

# **“In the beginning, there was only one mistake we could make and that was not to try.”**

## An Interview With David Dufresne and Anita Hugi on Their Interactive Works

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David Dufresne is one of the most successful directors of interactive documentaries. *Prison Valley* (2010, co-directed with Philippe Brault), about the prison industry in the USA using the example of Cañon City, a small town with 13 large prisons in its area, and *Fort McMoney* (2013), about the exploitation of nature and people using the example of a small Canadian town, were both co-produced by Arte and have strongly influenced the genre. As both projects are based on Flash, they are currently not available online. Dufresne is also the author of several novels and non-fiction works. As a journalist, he achieved awareness for his observations of police violence during the yellow vest protests, which he shared on Twitter (“Allô Place Beauveau”). In 2020, he presented his (linear) documentary *Un Pays qui se tient sage* in Cannes (released under the title *The Monopoly of Violence* in English), which features various interviews with witnesses and eyewitness videos. Since 2021, he has regularly broadcast the interview program *Au Poste* on Twitch, which deals with public issues, police violence, politics, cinema, and literature.

Anita Hugi was the editor in charge of Swiss Radio and Television’s (SRF) documentary program *Sternstunde Kunst* from 2005 to 2016. In 2016, together with David Dufresne, she realized the web project *Dada Data*, a project about the art of Dada in the form of contemporary internet art. Together, they also realized the phone-based interactive documentary *Die rote Hanna/Hanna la rouge* in 2018. Their projects have won numerous awards. As a director of (non-linear) films, she most recently made *Heidis Nightmare* (2022), which was broadcast on Arte, SRF, RTS, RSI, and NHK. Hugi was director of the Festival International du Film sur l’Art in Montréal from 2016 to 2019 and of the Solothurn Film Festival from 2019 to 2022. Since 2023, she has been head of the film department at the Geneva School of Art and Design (HEAD).

We meet Anita and David in the Césure, the old Sorbonne-Nouvelle building, which is currently available for temporary use and provides space for various artists. *Au Poste*’s studio is also located there, as is *the Narrative Boutique production office*.

*Q: In 2009, interactive documentaries were no longer new territory, but they were not yet a medium with an established audience or significant reach. What motivated you to make Prison Valley about the prison industry in the USA as an interactive documentary?*

D: I think the term “web doc” was first used in 2007 and *Prison Valley* is from 2009, so we were actually very early. I’ve also been publishing online since 1995, I’ve always been very interested in the interactive nature of this medium.

At the time, it was not possible to place certain kinds of content on television, and some people therefore migrated to the net. There was money to try some new things out and people took advantage of that. Back then, there were very few popular interactive formats, unlike today, where almost everything is interactive. Even if I want to order at McDonald’s, I have to press an interactive button. We shot *Prison Valley* in the USA at the time Nicolas Sarkozy had the idea of privatizing the prisons in France, and we thought, let’s show what it looks like here in the USA.

*Q: Prison Valley and Fort McMoney were produced with Arte, the CNC, and the NFB, among others. Was there still a certain amount of freedom?*

D: Absolutely. The sums weren’t huge (€250,000 for *Prison Valley* and €600,000 for *Fort McMoney*). We benefited from that, but so did Arte, which was also able to rejuvenate its audience through these experiments. At the time, the NFB had Monique Simard, who decided to primarily promote digital projects.

*Q: So there was this freedom because it was new, but probably also because it was a marginalized medium, because funding and broadcasters were still interested in linear projects. But if you look at the projects at the time, it’s noticeable that there was still a sense of euphoria and optimism among those responsible for such new formats, which is lacking today.*

D: That’s true. There’s a lot more competition today and even Netflix has interactive formats, so it’s become a bit standardized. But we’ve also seen that interactive formats have been discontinued in order to invest the money in VR and then later focus more on streaming. The people at Arte told us that we had to reach viewer numbers in the seven-figure range. *Fort McMoney* has reached around 700,000 viewers, which is not bad. People always say that you don’t know how long people watch, then I answer, yes, but with *The Irishman* (USA 2019), which Scorsese made for Netflix and which lasts three hours, nobody knows that apart from Netflix, and I would not be surprised if many viewers stopped watching after 15 minutes.

Q: *What were the technical challenges back then?*

D: There were a lot of them. We had to invent and try out a lot of things. It actually went back and forth. In *Prison Valley*, there's this hotel room where you can select the different stations. A designer spent a long time working on it. Today, I can do that in seconds with my iPhone. A lot has changed since then, also in terms of what Roger Odin called "*La compétence spectatorielle*" (communicative competence, see Odin 2022). When you make a linear movie, you imagine an adult spectator who knows what a flashback is, etc. But with interactive documentaries, it was new for all of us, we didn't know how best to set up an interactive scene, where to position the objects, which ones to choose, etc. Everyone had an opinion about it; there was no experience.

Q: *How did you make your decisions? Experimenting? Testing?*

The very concept of webdocs is experimentation. For viewers, as well as for authors, developers, designers and producers. We spent our time doing what's known as "agile development", adapting, depending on the tests and possibilities.

Q: *Have you done any test screenings?*

D: No, we didn't want that. But we got a lot of feedback from people about the content, but also about the operation, what they found illogical, etc.

Q: *What were your hopes for the new format back then?*

D: It was clear to us that we couldn't continue filming the way we had for 40 years. With the interactive format, we wanted to put the audience at the center. The authors are also important, we didn't want to do get rid of them, but they should no longer be above the viewers.

A: There was some headwind for these new forms at the beginning. I remember the pitch of the web documentary *Gaza Sderot* at the IDFA Doc Lab in 2008 (International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, the film was made by Alex Szalat, Joël Ronez and Susanna Lotz). It was presented on the big market, but there was a headwind.

D: People felt attacked, threatened, even when we pitched *Prison Valley* there. In terms of design, *Gaza* is the best Inter-Doc project for me. It's about the border. You, the viewer, are directly at the border, you go back and forth.

A: Yes, in terms of both form and content, it's an excellent project. We tried to do the same with *Dada Data*: looking for an interactive form that takes the content even further. I like this maxim: not doing documentary *for* the internet, but *by* means of the internet.

Q: *What changed between Prison Valley (2009) and Dada Data (2016) in terms of funding and technology?*

A: I knew that there was almost no documentary film ever made about the Dada art movement and I wanted to do something that wasn't just a documentary, but really reflected the spirit of Dada. It shouldn't just be a website. When co-producing with Arte, we were really able to rely on the experience of several years of interactive projects within public broadcasting. It should be possible to create artistically ambitious, precise, non-conformist projects that at the same time reached out to all kinds of audiences.

D: But there were also difficulties because more and more people now knew what they wanted in this area. Nevertheless, it has to be said that we also had a lot of freedom. We were also able to work with a company that was ten times bigger than the team of *Prison Valley*. And we were able to work with HTML5, which is why the site still exists, unlike *Prison Valley* and *Fort McMoney*. But there were more and more discussions about making it suitable for cell phones and so on. It was the last big project we were able to do. The strategy at Arte has already started to shift its focus more and more towards streaming and web series.

That's a pity, because with *Dada Data* we realized that we no longer had to explain many things to the viewers, since they had been able to gain experience with interactive films on the net for a good seven years.

Fig. 1: "DADA-GAFA", still from "DADA-DATA" (David Dufresne, Anita Hugi, F 2016)



Fig. 2: Photo of David Dufresne and Anita Hugi at the press conference at Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, 05/02 2016 (100 years of Dada movement), copyright by Dufresne/Hugi.



A: Today, this viewer competence is even greater, Covid has initiated another leap forward in terms of broad audiences being familiar with operating different interfaces. But this development is not reflected on the production side; there is simply no more money for non-linear work, which is crazy surprising, because the place this innovation comes from is also part of the cinema sector, but people still hesitate to invest in it.

Q: *On the one hand, you're right that competence is increasing because people are using more things, but at the same time you can see that the most popular formats that are being used have become very simplistic. There are interactive movies on Netflix, but they are mostly just YES-NO questions to choose from.*

D: Yes, there is a routine, a boredom, too. It has become commonplace. Maybe you have to wait and see. Change happens very quickly. A few years ago, everyone made fun of it when you filmed in portrait format, today it's more accepted due to the rise of Instagram and TikTok. That happens very quickly.

A: Absolutely. I remember I did a project on portrait format in 2010 with artists in Basel, back then it was still quite different. It was called *Hochformat* [German for portrait format] and was an invitation to artists for videos only in portrait format. Maybe this is where the feeling that little is moving comes from, because it's being standardized so quickly. It's the same with cinema. It's about conventions, some of which were previously only used by the avant-garde.

D: But it's true, in terms of form, it's become a bit more monotonous. In the beginning, there was only one mistake we could make and that was not to try. We tried everything and it worked. Today, in terms of design, it's less so because the iPhone has set standards to which everything has to adhere. Hovering, for example, doesn't exist on a phone. Apple and Android are very fussy about code and prevent creativity from expressing itself: Everything has to fit into their technical standards.

A: Yes, and with streaming you remain passive as a viewer to a certain extent, but with interactivity you are at the center, you participate. The TV channels, including Arte, which rely so heavily on streaming, want to have masses of viewers who can also be a multitude of individuals. Beyond streaming, you could also do great things, for example with the iPhone, stories that interact with your perception of daily life, that send you messages, like with *Hanna la Rouge*.

Q: *But these examples are often also examples of failure. Hanna la Rouge is no longer available, your first two early films are no longer running because of Flash.*

D: Eighty percent or so of the films of early cinema are no longer available today.

Q: *True, but they didn't all disappear in the first ten years after they were created.*

D: Even though I'm a passionate archivist, I don't see it so critically, because it's a bit like going to a concert: You only have the memory of it. That was a lot of work for three years ...

A: ... somehow paid work ...

D: That's right.

A: But it was also a decision. A lot of money was and is spent on preserving the cinematographic heritage, but hardly any at all for online projects.

Q: *Finally, I would like to come back briefly to the question of the documentary. You mentioned your reasons for starting to make interactive documentaries back then. From today's perspective – and I'm also thinking of David's latest film *Un Pays qui se tient sage* – what do you see as future developments that could perhaps be just as ambitious as this decision back then?*

D: For me, *Un Pays qui se tient sage* is a continuation of my work with interactivity. I wanted the original images of violence that were circulating as short clips in the social networks to be in the film in a completely unexpected way. It should be like when you're on Facebook or Twitter and suddenly someone posts such a shot. A sudden intrusion of the real. For me, that's direct cinema. I've been working on the web for over 20 years, I know the power of these shots, for me they are also cinematographic shots.

Q: *What would be a new format you would choose for your future work?*

D: Today I think that AI could bring me back to interactive documentary film. Because it's a new tool that shouldn't be left to the wrong people. And because it's generative. *Fort McMoney* is seven hours long, which is not an insane amount, but still. Any computer game can easily generate new material. If you can achieve that in a movie, that wouldn't be bad.

But even today, the young generation has all the means at their disposal not only to make documentaries, but also to distribute them. That's actually revolutionary. There is an enormous amount of energy on some of the platforms. That's excellent, something has to come of it, something will come of it.

Fig. 3: “Un Pays qui se Tient Sage” (David Dufresne, F 2020). In this documentary, footage showing the police brutality is screened, while witnesses watch it and discuss it while viewing it – another form of interactive engagement with heterogeneous footage.



Source: Still image from the film.

Fig. 4: & 5: David Dufresne at his studio where he records his show “Au Poste”



Source: Florian Krautkrämer

## Bibliography

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