

Netflix as Cinematheque

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Our reliance on online streaming platforms is now bigger than ever, and have completely changed our relationship with film and television. Before the emergence of online streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime, Hulu, YouTube, and Netflix, audiences were not able to play, pause, and change contents as they wished. Although this is not to say that the programming choices for television and theaters were not reflective of audiences' demands back then, it's true that online steaming platforms have put the power back in the hands of the viewer by giving them the ability to watch what they want, when they want to watch it. According to online community platform for media, entertainment, and technology IBC365, "Netflix rarely releases data about its content but recently broke cover to claim that 45 million accounts, nearly a third of its total, had streamed the Sandra Bullock thriller (and Netflix original) *Bird Box* (2018) in its first week on the platform (Pennington, 2019)". The film and television industries all over the world, most of all Hollywood, are being forced to change their business models to compete. After all, this is the year when box office revenues for movies are predicted to be overtaken by over-the-top (OTT) revenues for the first time according to analyst firm Ampere Analysis (Pennington, 2019).

Steven Spielberg has recently made a controversial comment on how online streaming platform-produced films that do not screen in theaters for ninety days should have no place at the Oscars. As Netflix has put so eloquently in its Twitter response, perhaps "loving cinema, giving people who can't afford or live in

towns without theaters access to movies, letting everyone everywhere enjoy releases at the same time, and giving filmmakers more ways to share art, are not mutually exclusive (n.d., 2019)". Netflix's ambition to be recognized as a content producer, not just a streaming platform, makes them stand out among its competitors. It also creates a very interesting case for defining what it means to be a 'cinophile' or 'telephile' in today's climate. The media giant's tenacity to produce original films with renowned directors and actors, plans to purchase the Egyptian Theater (a historic movie house in the heart of Hollywood) and demonstration of restoring and enabling access to Orson Welles's *The Other Side of the Wind* (2018) show that it's not interested in just being a better streaming service.

Going strong at 148.9 million subscribers as this paper is being written in April 2019, Netflix is also quickly expanding into international markets. What does this mean? Despite the negative labels attached to the company for being "too commercial", it does after all still mean that it's actively sharing moving image contents to users across the globe. In this paper, I will discuss the impact of advanced Internet on the film and television industry, followed by an analysis of Netflix's role as a cinematheque, or film school, as the Cinematheque Francaise was for French New Wave directors like Jacques Rivette, Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Eric Rohmer. Providing access to critically acclaimed films, unique television programs, and contents from different parts of the world, I would argue that Netflix has become a film school in its own right despite its limitations as a proprietary platform, which will also be discussed in the paper.

The Internet and the Rise of Online Streaming Platforms

Ever since the Internet was commercialized, video streaming, news, advertisements, and social interaction have moved online. The rise of all of these different types of content has been one of the main forces behind the huge growth of the Internet, and it has become an essential infrastructure for how individuals across the globe gain access to the content sources they want (Stocker et al., 2017). It's a bit of a chicken or egg situation; defining whether it was the rise of such contents that initiated the advance of the Internet or vice-versa is another matter of debate. Regardless, the Internet has become the biggest platform on which information can be shared, and the main source of film education for not only millennials but most of us today is the Internet, not a cinematheque.

The growth of the Internet has generated new channels for motion picture distribution. Cinemas spent huge amounts of money on digital projection systems, which have been introduced to replace the traditional film projection systems in movie theatres; according to the 2017 THEME Report by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), "At the end of 2017, virtually all of the world's cinema's screens were digital (98 percent), up one percentage point from 2016 (n.d., 2017)." This meant that it is not only individual consumers but also movie theatres that became dependent on the internet to 'download' digital movie files. The dominance of digital equipment and the internet means reduction in

distribution costs. In theory, digital movies have the power to reduce the marginal costs of duplication to almost zero. The Internet has allowed movies to move between times, thus overcoming the constraints that used to define theatrical exhibition (Crisp & Gonring, 2015).

Digital production and distribution cannot be detached from consumer behavior. According to the same report, global home entertainment consumer spending increased by eleven percent to \$47.8 billion, while in the United States, home entertainment consumer spending for content released digitally and on disc increased five percent to \$20.5 billion, accounting for 65 percent of combined theatrical and home entertainment consumer spending. Unsurprisingly, digital home entertainment took up 43 percent, the highest portion. The report's data points also suggest there is no slowing down as the number of subscriptions to online video services around the world increased to 446.8 million in 2017 – which is a 33 percent increase when compared to 2016. Online video content viewing in the United States increased in 2017, reaching 167.5 billion views and transactions, which is a 41 percent increase compared to 2016. It has been calculated that Americans now spend 49 percent of their media time on a digital platform. This does not necessarily point toward a decline in the number of audiences who go to the movie theater, but what it does mean is that the moviegoing experience can no longer be described as hearing the sound of film flickering through a projector, nor seeing little imperfections like scratches or 'cigarette burns'.

Before major online streaming platforms like YouTube and Netflix became

popular, some sites, like Newgrounds, streamed online video using container formats which helped stream the first videos on the Internet (from article 'YouTube and Animator' on newgrounds.com) (n.d., 2014). Due to quality issues caused by low bandwidth and bad latency, very little streaming video existed on the Internet until 2002 when VHS quality video with reliable lip sync became possible. Back in 1997 when Netflix was first founded, it started off as a DVD rental company. DVDs were mailed, and like a library fine, you got fined if you brought the DVD back late. In 1999, it began to offer four DVDs rentals per month with no late fees or due dates for a monthly subscription fee. However, it was not until 2007 when the company decided to stream its contents online that made Netflix the company we know today. Having the vision to see that the internet would one day be able to deliver video content, to any home, has resulted in Netflix achieving today's success. This has also focused the company on technology and how to stream content as efficiently as possible. New ways of optimizing video are developed every year allowing the same High-Definition (HD) content to use less bandwidth over each connection – which comes in handy when you're streaming over 125 million hours of video every day (Smyth, 2018). Netflix is at the forefront of adopting the latest technologies to provide top-notch service to its users. For example, it has migrated its content to the cloud beginning from 2008 and completed this process in 2016 – a decision rooted in their data center failure which shut the entire service down and stopped DVD shipments for three days. The decision has made it even easier and faster for users to access Netflix's contents. In addition, even though millions of people around the world will

be watching Netflix, there will be very little additional traffic on the 'Internet' because of a decision Netflix made in 2011 to build their own content delivery network, or CDN. As it writes in 'How Netflix Works With ISPs Around the Globe to Deliver a Great Viewing Experience', since January 2016, Netflix had "increased interest in how we deliver a great Netflix viewing experience to 190 countries simultaneously," which it achieves with 'Netflix Open Connect', the company's globally distributed CDN (n.d., 2016).

Netflix's effort to ensure that its services can be streamed in a relatively good quality and fast speed even in countries with slow internet throughput is allowing users all over the world enjoy its services. Many countries, including Philippines, were skeptical that local consumers would get to enjoy the service. In 2016 when the service rolled out, Philippine's Internet speed was simply not good enough for video streaming for most Internet users (although this is not to say that things are much different now for them). As Eden Estopace puts it in the article 'Netflix's answer to slow Internet: Adaptive streaming', for Philippines, "even the lowest threshold of 0.5 Mbps may be hard to come by. Watching in HD (five megabytes) or Ultra HD (twenty-five megabytes) is dreaming for the moon for the majority of the Internet population (Estopace, 2016)". But Netflix leveraged its technological capabilities to allow its videos to stream in places with not-so-ideal bandwidth infrastructure, through what's called adaptive streaming. According to Chief Communications Officer at Netflix Jonathan Friedland, "adaptive streaming means that the quality or the bitrate that comes into your device is measured in the milliseconds by the

conditions around you so that you don't see buffering, so the pictures are constantly adjusting according to conditions (Estopace, 2016)". Simply put, whatever device one is using to stream videos, Netflix can detect the user's bandwidth and adjust the picture quality accordingly. Indeed, what Netflix is doing here is strictly business. But if its efforts to expand into international markets are allowing audiences living in countries with inferior Internet quality gain access to films and television shows that are otherwise difficult for them to watch, the company's perhaps doing something right.

For most parts of the world, it is no longer a luxury for families to own personal computers, let alone each member owning their own personal computers. In addition, according to the article 'Cord Cutting Will Accelerate in 2019' by Variety, "the pace of cord cutting is continuing to accelerate in 2019, according to a new Convergence Research Group report, with 4.56 million television households opting to ditch pay television. By the end of the year, thirty-four percent of U.S. households won't have a traditional television subscription, according to the research company's latest Battle for the American Couch Potato report". In the report, Convergence estimated that "the pay television industry will see a five percent decline in pay television subscribers in 2019," which is "up from four percent in 2018, when an estimated 4.01 million U.S. subscribers ditched their TV service". Based on the top sixty-six online video services, the number of streaming subscribers will "actually surpass the number of traditional pay television subscribers this year (households can subscriber to both) (Roettgers, 2019)". In

addition, according to an article on pewresearchcenter.org, in 2017, “more than half of all households in the US contained a cellphone but not a landline telephone”. It goes on to note that “some eighty-four percent of American households contain at least one smartphone, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in fall 2016, desktop and laptop computers are nearly as common – eighty percent of households contain at least one of these devices,” and while “tablet computer ownership is somewhat less widespread with sixty-eight percent of households containing at least one tablet,” “thirty-nine percent of households contain at least one streaming media device, such as an Apple TV, Roku or Google Chromecast (n.d., 2017)”. As demonstrated by these facts and figures, the overall landscape of how we watch moving image contents are shaped by the growth of technology. As such, questions such as whether Netflix can be compared to a cinematheque, for example, must be examined in the context of the current technological trends and development.

The Blurring Lines Between Film and Television

One of the effects of the rise of online streaming platforms is that the distinction between film and television has significantly blurred. Just about fifteen years ago, there was a very distinct difference between film and television. To watch a film meant going out and dressing up, while television was the stay at home in your pajamas, comfortable and easy-going type. However, somewhere in

the past few years or so, the lines started to blur. There are two main reasons behind this phenomenon. Firstly, we are witnessing the golden age of television. Today's shows "have such high production value and such rich story lines that you'd be forgiven for thinking you saw it in the cinema (Ravell, 2015)". Starting from American Movie Classics channel's *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) to HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011 to current), *Silicon Valley* (2014 to current), Netflix's *Stranger Things* (2016 to current), and *House of Cards* (2013-2018), the quality of television shows has risen to a point where it would seem outdated for anyone to boast their preference of film over television. The second reason would obviously lie in the fact that the majority of us watch movies the exact same way we watch television, on television, computer, and smartphone screens, as demonstrated by the figures described previously. Inevitably, it's much more convenient, cheaper, and immediate. Even the so-called cinephiles rely on online streaming services to not only watch the latest films but also old black-and-white or cult films. For these reasons, today's definition of what it is like to love cinema (hence the term cinephilia) cannot be described the same as when there was a clearer distinction between film and television. This isn't to say that film and television are now a unified entity. However, it is indeed a phenomenon which can't be ignored.

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What is a cinematheque? According to Dictionary.com, the etymology of the word is rooted in French, combination of cinema and (biblio) thèque library. It is also typically defined as a motion-picture theater, often part of a university or private archive, showing experimental or historically important films. From the beginning of the silent film era, there have been film clubs and publications in which people who felt passionately about cinema could discuss their interests and see rare and older works. And at the beginning of the sound era, there were more and more people interested in seeing older films, which led to the establishment of organizations such as the Cinematheque Francaise, the first major archive devoted to film preservation. A cinematheque is more than a space where one watches films. It's about cherishing the medium through collective discussions, film preservation, and exhibition of film-related objects. For example, in the case of Cinematheque Francaise, the French government chose a location in the outskirts of Paris in 1948, at the disposal of Cinematheque Francaise to provide a home for its film collections. The first galleries of the 'Museum Permanent du Cinema' (Permanent Museum of Cinema) opened at Avenue de Messine in November 1948, which was like "a cinematographic cabinet of curiosities, a private apartment where the most bizarre objects hung from the walls (Mannoni, 2006)". Cinematheque Francaise was also where future filmmakers of the Nouvelle Vague first met. During this time, Henri Langlois, the founder, wrote for the world's best-

known film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema*, which first appeared in April 1951. This was a particularly significant period for the Cinematheque, because at this time the government banned the use of inflammable film. Thousands of reels of nitrate stock were therefore donated or loaned to the Cinematheque for preservation, which is one of the earliest efforts of film preservation in the history of motion picture history (Mannoni, 2006).

Cinematheque Francaise, found in 1935, was “the church for movies” according to the words of French filmmaker Jean Renoir. Italian filmmaker Bernardo Bertolucci called it “the best school of cinema in the world (Roud, 1999).” Can Netflix can be a film school to today’s young filmmakers and critics? I believe that just like the French New Wave directors have done in the past, today’s young directors could be watching and discussing a cult classic together, the difference being that it’s streamed on Netflix through a single account that they each chip in for.

To discuss Netflix’s function as an archive, we need to address its business model first. As a for-profit organization, Netflix monetizes access to culture. This means that generating revenues will always be central to its actions, whether it be production, archiving, preservation, or access. The choice of what is to be restored or what kind of films will be shot has to reflect viewers’ demands, which may mean that it may lack artistic insight or persistence, a requirement for cinematheques. However, there is an important point to remember: that producing high-quality original contents is the only way that allows Netflix to stay a frontier in the field. The

company doesn't sell advertisements on its site, and it doesn't sell its user data like other large tech/media companies. Netflix's primary source of revenue is subscriptions. According to the article 'How Does Netflix Make Money?', "roughly 139 million users pay between \$8 and \$16 to Netflix to stream shows, documentaries, and films every single month. And in fact, in the U.S., Netflix's biggest market, an estimated 54% of households now have the streaming service – which is a lot of people binge-watching in their pajamas (n.d., 2019)". So, for Netflix, the best way to boost subscriptions and beat competitors is to produce Netflix exclusive content, and it has to be good, too. According to the source, in 2018, "the company spent around \$12 billion on content, up from \$9 billion a year ago. In 2019, the company is targeting a content spend of \$15 billion (n.d., 2019)".

While Netflix is profitable, on a cash-flow basis, this content spend actually takes the company negative. For example, in 2018, Netflix "had a free cash flow of negative \$3 billion, and they plan to burn through an additional \$4 billion next year (n.d., 2019)". The company is taking on debt to build out its content library of originals, with plans to eventually scale that spend down over time as the archive becomes so big that even the most avid binge-watchers can't cruise through it all. This may be a bold strategy, but its financially promising stature as the seventh-largest internet company in terms of revenue, together with its ambition to create high quality films and television shows, suggest two important points. Firstly, it shows that the company is far from growing obsolete. Second, it either should already have or is planning on building robust digital archive infrastructure so that

Netflix's original contents, which drives its subscription increase (the only source of revenue apart from DVD rental business), can be preserved safely for many years to come. In this sense, Netflix will be preserving countless original films and television shows in which their original copies will never be available in archives other than Netflix. If Netflix is archiving and preserving 'high-quality' valuable moving image artifacts nowhere to be found other than its cutting-edge digital archive, provides easy access to these artifacts including for those who can't afford or live in towns without theaters, lets everyone everywhere enjoy releases at the same time, and gives filmmakers more ways to share art, why can't it qualify as a cinematheque?

Netflix's reputation for giving creative freedom to filmmakers for its original films should also be noted here too. Netflix filmmakers are known to be "given money to work with but without the meddling of Hollywood's 'spreadsheet' approach to filmmaking (Zinski, 2017)". Director David Ayer, while describing his experience of working with Netflix for its original sci-fi action film *Bright* (2017), said: "(the company) asks where and how to shoot it and they let me do it. It almost felt like a super, high-budget independent film. That may not land with you guys, but you have to understand that other side. It is the opposite for many filmmakers. Netflix is going to pull a lot of talented people to their side. (Zinski, 2017)".

During a discussion about his latest Netflix-funded-and-distributed *The Irishman* (2019), which puts Robert De Niro and Al Pacino in one screen since their latest film together *Heat* (1995), Martin Scorsese said that "people such as Netflix

are taking risks. *The Irishman* is a risky film. No one else wanted to fund the picture for five to seven years. And of course, we're all getting older. Netflix took the risk. (Dale, 2018)". From a filmmaker's perspective, it's hard to refuse an offer that entails sufficient funds and creative freedom, even if it means that the film is screened in theaters for only a week or not at all. Netflix's approach is drawing in auteurs who have already established their names in the field as well as new talented filmmakers. This is allowing the company to produce unique, high-quality films, worthy of preservation.

Another important factor to be considered is that today, the number of moving image materials shot digitally far outweighs the portion shot on film. The moving image archiving industry is still adapting to this change, seeking ideal ways to archive and preserve high-volume born-digital moving image materials – a costly and complicated job. While established archives such as the Library of Congress's National Audio-Visual Conservation Center, UCLA Film & Television Archive, and Harvard Film Archive, among many, have years-long experience of handling nitrate, acetate, and polyester base films, the same cannot be said for born-digital moving image materials. This means that Netflix, a leading company in the IT field, may be in an advantaged position when it comes to building reliable infrastructure for the archiving and preservation of born-digital moving image materials.

When talking about the preservation of information, librarians use the expression 'LOCKSS' or 'lots of copies keep stuff safe'. If "lots" of copies of an item were made and kept in different locations, it's unlikely that all those copies will be

destroyed or lost simultaneously. But of course, online streaming platforms are highly centralized by their very nature, and it's doubtful that they really have the intention to maintain "lots" of carefully maintained copies of their exclusive content. On top of this, while Netflix is not willing to disclose the specifics of the process for submitting copies of its works to the Library of Congress for copyright reasons, Director of Communications Gayle Osterberg at the Library of Congress said that "Netflix isn't submitting its shows on VHS, but it is sending some on tape — and the process is part of a long, complicated relationship between media producers, copyright registrars, and digital conservationists (Robertson, 2014)". It's evident from this quote that what's being submitted to the Library of Congress are not necessarily master copies nor stored in a format type meant for preservation. This kind of bureaucratic procedure is posing threat to moving image preservation, especially born-digital. One can only hope that within the company, Netflix is ensuring that its original contents are well preserved.

Case Study: *The Other Side of the Wind*, Orson Welles

The digital era seems to pose an opportunity, not a limit, to the preservation of movies as well as raising awareness of old movies. There was a long dispute between Beatrice Welles, Orson Welles's daughter, and Oja Kodar, a former girlfriend - to gain a cinema release for *The Other Side of the Wind* which was shot over several years beginning from 1970 before Welles died from a heart attack in

1985. Until Beatrice Welles finally agreed to the restoration and release of the work, with Netflix signing on to finance the postproduction in March 2017, one of the most important treasures (more than a thousand reels of an unpublished Orson Welles film negatives) of the film industry was left hidden for poor reasons as deterioration progressed. The problem lies not merely in the time it took for the contracts to be signed, but in the fact that the films, shot on 8mm, 16mm, and 35mm analog film medium, was left abandoned without proper preservation measures (O'Falt, 2018). Anyone, anywhere, can now watch the previously-unseen gem created by one of motion-picture history's greatest directors, provided they have a Netflix subscription. But of course, for Netflix to be able to establish itself in the film industry as a company that cares about film restoration and enabling access to unseen films, Netflix will need to continue its action.

The restoration work is setting an example here: an example that shows online streaming platforms might actually be of help when preserving and allowing access to our moving image heritage – by using their resources to help preserve and share culture. It's a platform that virtually all young people use (at least in the developed parts of the world), and to represent an auteur like Orson Welles on their platform by discovering a film he was not able to complete, Netflix could potentially be seen as a robust source of film education.

The Movie-Going Experience

Currently, Oscar rules demand that a film has a one-week theatrical engagement in Los Angeles during the calendar year to be eligible for awards. That's more than enough for Netflix, which usually releases its movies simultaneously online and in a few indie theaters to qualify. Unlike Amazon, who "partners with theatrical distributors to put its films in theaters, respecting the traditional window of exclusivity before making them available to stream on Prime, Netflix is committed to making its films available to stream the same day they hit theaters, if they hit theaters at all (Lincoln, 2017)". Major theater chains refuse to screen Netflix movies because of this strategy, because Netflix refuses to abide by the industry's typical ninety-day theatrical release window before allowing subscribers to stream its films. As the article 'Netflix and Byron Allen Could Be Getting into the Movie Theater Business' notes, "none of the major chains will carry a movie if it's simultaneously available on home platforms. If Netflix owned a theater, the company would be able to sidestep this barrier. (Lang & Setoodeh, 2018)". It could also be used to challenge comments made in opposition of Netflix films contending in major film awards.

Netflix is in talks to buy the historic Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood which would cost tens of millions of dollars. While we all can agree that the beauty of having a Netflix account is about viewers being able to watch any contents from the comfort of their own homes, Netflix's theater purchase strategy will undoubtedly

help the company gain prominence as not just a streaming service but as a film producer and distributor. Martin Brittany writes in the article 'Netflix May Purchase the Historic Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood' that "this is a chance for Netflix to show its commitment to film preservation and restoration. As the deal stands now, the non-profit will continue to run their own screenings, lectures, and festivals on weekends, totally independent of Netflix. Netflix will primarily use the space on weekday evenings, hosting premieres and special events. While the Netflix deal will help sustain the non-profit Cinematheque, there's no doubt that owning a theater could also ease the way for its films to get Oscar qualifying runs. (Martin, 2019)".

On another note, Steven Spielberg's wish to preserve the movie-going experience needs to be heard. The more and more online streaming platforms-distributed films get accepted to contend for major film awards such as Oscars and Cannes, the need for theaters will slowly diminish and potentially disappear. If cinema is indeed considered the seventh art, something which early cinephiles including Henri Langlois fought so hard for, today's audiences must remember that the theater will always remain an utmost important element for the art form. At this rate, theaters may become a site restricted to film festivals and museums. Watching films at home aren't only indicative of the lack of theatrical atmosphere; i.e. being in a completely silent and dark space with strangers to only stare at a huge screen. It also means that audiences can pause the film as they wish, stare into their smartphones to check their e-mails and social media, or worse yet, stop

the film halfway to never return to it. If this worsens, film production companies will focus on producing films that are trendy and 'easy to watch', basically films that will be left streamed. This is not the kind of environment that allows for filmmakers to create artistic and unique films.

On top of this, Netflix's machine learning algorithms-driven recommendations could mean that audiences, especially those who aren't savvy with films and television shows, may end up watching similar contents instead of being experimental. This doesn't only confine to contents selection but also how these contents are displayed, under what Netflix calls 'artwork personalization'. Here is an example from the Netflix Technology Blog: "Let us consider trying to personalize the image we use to depict the movie Good Will Hunting. Here we might personalize this decision based on how much a member prefers different genres and themes. Someone who has watched many romantic movies may be interested in Good Will Hunting if we show the artwork containing Matt Damon and Minnie Driver, whereas, a member who has watched many comedies might be drawn to the movie if we use the artwork containing Robin Williams, a well-known comedian. (Chandrashekar et al., 2017)". While such curation is quite honestly refreshing as it's something that's only feasible by means of the latest technologies, what is absent from this are the artist's original intention and accurate portrayal of motion-picture history.

Conclusion

In 2019, Disney is going to pull all of its content from the Netflix site and create its own streaming service following Disney's acquisition of Twenty-First Century Fox's film and television assets. Even Apple announced moves towards entertainment and original content and signed up content creators including Oprah Winfrey and Steven Spielberg. If Netflix wishes to continue to stand out among its competitors by appealing to the motion-picture industry and film buffs as more than an online streaming platform, which at the moment appears to be the goal, the company would need to successfully juggle the demands of both binge watchers and cinephiles or film buffs (or whatever the right pretentious term is). From my personal standpoint, I believe that starting from CEO Reed Hastings to entry-level employees, the people behind creating the company culture at Netflix will need to study film history as much as they study the latest trends in tech and media industries. Equally, for those who are unwilling to accept that the accomplishments made by Netflix include progress in cinema, I would like to suggest that they think about this topic in the context of the rapidly changing landscape in technology and the consequent consumer behavior.

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