aims to gather

professionals, policymakers, and academics in Brussels in 2017 with the aim of lobbying the European Union Parliament. The project was presented in CPH:DOX with the seminar 'Positioning the Creative Documentary in a Changed Media Landscape', where PhD candidate Eline Livémont presented her study of the role of public broadcasters in Flanders and the Netherlands. The meeting had a follow-up session at IDFA, presented as an open discussion to representatives from festivals, film funds, and associations of documentary professionals from Europe and North America.



Fig. 4: Eline Livémont at the EDN seminar 'Positioning the Creative Documentary in a Changed Media Landscape' in Copenhagen, and the follow-up presentation of the 2017 congress in Amsterdam.

Industry sections have become an intrinsic part of film festival programming. Not only do they influence which films will be developed in upcoming years but they also create a common understanding (and to some extent consensus) of what will be the future of documentary production and distribution. Although the classic dichotomy between content and form is a recurrent discussion in the documentary festival realm the decision makers and funders tend to prioritise topics over aesthetics. This can explain the turn of CPH:DOX to more conventional forms of documentary and its recent interest in political or scientific issues. The Copenhagen festival's recent changes demonstrate how art and industry are embedded in the festival circuit and create intersections that condition each other.

Conclusions

Defining a differentiated profile in the international documentary film festival circuit is certainly not an easy task – particularly if you want to score high in the international hierarchy. A close look at the 2015 editions of IDFA and CPH:DOX can serve to better understand the multiple (sometimes opposed) dynamics which contribute to delineate a profile, including

the much overlooked power of industry sections. While many documentary festivals were originally created to increase awareness about contemporary socio-political problems (like IDFA) or give exposure to new aesthetic forms (like CPH:DOX), the growing importance of the presence of industry delegates for their international success is affecting their programs, which have expanded in parallel sections devoted to industry activity. While IDFA has always been a pioneer in implementing the industrial model in the documentary realm, CPH:DOX was born as an opposite (and much more modest) model, putting an emphasis on documentary exhibition, particularly on films created at the intersections between art, reality, and experimentation. Nevertheless, the steady growth of the Copenhagen festival has brought about an increasing number of parallel activities incorporated into its program, which have not only increased the industry presence in the festival but also expanded its programming practices to more classical documentary topics and styles, such as current political affairs or journalist films.

Although film festival discourse tends to highlight films in the program there is a growing amount of professional events that are affecting festival programming and organisation worldwide. The study of contemporary documentary aesthetics must therefore consider these exhibition sites as key players in the redefinition of the genre and look at their industry sections that, today more than ever, are affecting documentary cultures of production and distribution.

Aida Vallejo (University of the Basque Country)

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Notes

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- [2] For the completion of a PhD thesis presented in 2012: *Festivales de cine documental: Redes de circulación cultural en el este del continente europeo [Documentary Film Festivals: Networks of Cultural Circulation in the Eastern Part of Europe]*. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid: Madrid.
- [3] Five festivals have FIAPF accreditation in the category of 'Documentary and Short Film Festivals': Tampere (March), Oberhausen (May), Krakow (May), St. Petersburg (September), Bilbao (November).
- [4] A partnership of CPH:DOX, Doclisboa, Docs Against Gravity FF (former Planet Doc Review, Poland), DOK Leipzig, FID Marseille, Jihlava IDFF, and Visions du Réel Nyon. <http://dafilms.com/section/about-alliance> (accessed on 22 March 2016).
- [5] Elsaesser 2005; De Valck 2007.
- [6] See Vallejo 2015.
- [7] <http://www.cphpix.dk/news/892/1>
- [8] See Vetter 2015.
- [9] Cf. Macnab 2015.
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] See Vallejo 2014.