Moving Docs 2018:
Advancing the concept of
'Event Cinema Online' with
the release of *Silvana*

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The idea of a 'virtual screening room' – when 'event cinema' goes online

In 2018, Moving Docs continued to explore concepts for what we first described as a 'virtual screening room' – an online space that replicates the experience of watching a film jointly with others, and that facilitates the remote participation in an on-site event, for example through interaction in a debate following a documentary screening.

It's the scarcity factor that makes people go to see films

When people are asked why they watch a certain documentary then the vast majority of cases the reason given is an interest in the film's subject matter. This sets documentaries apart from other types of films. But is it enough to make audiences go to the cinema?

Marketing research has shown that such a rational argument – here it is making the case to go and see a film because the subject matter is important – is less convincing to consumers than the social pressure that is applied when they know that many of their friends are doing the same thing, i.e. all going to see a certain film.

Yet again, more powerful than social pressure is the argument of scarcity. "Only on this special day will you have this exclusive experience…" This is exactly what 'event cinema' is aiming to do, especially against a backdrop of declining cinema attendance: to turn something seemingly replicable (i.e. watching a certain film) into something unique (i.e. experiencing this film with special guests, music, food, or in an unusual place).

This is something Moving Docs partners strive to achieve, and already do very successfully in many cases.

But what about people who can't attend?

One problem remains: what if you can't be there on that special night because you have other commitments, or if you are too far away, or if the venue is not accessible enough for your special needs?

How can we enable remote participation in these kind of circumstances? Hence the proposal to enable 'event cinema online' by means of online transmission with direct feedback channels for viewers.

The limits of watching a Q&A when you haven't seen the film

Moving Docs already has a history of experimenting with the live online transmission of Q&A sessions with filmmakers, protagonists or experts on the themes raised in a documentary. This was successfully trialled around titles like *At Home in the World, Free Lunch Society* and *Golden Dawn Girls*, involving multi-camera production setups on location to get close to a TV-like experience.

However, two things were missing here: firstly, feedback channels – even when technically available through comments posted during a Facebook Live stream – were not fully utilised to enable remote participation.

Secondly, and more importantly, remote viewers typically hadn't seen the film before – so they weren't watching the Q&A based on the same information and the same emotional experience the people on-site just had.

So how can both be combined, the streaming of a film and the subsequent activities in one live stream? First and foremost, this appeared to be a technical challenge.

The story so far

Researching many platforms

We conducted in-depth research on platforms that would allow us to combine
- the streaming of a feature-length film,
- the transmission of subsequent on-site activities such as a debate or performance,
- a feedback channel for remote viewers to actively participate,
- a paywall to charge viewers in order not to compromise the on-site event financially,
- and, with Moving Docs working on micro budgets for campaigning activities, affordability.

Our comprehensive research is documented in detail in this report posted in February 2018:
https://www.movingdocs.org/can_event_cinema_happen_online

Looking at Wonderstream for future Moving Docs experiments

Our research led us to consider working with Seattle-based Wonderstream – originally a recommendation by L.A.-based distribution consultant Jon Reiss – for the next steps. We noted at the time:

> 'Co-founder Brad Wilke of Smarthouse Creative describes Wonderstream as "a bridge between a brand's online and offline audiences", avoiding the "walled gardens" of Facebook Live or Periscope by allowing hosts of events to get to know their audience through capturing viewers' names and email addresses for follow-ups. Login will be made easy using Oauth (signing in with a Google or social media account, not requiring a password-based setup). Wonderstream isn't exactly a 'white-label' platform like some of the others we looked at, but it allows hosts to have a branded page featuring their own calls to action and partnering organisations.'

Another apparent advantage was that the platform wouldn't involve Moving Docs in an annual subscription but charge one-off fees of (at the time) $89 per event. More information on the platform here:
https://wonderstream.net/

With an unintended hint of foresight, our assessment closed with the words:

> 'So let's keep a close eye on Wonderstream and keep our fingers crossed this one delivers.'

The experiment with *Silvana*

Moving Docs and *Silvana*

The documentary *Silvana* is an intimate portrait of the Swedish artist Silvana Imam, a rapper famed for her "phenomenally powerful presence" and striking lyrics, with the film's main storyline being a beautifully-told lesbian love story.

The film was chosen as a core title for the Moving Docs slate of documentaries in 2019, and plans for activities around the film were first shaped at the Moving Docs outreach workshop in Thessaloniki in March 2018, with a good number of screening partners planning to show the film.

Trailer and synopsis here: https://www.movingdocs.org/silvana_the_story

The film's potential and its challenges

Notes from the workshop, taken by New Notion's Aaron Guthrie, recognise that "against a challenging environment, [Silvana's] determination and true belief in her principles make her a truly inspirational figure for a whole new generation."

Or, as Katrina Schelin of Danish Moving Docs partner DoxBio summed it up at the time: "She will make you want to dance, make love and change the world."

Difficulties identified at the time included the lack of data on a captive audience for female hip-hop artists, as well as the fact that Silvana remained pretty much unknown in territories outside Sweden.

So the challenge would be to take Silvana's impactful message and introduce her to new audiences in new territories.

Initial strategies for the release

Strategic solutions developed at the workshop included:

- Creating film events with local artists who perform and bring their own audience - inspired by the activities of Moving Docs parter Doc Lounge, and with Nina Landau of Doc Poppies in Belgium taking a lead
- Ideally involving Silvana herself with appearances and concerts, though her availability was already questioned at the time
- Igniting outreach partnerships with local organisations to match the different target groups of the film: LGBT, feminism, music/hip-hop

- Running a social media campaign involving translations of Silvana's lyrics and Silvana GIFs, also aligning her with other famous female rappers
- Using agreed hashtags: #silvanafilm and #inspiredbysilvana
- On-site marketing including flyers and temporary tattoos stating 'Pussypower' or 'Bulletproofbaby'
- Creating a Spotify playlist composed of songs by European female rappers, allwoing target audiences to not only discover Silvana but also local and other European artists.

In conclusion, the workshop notes stated that the proposed activities could empower:

- more women to follow their dream of a career as a hip-hop artist,
- people in the LGBT community to create art about their condition in society, and
- a wider public to return to placing their vote at the ballot box to quash destructive ideologies.

Moving Docs screening partners involved

In May 2018, Film & Campaign were tasked with coordinating the *Silvana* release by Moving Docs partners. Our survey at that point, having contacted all partners who had expressed an interest in showing *Silvana*, led to the following results:

- Against Gravity in Poland reported that distribution would be handled through a separate entity and they wouldn't be involved themselves
- BDFC in Berlin reported no involvement due to the film being solely handled by Rise and Shine
- CineDoc in Greece had already shown the film in April on a one-off licence for a screening in the biggest lesbian club in Athens, in collaboration with the Outview Film Festival, but not planning any further screenings: https://www.facebook.com/events/362010987648192/
- Demiurg in Slovenia had already shown the film as a partner in the Kinotrip festival but envisioned further screenings in the summer which didn't materialise
- DocsBarcelona had just completed screenings of *Silvana*: http://www.docsbarcelona.com/doc/silvana/
- DOK.fest Munich, likewise, had just shown *Silvana* as part of their festival in May: https://www.dokfest-muenchen.de/films/view/11933
- Doc Lounge, operating in the Nordic countries and pioneering as usual, had already shown the film in Sweden in 2017 before it established an international presence: http://doclounge.se/films/silvana
- DocPoppies in Belgium scheduled an event for 21 November at the music venue De Roma in Antwerp, at this point planned as an actual Silvana concert
- DOXBIO in Denmark were the first Moving Docs partner to release *Silvana* following the Thessaloniki workshop and hence served a testing ground for the ideas developed this workshop (more below below)

- Five Stars in Belgrade stated an interest in showing the film but this didn't materialise
- Jeden svět / One World in Prague had planned a Silvana concert in connection with the film's release for 6 March that was cancelled the day before "due to private circumstance"
- Lemesos International Documentary Festival would show the film in collaboration with Accept (LGBT Cyprus) and the Swedish Embassy in Nicosia: http://filmfestival.com.cy/film-list-2018/item/317-silvana
- New Notions Cinema didn't provide further updates beyond the initial sharing of notes, and appears to have ceased operations since
- Rise and Shine Cinema had also hoped to involve Silvana herself in an event, but this didn't materialise. Nonetheless, a rolling theatrical release began in Germany on 23 August, and according to our records, the film still had more screenings there than in any other country outside Sweden: https://silvana-film.de/termine/
- Take One Action Film Festival in Scotland was planning to release the film as part of their annual festival in September, planning a live event involving local performers

Initial experiences shared by DoxBio

Being the first on-site event following the Moving Docs workshop in Thessaloniki, DoxBio's joint release of *Silvana* in collaboration with the CPH:DOX festival was of particular interest as a testing ground for the group's ideas.

A more private 'influencer screening' by DoxBio had been off to a great start, with two directors attending, word-spreading really working, and a photoshoot with the poster deemed a success.

However, even though Silvana performed a concert after the CPH:DOX screening, there was "a lot of back and forth" and not even an interview with her was possible.

The DoxBio release across Denmark only sold 1,200 tickets instead of the expected 4,000 – it turned out that "not that big a crowd knows Silvana" and that for her real fans who came to the Copenhagen premiere, the film actually wasn't "political enough".

The lesson for DoxBio's Katrina Schelin was that CPH:DOX didn't really trigger word of mouth, and she says that in hindsight, she wouldn't have entered this collaboration.

Can *Silvana* be the first case for Moving Docs to trial 'event cinema online'?

Also in late spring, it was suggested that *Silvana* could be used to trial Film & Campaign's proposals for a 'virtual screening room' aka 'event cinema online', attempting to combine

transmissions of the film's screening with a concert either featuring local artists or Silvana Imam herself.

In particular, Scottish Moving Docs partner Take One Action was planning an event at CCA in Glasgow on 18 September involving spoken word and hip hop performers, and Doc Poppies in Flanders would actually have Silvana herself perform a concert on after the film at de Roma, a music venue in Antwerp, on 21 November.

Both screening partners reached out to media partners as well as organisations in the areas of music and culture, citizens' empowerment, the 'female gaze', and the debate about gender roles.

The interactive online stream of these events would also have the benefit of being available for sharing across Europe by Moving Docs partners wherever rights permit. Discussions with the film's sales agents showed that only a few territories would have to be geo-blocked. They also requested there be a paywall.

Everything looked feasible.

Preparing our first 'event cinema online'

Working with Wonderstream

With these concrete events in mind, we went back to where we had left off after the previous year's research: to Wonderstream in Seattle.

A call with Wonderstream's Brad Wilke in mid-July revealed they were working on a relaunch of their software "as we speak", they would offer it to us free of charge for first usage.

In terms of geoblocking, they confirmed that the livestream could be geo-blocked by hosts, and a recording could then be downloaded by the event hosts and be offered with a different set of geo-restrictions.

Their geo-blocking also precedes the paywall, so there is no potential case of users paying but then not being able to watch – an important difference to more home-made solutions we had considered in parallel.

Wilke also advised us on suitable live-on-air software that would allow seamless switching from video file playback (i.e. the feature-length documentary) to a two-camera setup.

Anonymised analytics and email capture would be available.

Wilke was going to look into currency options for payment, and potentially enabling different pricing in different territories, or even the option of watching for free in a limited number of territories.

An on-site rehearsal was agreed to be held before the actual event.

Take One Action's stage schedule for the big night looked as follows:
https://www.dropbox.com/s/j0i2owsvwcr3glo/Screenshot%202019-01-21%2016.46.05.png?dl=0

We noted how an event duration of more than 2.5 hours would overrun Wonderstream's standard limit of 140 minutes, and negotiated that they would allow us to overrun their standard slots.

However, with just a few weeks remaining to the event, a number of core obstacles became obvious.

Obstacle #1: Event streaming platform still in early stages

We ran into a number of critical issues during our testing of Wonderstream. For example, it turned out that
- entering UK postcodes would break the system entirely,
- European payment cards would be declined, and
- consumer-facing pricing was still only available in US dollars.

Here is an illustrative sample from what we reported to Wonderstream: https://www.dropbox.com/s/j0i2owsvwcr3glo/Screenshot%202019-01-21%2016.46.05.png?dl=0

Wonderstream was obviously still in the process of working on the platform and – to their credit – constantly improved it based on our reports. However, we suddenly felt like we are alpha-testing a buggy new software – and this was nothing we could afford to be doing with only weeks to go to the event.

Take One Action decided to work with Glasgow-based Blue Star Streaming to deliver the video production and the stream: http://www.bluestarstreaming.co.uk/

We convinced Blue Star's Trevor Thomson to do a test for safety which was initially delayed due to their staffing issues but finally held on 7 September. We set up a test event on Wonderstream for Blue Star to connect their RTMP stream to but there were basic registration issues preventing it from going ahead: https://www.dropbox.com/s/39tp3a5pvs2wjvb/Screenshot%202019-01-21%2016.42.20.png?dl=0

Obstacle #2: Difficulties with venues

The venue for Take One Action's event on 18 September was going to be the high-capacity Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) in Glasgow, set to re-open on 14 September following an extensive closure due to the blaze at the neighbouring Glasgow School of Art in June, leading to fears the ruins could collapse.

Coinciding with the bug-ridden software testing, on 6 September, it was announced that the CCA would not be able to re-open as planned.
Background info: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-45434303
The venue remained closed until the end of October.

Take One Action's Tamara van Strijthem suddenly saw herself confronted with not just having to find an alternative venue for the *Silvana* event but for all other festival screenings they had scheduled at the CCA – with just 10 days to go to the festival.

The only venue available that would be able to accommodate both a film screening and a live performance at such short notice was SWG3's Poetry Club, a significantly smaller venue. Another issue was that the venue would need to guarantee a reliable fibre internet connection for high-speed upload of an HD live stream.

Obstacle #3: Micro-budgets limiting the quality of the remote experience

At the same time, we became more and more convinced that, considering that we were supposed to charge remote participants for watching, audiences would rightly be expecting a high-quality experience not just in terms of content but also in production value.

It became increasingly clear that the 'shoestring' support mechanisms available to screening partners through Moving Docs may be enough to ensure a quality event on-site but insufficient to translate this into the online experience, even though extra funds had been made available for this.

As Tamara von Streijthem summed it up at the time, "a poor experience would reflect badly on all organisations involved." On 7 September, the difficult decision was taken not to proceed with the transmission of the event on 18 September.

The event in Glasgow went ahead as programmed with the local artists but in a different venue and without the online component. 74 people attended.

At that time, it still looked like the much larger event Doc Poppies had been planning – with Silvana herself giving a concert – would go ahead as planned and present a much better value proposition to win audiences for 'event cinema online'.

Obstacle #4: Reliance on an unreliable performer

We started to focus on the event planned with Silvana Imam for Antwerp, only to learn that the artist had cancelled the gig in the meantime. We were told she might still be available for a Q&A session, but that plan was soon dropped as well.

A pattern was emerging here, given Silvana or her management had also let down other Moving Docs screening partners, for example by first agreeing a concert with Rise & Shine Cinema for the German release – only to cancel this as well.

The music venue in Antwerp was in the process of finding a replacement female hip hop band. Doc Poppies said they weren't really involved in managing this specific event itself; they were mainly supplying the film and doing outreach work around their multi-city

release of *Silvana* – and Moving Docs was not in a position to manage the special event in Antwerp remotely.

Obstacle #5: Artist(s) unknown to audiences

Due to the unavailability of Silvana Imam for film events, and the cancellations of gigs she had agreed to, there was a reliance on using local musicians and spoken word artists that would complement the film.

The fact that Silvana is relatively unknown outside of Sweden, and that local 'replacements' are equally unknown to audiences joining remotely from further afield, made it difficult to communicate a value proposition that would justify a payment for this type of content (Take One Action had suggested £4 / €4.50 for the 'event cinema online').

With another Take One Action screening of the *Silvana* film coming up in Aberdeen in November, again in combination with local artists, we pointed out that we could have another attempt at the 'event cinema online' but should offer it for free in this inaugural edition. The co-hosts at Belmont Cinema in Aberdeen agreed to that, and we began negotiations in this direction with the rightsholders.

Working together with the coordinators of Moving Docs, we still couldn't figure out the eventual 'pull' of the proposed event.

Obstacle #6: Lack of proposals for the use of the feedback channel

A core element of the proposed 'event cinema online' is that it should enable audience interaction, or in other words, turn remote viewers into virtual but active participants in the event – typically through a chat channel or, in the case of using Wonderstream, a hashtag-based Twitter feed. Originally we had also looked at video-based participation, but these solutions are a lot less scalable.

In the case of a debate or Q&A session, this is comparatively easy. A staff member monitors the feed and relays 'remote' questions to the panel or the interviewee. But what if the added value is less dialogue-based and more of a performance, as with the *Silvana* events? For example, would performers be able to improvise based on audience keywords?

We kept reminding partners of the need to come up with concepts that would make good use of the feedback channel. At the same time, the other obstacles described above were already great enough so insufficient thought was given to making the most of the desired interactions.

Eventually, we jointly considered using titles other than *Silvana* for the screening room, e.g. *Over The Limit* or *Dolphin Man,* which were already part of the Moving Docs slate and where the options for interaction would be more verbal and easier to define – but were running out of time for an actual implementation of 'event cinema online' in the 2018 season of Moving Docs.

Takeaways

In retrospect, the core issue for us was that *first* came a proposal and a desire to try out promising new technology and new ways of event participation. *Then* we tried to make a project fit this tech concept in order to live up to a pledge that had been made for the 2018 edition of Moving Docs, which ultimately wasn't deliverable for the network in the circumstances we encountered.

Just like form is supposed to follow function, tech should be chosen to naturally suit the content – not the other way round. As long as we keep that in mind in the future, none of the obstacles we encountered will be unsurmountable.