

Documentary Workflows, Distribution and Marketing

Leading German documentary producer and director Arne Birkenstock was at DPC II in Athens 2018 to discuss how post-production strategies, such as those applied to his doc *The Congo Tribunal*, can complement multiplatform and marketing strategies to maximise audience engagement and impact.

Birkenstock founded his company Fruitmarket in 2004 to produce his own films, such as *Beltracchi – The Art of Forgery* (2014). For the past 5 years he has produced theatrical documentaries for other directors like the Şamdereli sisters, Uli Gaulke, Tonje Hessen Schei, Heidi Specogna, Enrique Sánchez Lansch and Milo Rau.

Birkenstock introduced *The Congo Tribunal*, which world-premiered at Locarno 2017 ahead of a German release the following November. He stressed how, very soon, the project became more than just a film, morphing into major political events both in Bukavu and Berlin, a website, an archive, a game, a VR experience, an exhibition, a book, a graphic novel, a magazine, an NGO and a series of symposia, panels and activities held both in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and in Europe. Not that this was the plan when he set out to make the film. “I would love to tell you about the genius strategy in which all of this was planned years ago and then we exercised it, but this was not at all the case,” he said.

He discussed the film’s location, the DRC, formerly known as Zaire. It is “a paradise”, seven times as large as Germany and 77 times the size of its former colonial power, Belgium. It is one of the richest countries in the world, both green and fertile (4 harvests per year) and rich in raw materials. In former times these were kautschok (rubber), gold and diamonds and latterly coltan. About 80% of the worldwide coltan is found in the Kivu province in Eastern Congo, he said.

One could be forgiven therefore for assuming that all is well within this paradise state. “No, wealth is a curse,” Birkenstock contradicted, indicating how, after 20 years of civil war, the DRC population is one of the poorest in the world, where 76% cannot send their children to school, 79% are undernourished, 81% do not have appropriate housing and 82% have no access to medical care.”

“In Europe these conflicts [civil wars] are very often referred to as local or tribal conflicts, but if you look at the map of the conflicts and at the map of big international agricultural and mining projects, you can see parallels in time and geography...The director of the film project [Milo Rau] calls this the Third World War, which is an *economic* World War.”

In terms of the project’s inception, director Rau approached Birkenstock in November 2013 with the idea to make a *j’accuse* type tribunal in the Congo, holding to account the institutions and bodies that have wreaked havoc across the country. Rau is a Swiss theatre director, living in Germany and Belgium, “and probably one of the most influential theatre makers of our times.” He had made previously *Hate Radio* and *The Moscow Trials* where he united all the people involved in the Pussy Riots trial and recreated the legal proceedings.

Birkenstock secured development financing (€70,000) for *The Congo Tribunal* in November 2013, mounted a 10-day research trip in June 2014 (where much footage was shot, and during which the majority of the cast of 80 were secured - lawyers, judges, witnesses, experts, journalists etc) and returned to shoot in June 2015. Post-production was undertaken October 2015 until April 2017.

While the film was in development “something radical” happened. Rau originally wanted to conduct the entire tribunal in Berlin, which historically had been the locale of the 19th century Congo conference when the colonial powers divided up Eastern Africa, but Birkenstock had the feeling that a tribunal in front of a European audience would be nowhere near as effective as staging it *in situ* in Bukavu, an Eastern Congolese city. From a production perspective, this was a controversial decision, both logistically and in terms of safety as there was still a war raging in the country.

The planned budget was €700,000 (530K from Germany, 170K from Switzerland). The final budget was €925,000 (464K from Germany, 460K from Switzerland). The team planned a 3-day tribunal for May 2015 (5 cameras) and, a month later, a 3-day hearing in Berlin (3 cameras) where - with the same judge and prosecutor - politicians, experts and functionaries were quizzed. In Bukavu, the local story was told. In Berlin it was put into international focus. Birkenstock also told how, before the shoot, the UN in New York reneged on a witness security agreement made with one of the core participants.

“Milo managed to get all parties there in Bukavu, the army, the government, the opposition, the rebels, the local miners, the international miners...all the parties that were struggling were involved in the tribunal... By involving everybody actively in the film we had a certain probability that it would work out.” Ironically, the only building they could use in Bukavu to stage the tribunal was a colonial building, a former Jesuit college. “This was interesting because our expectation [of the institutions that exploit the DRC these days] is much more cynical. They just go there and exploit. They don’t leave any kind of infrastructure in the country. It’s even worse than colonialism.”

From a post-production and editing perspective, the footage from Bukavu was vibrant and personal whereas energy levels during the dry Berlin hearing plummeted, therefore much of the latter was cut from the film. Also, there was a lot of classical documentary footage shot outside of the tribunals which had to be folded into the film.

“What was completely interesting for me as a documentary filmmaker is how form has an impact,” Birkenstock continued. “First of all this was a fiction...the tribunal had no jurisdiction at all. Nobody would be prosecuted. There would be no legal consequences. But we were immediately top news in the Congo and there was a lot of international coverage.” In a country where justice was not expected to be delivered, a basic need was met for individual witnesses to state publicly how they had suffered terribly at the hands of political, military and corporate oppressors, and those perpetrators were forced to listen, Birkenstock underlined. The Congolese poor were elevated and empowered, their status immediately changed. What’s more, the tribunal offered the same set of rules of engagement to all participants.

This was where the transmedia part of the project began. Greater access had to be arranged not just to the film, but to the entire hearings (2 x 18 hours). The website became core, and included an intensive archive (published even before the film was released). A game and a graphic novel were developed, based on the horrendous Kafkaesque and labyrinthine experience of Witness J who tried to gain help from the international authorities after escaping a massacre. These were created by Congolese artist and political illustrator Kaylene who had worked as a court artist during the Bukavu tribunal.

To finance this transmedia element Birkenstock approached the German Cultural Ministry that runs a programme that supports artistic projects between German and Africa. This also included an exhibition about the project which premiered in Belgium presenting the entire hearings on the big screen, the game as a VR installation and the archive presented within a working space. The German contribution to this amounted to €300,000.

Also, prior to the Locarno world premiere, Birkenstock and Rau brought the film back to the DRC, together with some of the European experts, and toured the country with it. "What was interesting in the tour, aside from the fact that people in the Congo attend cinema as we would a football match – there is a lot of cheering, there is a lot of noise in the cinema – was how the discussions afterwards were about many things, but not about the film. I realised that the screening of the film was again opening that wound...They [the audiences] used it immediately to address the things which had been happening to them."

This led to a wider release of the film across the DRC on DVD, dubbed into local languages, which triggered further discussion and continued the process of engagement. An NGO was founded which enabled the collection of €180,000 (garnered from film and exhibition ticket sales) to finance the DVD and screenings of the film in the DRC and to enable local lawyers to continue collecting evidence.

Unfortunately the theatrical release in Germany in Switzerland was very disappointing (6000 in total), with 3500 of this number generated by Birkenstock and his team during a "tour," where they managed themselves to fill huge auditoria of 800+ capacity. He told how he sold out a large theatre in Munich of 1000 seats four weeks before the event. The next day the film was screened in the local arthouse theatre for which a mere 12 people turned up.

This led Birkenstock to express his dissatisfaction at the current theatrical release set-up in Germany and Europe, describing how "the distribution we are forced by laws and regulations to do is nothing but a set of measures to prevent people from seeing your film. It is absurd for such a film to go on a nationwide theatrical release." Energies, he argued, should be spent on careful event-based strategies and online access to the film from the first day. "Many people who want to see the film don't have access to it....People nowadays don't want to have the decision taken [for them] in terms of where to see a film. They want to see films wherever, whenever and on whatever device, and they have no interest at all in following our wish that they should first watch at the cinema, then on the internet, then on television. That doesn't work anymore." The exhibition, conversely, attracted audiences in excess of 50,000 when rolled out across Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Italy.

So, if Birkenstock were to do it all again what would he do differently? He replied how, despite liking the game and VR in terms of their aesthetics and their intrinsic link to both the tone and content of the film, “what it gives and what it costs has not, for my taste, been a very good relation.” Also, the material for transmedia and social media campaigning should be “consciously” collected during filming with a designated producer or director on board from the beginning. And he would look to “bundle” the release, to have the film’s tour, exhibition and online access all coincide to *maximise impact*.

The complex project was never going to be a blockbuster, he conceded, but it was a vital and invigorating odyssey that had to be embarked upon. “What started as a film became a nightmare from a producer’s point of view, but it was also the most rewarding experience,” Birkenstock concluded.