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Streaming World Genre Cinema

By Stefano Baschiera

There is little doubt that the online life of films could potentially offer new distribution opportunities for specialised niche cinema and help a new proliferation of genres and subgenre films.^[1] In this technological landscape, the genre production of world cinema may find improved possibilities to cross national borders and travel thanks to a potential availability that was unthinkable beforehand. In this brief Point of View contribution, I invite scholars to look at the ways in which a change in the circulation of specialised cinema may affect the features and understanding of film genre within a World Cinema context.

Gatekeepers and the Digital Disruption

Over the past decade, the development of online distribution and Video-On-Demand platforms, and their promise of unlimited and instant offer of films, generated a wide range of reactions from critics, media analysts and academics as they attempted to understand how internet access affects the circulation of audiovisual products.^[2] Some scholars, for instance Dina Iordanova,^[3] underline the potential disruption of the markets, in particular through the process of disintermediation and the consequent opening of the availability of a wide series of specialised cinemas, which usually live at the margins of theatrical distribution.^[4]

In fact, following the concept of “long tail” markets as promoted by Chris Anderson,^[5] we can grasp how online access may render the niche profitable and, therefore, it potentially allows cinematic marginal realities to meet a global audience, on some occasions, for the first time. This relatively “new” online availability is present across the disparate types of service, albeit with different degrees.

On the one hand, there are servicing platforms dedicated exclusively to the streaming of specialised cinema. This is the case of Mubi, which is renowned for its focus on global art cinema. On the other hand, the depth of the long tail markets is more evident where the boundaries between formal and informal modes of distribution^[6] overlap, for example with digital archives, YouTube channels, Bit-Torrent closed communities etc. Nonetheless, the end result is the availability of the niche, if not its profitability. From Asian horrors to Finnish romantic comedies, specialised films, in particular belonging to genres and subgenre categories, are now available on different online markets, from Video-On-Demand to catch up services, to the extent that each independent

production can virtually reach millions of viewers through hosting websites such as Vimeo and YouTube. However, if these services allow independent zero-budget films to meet their audiences, it is also true that these markets are still struggling for a business plan which is able to make them financially rewarding.

This strain leads to a wary reaction towards the digital disruption and the online life of films. Some scholars argue that it might actually compromise the future availability of those films not deemed sufficiently profitable to justify the cost of digitalisation. Among the advocates of this position is Wheeler W. Dixon who goes further and questions the durability and reliability of the digital format (and its archives) and the significant top-to-bottom control allowed by new forms of distribution.^[7]

Overall, the middlemen, the gatekeepers, have not gone away; they have mainly shifted form, appearing now at the level of rights clearance and as content aggregators. As Ramon Lobato argues, the rights for online distribution, in particular for films pre-1997, needed to be renegotiated for the distribution in a certain geographical area. The cost-effective aspect of this clearance is the first barrier to determine which films deserve the effort to be made available online in a given territory.^[8] Consequently, new forms of gatekeepers have developed, among them content aggregators have become crucial.

Patrick Vonderau analyses the role played by one of these aggregators, Under the Milky Way. He points out “how searching for a European film in the iTunes Store activates a library preselected by Under the Milky Way, iTunes’s key video-on-demand (VOD) movie aggregator for Europe, an intermediary whose approach to distributive gatekeeping tactics has changed the amount, variety, and accessibility of entertainment program content”.^[9]

A look at Under the Milky Way’s website can offer a understanding of the way this content aggregator defines itself:

Under The Milky Way is a company dedicated to the digital distribution of films and audiovisual programs. Under The Milky Way brings you a wide selection of films and series from all over the world. We distribute these films through legal and reputable platforms such as iTunes, Google, Amazon, Vudu, etc. ensuring the highest standard of quality for your movie watching experience! Under The Milky Way is the result of an international team working directly with rights-holders and with great passion to bring you the best, but also the odd, the hard-to-find, the somewhat different, the disturbing, the old, and also the future of cinema as we know it Under The Milky Way.^[10]

I would like to draw attention to two aspects emerging from this short description. First of all, the gatekeeper role is clearly stated, stressing the action of an “international team” which deals “directly with the right-holders”. Secondly, the criteria for the selection of films on offering underline once again the attention given to the niche, to the films previously unavailable or simply “odd”.

The attention towards the depth of the catalogue, which offers the less known, demonstrates the “long tail” approach of the company. However, once the niche is picked from the aggregators and made available by the streaming platforms, another issue emerges: the visibility of the films in question. Clearly, even if they are digitalised and made available online, not all the films immediately encounter new audiences. Film genres continue to play a crucial role in the categorisation, marketing and offering of film online, especially as far as the niche market is concerned. As I shall discuss later, the organisation and the visibility of the video-on-demand catalogue can be seen as another layer of gatekeeping; the visual interface becomes, in fact, another intermediary between the film and the potential viewers.

Online Distribution and Genre Cinema

The scholarly works on the effects of digital disruption mark a new attention towards questions of media consumption and distribution.^[11] What emerges from the analysis of the online modes of film circulation is the focus on the role played by distribution in shaping and understanding film culture and the films themselves. In fact, the reflection on recent technological developments in the consumption of digitised films, and the relocation of viewing practices (as addressed for instance by Francesco Casetti)^[12] shifted the debate from thematic approaches and textual analysis to the area of film industry and the circulation of films.

The importance of looking at film distribution for a theoretical definition and development of film genres has been efficiently underlined by scholars, such as Stuart Cunningham,^[13] Ramon Lobato and Mark David Ryan^[14] among others. For instance, Lobato and Ryan argue that “[a]ttention to the circulation of texts as material commodities in cultural markets, and to the structural and economic forces shaping movie genres as textual formations, industrial categories and production templates, can produce new models for genre analysis”.^[15] This process operates on two levels within film distribution. The first concerns the ability of withholding the circulation of films and the second consists in the distribution capacity to indirectly regulate the degrees of access. As Lobato and Ryan point out, “thinking genre through distribution provides a different way of addressing some of the typical concerns of genre studies, such as patterns of generic evolution, aesthetic histories of

individual genres/sub-genres, and debates around categorization and canonization.”^[16]

From this perspective, looking at streaming distribution presents pressing challenges and opportunities for the categorisation of films and generic evolution. In fact, while scholarly works have engaged on several aspects of media circulation, including content development networks, copyrights, regulation, physical practice of streaming, piracy etc., little attention has been given to the organisation of online catalogues as a form of gatekeeping. The recent development of servicing platforms for online streaming such as Netflix and Amazon Instant Video has underlined, once again, the increasing need for categories which are able to organise the vast online film catalogues, as well as to feed the “what to watch next” suggestion algorithm. Tailoring the homepage and catalogue offering to the habits and tastes of the viewer/costumer has become the real struggle for these platforms, as they try to offer an apparent never-ending choice and the promise of endless discovery of films.

The subscription Video-on-demand model (S-VOD), in fact, changed the competition arena: its shift from attracting the viewer to buy or rent the film he/she is specifically looking for (in a way not dissimilar to the brick and mortar video rentals store), to a system where it is the depth of the catalogue (or its perception) that really matters. The latter is generally based on a monthly subscription and the viewer needs to be guided to a wide choice of films and TV series that he/she does not yet know to like. Inevitably, questions of genre and subgenre emerge both in the organisation of the films on the platforms and in the occasional questionnaires and surveys aimed at determining the customers’ tastes, preferences and kind of emotional response they want from the films.^[17] Cross-categories such as “cerebral films”, “foreign violent films” or “dark film” have recently appeared alongside more traditional generic labels as horror and thriller, in order to guide the viewer through the choice of film and TV products.

Whilst categorising elements and meta-data, such as “content tags” (genres, stars, directors etc.), are taken into account to offer a “next viewing suggestion”, national belonging and languages are generally dismissed features. In fact, Netflix and Amazon Instant Video, two of the main competitors of the streaming platform service, despite their different approaches to the organisation and visualisation of the catalogue, move away from geographical classification if not for a general, hidden, (and often imprecise) “foreign films” category. This “geographical indeterminacy” and the digital possibility to cross-categorise a film, listing it under several categories at the same time (something that the brick and mortar store shelves do not offer), means that several world cinema products “mingle” in the catalogue, finding

places under different classifications and genres. This aspect is important for two reasons. Firstly, because it presents a sort of break from a distribution tradition of marketing foreign films mainly as art-house products. Indeed, apart from few generic exceptions, mainly horror films, it is not a surprise that subtitled world genre cinema is normally marketed as art-cinema and “festival film”. Secondly, “foreign films” find a new association and links with more mainstream generic products thanks to the new categorisation and suggestion for further viewing. It is not uncommon to receive recommendations for *Old Boy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003) or other Korean and Scandinavian films as “what to watch next” at the end of a Hollywood mainstream thriller or drama.

I therefore argue that world cinema as “niche” finds a new place in the online catalogue: not really as world cinema per se but as a sort of “filling up” of generic categories. Foreign genre films appear to be used to give the impression of the depth of the catalogue and for completing the offering in subgenres and specialist subcategories. The presence of foreign/subtitled films on streaming platforms is so significant that it has been recently considered as one of the reasons for the decreasing presence of world cinema in the theatres.^[18] Unsurprisingly, horror and crime are the two genres that, on a platform like Netflix UK, feature the majority of world cinema titles, despite being genres that normally “hide” their country of origin and national iconicity. Horror is arguably the genre of foreign films which travels more easily online. This is because of the predominance of low budget productions, the minor impact of language differences and because of the thriving of subgenres on the long tail markets. Similarly, crime films present an understandable narrative structure based on a set of values that are easily translated across cultures as the recent success of Scandinavian crime shows. Conversely, world cinema here intended as art cinema (with the consequent focus on its geographical connotations) is mainly represented by the more traditional “festival films”, for instance *Das weisse Band – Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte / The White Ribbon* (Michael Haneke, 2009) and *Cesare deve morire / Caesar Must Die* (Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, 2012) among others.

The Future for World Genre Cinema

In order to demonstrate the effects that recent development in online distribution have on genre, Lobato and Ryan analyse Australian horror cinema, engaging with the way in which international online distribution privileges horror films that show clear geographical connotations.^[19] Australian horror films produced in the past decade strongly emphasise their settings and cultural regionalism. As the two scholars explain, the same rule does not apply to every national horror cinema. For instance, the Indonesian exploitation films that manage to travel through these new

distribution channels downplay certain local cultural specificities.^[20]

The development and global expansion of streaming platforms, which are increasingly dominating the home video markets, need to rely on the niche in order to offer a depth of catalogue and compete in this way by offering the kind of international genre cinema that was available only in specialised circuits just a decade ago. While crime and horror remain the dominant genres, drama and even comedies (like the French *Populaire* [Régis Roinsard, 2012] and *The Closet / Le placard* [Francis Veber, 2001]) make their appearance in the suggestion box. Although the financial impact of streaming distribution still represents a small percentage in the bigger picture of home entertainment, there is no doubt that it is going to be a dominant force in the following years and it may directly affect and shape the international genre production.^[21]

With this short overview I want to embrace Alisa Perren's suggestion to consider distribution as a label whose scope is to "categorize work on topics such as piracy, infrastructure, market research, trade shows, cloud security, and library building."^[22] In doing so, I would like to stress the necessity to look at the organisation of streaming platforms' online catalogues as a form of gatekeeping (arguably the last barrier before reaching the audience). Looking at the categorisation and the "what to watch next" suggestions, it is possible to grasp the role played by genre and world cinemas. The global expansion of S-VOD services,^[23] such as Amazon Instant Video and Netflix, offers the possibility of comparative analyses which may help to reframe the question of the transnational and the national in the online film circuit.

Moreover, this categorisation and use of genre labels may encourage a new proliferation of studies, engaging with formal and informal modes of distribution. With the exhibition sector increasingly dominated by few titles, online distribution may represent the main opportunity for the circulation of global cinema (for non-diasporic audiences), and genre seems to be able to play a crucial role contributing to the depth and growth of the catalogues. The way this will shape global genre production is an important matter for future investigations.

^[1] On the impact of streaming on the home video market see Ethan Tussey, "Digital Distribution Troubles Home Entertainment Market," *CWC Carsey-Wolf Center. Media Industry Project*, 5 August 2011. [[Accessed 15/08/14](#)].

^[2] On this topic see the interviews featured in Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson, *Distribution Revolution. Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014).

^[3] Dina Iordanova “Digital disruption: Technological innovation and global film culture,” in *Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves on-Line*, eds. Dina Iordanova and Stuart Cunningham (St Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2012), pp. 1-31.

^[4] On the possibility of disintermediation see also Jordan Levin, “An Industry Perspective: Calibrating the Velocity of Change,” in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 256–263.

^[5] Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).

^[6] For Ramon Lobato informal economy is distinguished by the “economic production and exchange occurring within capitalist economies but outside the purview of the state”, Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution (Cultural Histories of Cinema)* (London: British Film Institute, 2012), pp. 39-40.

^[7] While several arguments by Dixon refer mainly to the impact of digital projection on theatrical distribution, questions of preservation, availability and control are pertinent to the streaming sphere. See Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Streaming. Movies, Media and Instant Access* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).

^[8] Ramon Lobato, “The Politics of Digital Distribution: Exclusionary Structures in Online Cinema,” *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 3, no. 2 (December 2009): pp. 167–78.

^[9] Patrick Vonderau, “Beyond Piracy: Understanding Digital Markets,” in *Connected Viewing*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson, (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 105.

^[10] Under The Milky Way, [\[Accessed 19/08/14\]](#).

^[11] For an overview of the scholarly works on distribution see Alisa Perren, “Rethinking Distribution for the Future of Media Industry Studies,” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (2013): pp. 165–71.

^[12] See for instance Francesco Casetti, “Back to the Motherland: the Film Theatre in the Postmedia Age,” *Screen* 52, no. 1 (March, 2011): pp. 1–12.

^[13] Stuart Cunningham and Jon Silver, *Screen Distribution and the New King Kongs of the Online World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

^[14] Ramon Lobato and Mark David Ryan, "Rethinking Genre Studies Through Distribution Analysis: Issues in International Horror Movie Circuits," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 9, no. 2 (June 2011): 188-203.

^[15] *Ibid.*, p. 90.

^[16] *Ibid.*, p. 90.

^[17] Netflix US, for instance, adds to the films descriptions a couple of lines detailing the kind of emotional responses the viewer might expect from the film and/or the appropriate mood and "environment" to watch it.

^[18] See in this regard Anthony Kaufman, "The Lonely Subtitle: Here's Why U.S. Audiences Are Abandoning Foreign-Language Films," *Indiewire*, 6 May 2014. [[Accessed 14/08/14](#)].

^[19] See Ramon Lobato and Mark David Ryan, "Rethinking Genre Studies Through Distribution Analysis: Issues in International Horror Movie Circuits."

^[20] *Ibid.*, p. 199.

^[21] On the impact of streaming VOD on the US market of cable TV see John Vanderhoef and Kevin Sanson, "Cord Cutting Anxiety Oversimplifies Distribution Revolution" *CWC Carsey-Wolf Center. Media Industries Project*, 31 January 2014. [[Accessed 31/08/14](#)]. For an overview on the streaming landscape in UK see Elizabeth Evans and Paul McDonald, "Online Distribution of Film and Television in the UK: Behavior, Taste, and Value" in *Connected Viewing*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson (NY: Routledge, 2013), pp. 158-180.

^[22] Perren, Alisa. "Rethinking Distribution for the Future of Media Industry Studies." *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (2013): p.171.

^[23] On the question of policing and the European expansion of VOD services see for instance, Hannah Goodwin and John Vanderhoef, "Policy and Politics Dictate the Growth of the European SVOD Market," *CWC Carsey-Wolf Center. Media Industries Project*, 21 April, 2014. [[Accessed 31/08/14](#)].

Notes on Contributor

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