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Film Studies

Online Distribution and the Relocation of Specialised Film

by

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ABSTRACT

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The recent advent of online film distribution has inspired a utopian vision of change and disruption. In particular, online distribution is believed to foster a new democratic dawn of content distribution, widening the range of choice and opening pathways to a plethora of cultural content. This is deemed to have a particularly enriching impact on the diversity of film culture by dragging specialised and niche films from the fringes of the market to the centre of cultural life. In light of these claims, this thesis considers whether online film distribution is the disruptive force that many promise. In particular, this thesis assesses whether online distribution widens public access to niche content and stimulates greater public engagement with a range of specialised film. As a means of exploring these issues, this thesis proposes an alternative approach to the study of online film distribution. Rather than subscribing to the notion of disruption, this thesis argues for a model of continuity. This is achieved by analysing the current changes in content delivery through a historical lens of study. Firstly, by surveying the important chapters in the history of film distribution and exhibition in Britain, this thesis identifies a number of patterns and practices which have served to limit public access to specialised film. Following this, we see how a number of these practices and trends resurface online – albeit in slightly new and interesting ways. This is evident across the broader digital landscape, addressing issues such as the renewed influence of marketing and content visibility; the continued importance of theatrical exhibition; the profound ways in which traditions of specialised distribution and exhibition shape the online platform MUBI; and the reinforcement of social distinction in the context of illegal online filesharing. By examining these and other issues, this thesis challenges the utopian discourse by painting a more complex portrait of the digital landscape, one in which the future is profoundly tethered to the past.

Contents

List of Tables

Declaration of Authorship

I, Elliott W. Nikdel, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

Online Distribution and the Relocation of Specialised Film

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
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7. Either none of this work has been published before submission, or parts of this work have been published as: [please list references below]:

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Chapter One
Introduction: Online Distribution and the Relocation of Specialised Film

For over a decade, the advent of online film distribution has inspired a utopian vision of change and disruption. This is a vision rooted in the apparent principles of digital democracy – an inherent belief in the internet's power to lower the crippling barriers of division and widen access to broader forms of cultural engagement. Unshackled from the physical limitations of the past which have served to limit cultural choice, online distribution is seen to foster a new democratic dawn of content circulation. This rests on the notion that the delivery of films online impacts on everything from consumer behaviour and industry practice to the structures of power and control which have long defined the structural terrain of the distribution market. In particular, by transcending the physical limits of time and space, online distribution is embraced as an immediate form of consumer empowerment, widening the range of choice and opening pathways to a plethora of cultural content. This is deemed to have a particularly enriching impact on the diversity of film culture by dragging specialised and niche films from the fringes of the market to the centre of cultural life. In this respect, the utopian rhetoric of change and disruption argues that online distribution brings greater parity to a deeply imbalanced market, a market which has long been monopolised by an elite group of powerful gatekeepers – the conglomerate-owned American distributors – driven by the need to dictate and hinder the flow of content.

This vision of disruption and cultural democratisation has assumed a prominent place at the heart of the debates surrounding the changes in media distribution and content circulation. This thesis seeks to contribute to these current debates with a particular emphasis on the present and future prospects of niche and specialised film. This is a particularly pertinent area of focus given that niche and specialised films have long occupied a position on the margins of the British film market. This thesis, therefore, considers whether online distribution, as promised, both widens public access to niche content and stimulates greater public interest in a range of specialised film. In certain respects, this area of focus provides a springboard into the wider discourse of online content delivery, addressing issues of empowerment and democratisation. In contributing to these current debates, this thesis proposes an alternative approach to the study of online film distribution. What is particularly striking about this democratic vision of the future is the way this narrative is distinctly marked by a rhetorical divorce from the past. Indeed, in advancing this utopian vision, the argument is often presented in dichotomous terms. Whilst the history of physical distribution serves to limit cultural choice, the future is portrayed as a gateway to a cornucopia of cultural content. Whilst the past is defined as a hierarchical market of mainstream monopoly, the future is presented as a level and democratic cultural landscape. In this respect, online distribution is seen as a disruptive force in the industry – a profound and

radical break from past traditions, patterns and practices.

However, rather than subscribing to this notion of historical disruption, this thesis proposes a model of historical continuity. Indeed, what becomes clear throughout this thesis is that a number of practices, patterns and trends which have both curtailed the wider circulation of specialised film and narrowed the broader public interest in non-mainstream cinema, also retain their presence online – albeit in slightly new and interesting ways. With this in mind, we can see that many of the challenges and barriers which have hindered the wider circulation of specialised film are not simply abolished with the move online. In this regard, online distribution can sometimes flatter to deceive, giving a false and fanciful impression of radical disruption and profound democratisation. This thesis, therefore, strives to paint a more complex portrait of the digital landscape – a landscape in which the future is tethered to the past. Considering this complex interplay between the past, present and the future, this thesis advocates the need to interpret and analyse the current changes in content delivery through a historical lens of study. This is most evident in Chapter Two where the historical lineage of film distribution in Britain is broadly traced, focusing on the many ways that specialised film has been pushed to the margins of cultural access. From here, we will see how this historical chapter permeates the following discussion, shaping and guiding our understanding of the digital landscape of film.

Defining Distribution

In addressing the past, present and future of film distribution, this thesis contributes to a growing body of work that puts the study of distribution at the centre of academic discourse. In part, this recent surge in interest has grown in response to the acceleration of digital delivery and the evolving nature of cultural access. Recent publications such as *Distribution Revolution* by Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson and Chuck Tryon's *On-Demand Culture* are testament to the growing interest towards audio-visual distribution in an era of profound 'digital change.' Indeed, this apparent revolution in media distribution has sparked what Curtin, Holt and Sanson describe as a period of 'turmoil and transformation' as industry players are forced 'to reconsider established maxims about how screen media are created, circulated, and consumed.'[1] Importantly, it is within this climate of change that Curtin, Holt and Sanson claim that technology and distribution 'are where the seeds of transformation have been sown.'[2]

This recent growth in academic interest towards the study of film and media distribution also stems from a wider acceptance of the way distribution intersects with notions of power and control. In this respect, film distribution is regarded as a central force in shaping the cultural landscape. This is evident when considering the terminological frameworks that define and shape our understanding of film distribution. Sean Cubitt, for instance, defines the essence of distribution as 'the exchange of information across time and space.'[3] Following in Cubitt's footsteps, Ramon Lobato echoes this broad interpretation, defining distribution 'as the movement of media through time and space.'[4] Others, such as Janet Wasko, offer a more

detailed portrait of what film distribution entails, touching on the logistical and strategic challenges that distributors face on daily basis.[5] Perhaps the most common understanding of film distribution, however, is provided by Julia Knight and Peter Thomas who define distribution as the 'vital link' between producers and audiences.[6] Whilst those in the industry recognise the distribution sector as a distinct sphere of practice, Knight and Thomas stress that this 'link is largely invisible' to those outside the industry.[7] This might explain why the study of film distribution has been mostly relegated to the fringes of academic discourse.[8] Cubitt also suggests that the critical neglect of media distribution might pertain to the role that information theory has played in shaping common perceptions of distribution. In this regard, Cubitt states that distribution has long been theorised as a 'black box' of data transmission where the channel through which information passes is deemed of little importance.[9]

The issue with this interpretation is that it depoliticises the process of distribution, fostering the notion that channels of media circulation are somehow neutral and immune from political influence. Indeed, such a view neglects the way distribution intersects with notions of power and control. This is evident in the broader theoretical treatment of distribution across the fields of social and political theory. Here, rooted in the principles of Marxist thought, distribution becomes a potent source of power and an instrument for social control. This rests on the notion that the 'distribution of resources in society is an inherently conflictual, and therefore political decision.'[10] For instance, in pursuing his philosophy on capitalism and social conflict, Marx referred to distribution as a process that assigns and divides material resources 'according to social laws'.[11] In this regard, the social conflict present in capitalist societies is rooted in the uneven distribution of power and the unequal allocation of resources. Here, conflict is driven by the capitalist desire to create scarcity, an artificial construct designed to limit and control public access to material and ideological resources.[12] With these dynamics in mind, we can see how distribution operates within a political framework of power, access and control. Indeed, as Lobato notes, understanding 'politics as a struggle for power and resources' reveals the political nature of distribution.[13] As this thesis demonstrates throughout, the beating political heart that drives the social function of distribution bears great relevance to the circulation of film. This, as discussed shortly, is particularly evident in Chapter Two and Chapter Three.

Retaining this focus on the political nature of distribution, a number of scholars have also shown how issues of power and control are imperative to the study of cultural distribution and the circulation of film. This is rooted in Nicholas Garnham's belief that distribution, rather than production, '*is the key locus of power and profit.*'[14] In his influential study on the concept of the cultural industries, Garnham aligned cultural distribution with the capitalist drive to maximise audiences. For Garnham, this drive is achieved through a range of strategic practices designed to create artificial scarcity.[15] Sean Cubitt, for instance, talks about the management and 'orchestration of flows' as a crucial means of creating scarcity and shaping the circulatory dynamics of culture.[16] In this respect, distribution organises the spatial and temporal management of media content, accelerating or delaying its delivery in time and stratifying market space into hierarchal order.[17] This is most evident in the way films accrue value over

time as the commercial flow of content is staggered through a hierarchal model of distribution. In creating the conditions of scarcity, the management of media flows also demands that distributors actively block the public circulation of certain information.[18] In this respect, distribution not only determines what people can access but, more importantly, dictates what people cannot access.[19] Distribution also intervenes in issues of cultural capital. Indeed, Lobato states that distribution has the power to circulate cultural capital unevenly, stratifying audiences along the lines of age, class and gender.[20] Distribution, therefore, not only controls the means of access but also perpetuates social division by creating audiences and segregating them into distinct market segments.[21]

With these issues in mind, we can see how distribution as both a concept and a market practice amounts to more than a simple channel of delivery. Instead, as the likes of Garnham and Cubitt have shown, distribution intersects with the political dynamics of power and cultural dominance. Importantly, this dominance is rooted in the practice of permitting and denying public access. In certain respects, then, distribution is synonymous with notions of access, hence Joshua Braun's incisive claim that that 'the study of distribution cuts straight to the heart of who has access to culture and on what terms.'[22] Knight and Thomas also state that distributors serve a crucial role in shaping our film culture by 'determining what we as audiences get to see'.[23] As Chapter Two makes clear, distribution has indeed been a central source of power in the industry. Whilst a range of social, cultural and economic issues have played their part, distribution has been the principal means through which Hollywood has achieved such historical dominance over the British film market. As a result of such dominance, niche and specialised films have been pushed to the fringes of the exhibition sector, fostering a distinct market dichotomy. This disparity is made particularly clear towards the end of Chapter Two when summarising the contemporary state of play. In light of such market conditions, the advent of online distribution has given rise to vocal claims of digital disruption. This rests on the notion that online delivery circumvents the limitations of the physical market, widening consumer access to a greater range of cultural content. In this respect, online distribution is deemed by many to be a disruptive and democratic force in the industry, unsettling the structural dynamics of power and bringing greater parity to a deeply imbalanced market. Whilst this argument is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, it is worth briefly elaborating on the concept of digital disruption and its employment in film industry discourse.

Digital Disruption and the Democratisation of Film Culture

Michael Franklin defines 'digital disruption' as the conflict between 'exponential rates of change in technology' alongside 'incremental rates of change in society, economics, politics and law'.[24] In this respect, the conflict that arises from disruptive technologies derives from the pioneering exploits of innovators who seek to impose profound change in an industry bound by its own traditions and deep-rooted practices. Indeed, for Kevin Zhu, disruptive technologies are innovations that revolutionise business practice, creating conflict by threatening to 'overturn

entrenched industries and stalwart business models.'[25] The change and disruption caused by such innovations are seen to have a wide-reaching effect. Ephraim Schwartz states that disruptive innovations 'seed the growth of change', shifting 'the balance of power' and accelerating across 'generations of business evolution.'[26] By streamlining business practice and lowering the barriers to market entry, Schwartz claims that disruptive technologies can culminate in a more competitive and balanced market. In effect, 'more companies can gain the sophistication needed to compete on the same level as the traditional, often larger players in the same market.'[27] The supposedly democratic principles of digital disruption also filter down to consumers. As Schwartz states, disruptive technologies are always driven by a democratic impulse to widen the reach of information and resources, making them more accessible to more people.[28] Digital disruption, then, as the phrase implies, is rooted in a profound and paradigm-shifting notion of change. Here, disruption evokes a sense of discontinuation, a break from past traditions and a conscious effort to unsettle the established state of affairs. What supposedly emerges is a discernible move towards a more democratic form of consumer access and market participation.

This is particularly evident throughout Simon McPhillips' and Omar Merlo's discussion of media convergence and the digital delivery of media content. They argue that the binary impact of convergence and digitisation is disrupting longstanding models of media business and redefining the tripartite relationship between media companies, content producers and consumers. For McPhillips and Merlo, whilst the dominant media companies have consolidated their power through horizontal integration, they argue that the 'digital revolution' will likely cause 'vertical disintegration' across the media landscape.[29] As they explain,

> Media owners have for long dominated the entire value chain, from creative inception to production, marketing, and ultimately distribution. Now producers do not need to rely as such on media owners, because production costs are falling due to advancements in technology (and specifically digitalisation). Moreover, the internet provides an open-source route to market. Producers are able to bypass media owners and produce and distribute content independently.[30]

They also argue that this apparent trend of digital democracy spawns a new form of consumer empowerment. 'In the new media age, consumers are empowered to choose their own content,' they claim, without the spatial and temporal constraints that hinder the reach of traditional delivery systems.[31] In keeping with the transformative rhetoric of digital disruption, McPhillips and Merlo herald the dawning of a 'new media age'.[32] 'The environment is changing', they claim, altering the structure of the media business, redefining its boundaries and fragmenting the value chain.[33] Whilst McPhillips and Merlo articulate the disruptive nature of digitisation and its impact across the broader media landscape, these notions of change and disruption bear a striking relevance to the current discussions around film distribution. This is discussed at greater length in Chapter Three, but is also worth briefly addressing in this introductory chapter. Like the argument proposed by McPhillips and Merlo, the view that online film distribution is disruptive generally rests on the democratic principles of parity and empowerment. For instance, Ramon

Lobato states that alongside the 'lawless frontier of copyright infringement' (as discussed in Chapter Six), the dominant rhetoric of online distribution has been its promise 'as a revolutionary force for distributive democracy'.[34] In the case of niche filmmakers and distributors, the disruptive thesis advances the notion that by breaking the 'tyranny of geography', the internet levels the cultural playing field. This is predicated on the basis that direct access to consumers is no longer tethered to the limited space of physical markets, meaning filmmakers and distributors can now bypass such markets altogether. Indeed, whilst the dominant American distributors can monopolise the restrictive space of physical markets, the internet is supposedly boundless in nature and, therefore, immune to such monopoly. Jon Silver and Frank Alpert argue this very point, stating that the internet 'lowers entry barriers' for otherwise marginalised filmmakers and distributors because unlike physical spaces of access, 'nobody owns or controls' the internet.[35] Dina Iordonova argues a similar point, suggesting that with the openness of the internet, dominant industry players are no longer able to actively prevent consumers from accessing niche and specialised content.[36] In this respect, the internet is seen to disrupt and unsettle the structural dynamics of power which have long pushed niche content to the margins of the market.

The recurring notion that the internet bypasses the limitations of physical markets is further advanced by Chris Anderson and his seminal concept of the 'long tail.' One of the more vocal advocates of this utopian thesis, Anderson argues that the internet provides a balanced platform where anything from Hollywood productions to amateur content can compete on even basis.[37] Anderson, therefore, states that this new cultural landscape provides 'unlimited and unfiltered access to culture and content of all sorts, from the mainstream to the farthest fringe of the underground.'[38] For this reason, Anderson claims that the long tail 'is about the economics of abundance – what happens when the bottlenecks that stand between supply and demand in our culture start to disappear and everything becomes available to everyone.'[39] From an economic standpoint, Anderson argues that the advent of online delivery benefits content providers such as iTunes who can expand the range of their catalogue and thrive by selling a diverse collection of content to niche audiences. From a consumer perspective, the long tail of the burgeoning digital market is seen to empower cultural consumers.

Indeed, central to this utopian vision of digital disruption and democratic change is the notion that online distribution widens access to a range of cultural material, giving consumers greater choice. As Michael Gubbins notes, 'The early narrative of digital change was of a democratising trend away from 'gatekeepers' restricting choice.'[40] Whilst physical channels of distribution drive the need for scarcity, the digital landscape is defined by abundance, choice and plenitude. This, in the words of Anderson, is 'a market of multitudes.'[41] As a result of such choice, Anderson also suggests that the advent of online distribution and the growth of digital culture are fostering new and disruptive patterns of consumer behaviour. He argues that consumers are embracing this newfound model of choice, browsing through endless catalogues of content and accessing the type of material that transcends the safety of conventional mainstream taste.[42] In response, Anderson claims that choice is widening consumer taste and

stimulating new levels of interest in broader forms of content.[43] Discussing the digital future of media delivery, William W. Fisher makes a similar claim, arguing that choice is a liberating force, encouraging consumers to traverse uncharted territories of taste and expand their cultural horizons.[44]

As mentioned earlier, this utopian thesis comes into sharper focus in Chapter Three. For now, though, we can see how online distribution has been heralded as a disruptive and democratic force, one that promises to weaken the structural dynamics of power and level the cultural playing field. For filmmakers and distributors, the internet promises to transcend the spatial limitations of physical markets, offering a direct and immediate route of access to a wide range of consumers. As a result, this utopian thesis also argues that online distribution widens cultural access to a range of niche and non-mainstream content. Therefore, whilst empowering filmmakers and distributors to reach out to new and existing audiences, on-demand access also creates new opportunities for consumers. No longer shackled to the physical markets of access and exhibition, the digital landscape liberates consumer choice, encouraging viewers to broaden their cultural horizons and expand their taste. In this respect, both Tim League – co-founder of the Alamo Drafthouse chain of cinemas in America – and Ruth Vitale – who co-founded Paramount Vantage – capture the optimism that surrounds online delivery when they claim that the 'almighty internet has been a powerful, democratizing force in entertainment, leading to exponential increases in choices for audiences and greater potential for exposure for filmmakers.'[45]

The Politics of Online Distribution

Surrendering to this optimistic narrative might seem tempting given the internet's inherent capacity to transcend time and space in a way that no other delivery format can. In response to these claims of disruption and democratisation, I would certainly agree that the advent of online distribution has given rise to some significant and profound changes in the way films are released, accessed and consumed. For instance, Chapter Three touches on the growth of day-and-date, multi-platform releasing which, in the specialised sector at least, has seen the collapse of clearly demarcated windows of release. In the process, such distributors are posing important questions about the sacred nature of the sequential, theatrical-driven model of distribution and whether such a model can or should be sustained in an age of on-demand access and platform mobility. In relation to this, the digital delivery of media has, to certain extents, altered the mindset of many cultural consumers who share new expectations of how media should be delivered and accessed. This is central to Chuck Tryon's notion of an emerging 'on-demand culture' where developments in media delivery and advancements in platform technology have provided viewers with 'new forms of immediate access to movies and television shows'.[46] Such immediacy, convenience and choice in when, where and how consumers choose to access content is again, like the compression of release windows,

representative of an undeniable shift in the way media is delivered and accessed. In fostering greater consumer autonomy, Tryon and others have also noted that such changes in media delivery are fostering 'a more fragmented, individualized media culture.'[47] This paints the portrait of a more connected but insular brand of consumer, as viewers retreat into their own private and personalised media bubbles.[48]

Further to this, there can be no doubt that online distribution does indeed make a greater range of content, past and present, available to a greater number of people than any other distribution outlet – from theatrical to television to bricks and mortar retail – has ever achieved. Indeed, as Julia Knight and Peter Thomas state,

> This easy access to an unprecedented abundance and variety of moving image work has without doubt transformed certain aspects of our moving image culture. Films that in the past were virtually impossible to see unless you lived within easy reach of a 'progressive' film society, or in a metropolitan centre like London or New York, and then only rarely […] can now be accessed directly online or acquired on DVD at the click of a mouse.[49]

This general sentiment, at least on the surface, is largely echoed by industry figures in Chapter Four. But whilst the advent of online distribution has undeniably widened the route of access to niche material, a casual acceptance of such a view can have the misleading effect of disguising the challenges, the politics and existing barriers to access that remain deeply entrenched in the industry. Indeed, the issue with this utopian narrative and the rhetoric preached by digital disciples like Anderson is that such a view is steeped in a sort of casual nonchalance, as though democratisation is an instinctive and inevitable upshot of digital change. Throughout this narrative, there is a distinct lack of critical engagement. Utopians such as Anderson are not so much dismissive of alternative viewpoints and arguments but, rather, such critical analysis is entirely absent altogether.

There is also a general failure to engage with recurring historical patterns of industry innovation which have shaped and defined the way gatekeepers mediate and control consumer access. Indeed, as Chapter Two demonstrates, the history of film distribution is a cyclical narrative of change and stasis – a conflict brought about by industry innovation where the threat of disruption and the promise of democratisation is soon suppressed and assimilated into the existing state of affairs. In short, those propagating this narrative of change are guilty of neglecting the issues which have historically limited access to and engagement with non-mainstream content – an issue of access which the likes of Anderson wrongly attribute to the absence of market space alone. As a result, such a narrative fails to truly address the complexity of online distribution. For this reason, I would argue that this utopian narrative neglects what Ramon Lobato refers to as 'the politics of online film distribution'.[50]

Others have not been so neglectful, painting a more complex and nuanced portrait of the digital landscape. For instance, in *On-Demand Culture,* Chuck Tryon provides a more balanced account of online distribution. Like Lobato's emphasis on the political nature of distribution, Tryon stresses the importance of considering 'the economic, political, and legal infrastructures that shape the distribution of media content.'[51] In this respect, he claims that

despite the renewed promise of unfettered cultural access, the growth of digital delivery has seen a concurrent rise in the efforts of 'media conglomerates to develop better mechanisms for controlling where, when, and how content is circulated.'[52] For instance, Tryon makes a number of references to discreet industry practices such as data capping, geo-blocking and digital rights management which limit the freedom of media circulation and reduce the range of content available to consumers. In response, Tryon provides the following assessment,

> Contrary to promises made by media and technology companies concerning platform mobility, audiences often encounter constrained choices and limited mobility, due to practices such as geo-blocking and rights management. Thus, the promises of liberation and freedom are constrained by market fragmentation, limited choice, and, quite often, consumer confusion.[53]

In attempting to traverse the vast digital terrain, Tryon paints the on-demand landscape in broad strokes. As a result, he touches on some of these issues that limit access rather than exploring the mechanics and implications of such barriers in depth. He does, however, provide a more pragmatic account of online distribution, one that considers the underlying barriers to access and the structural politics of control which impede the flow of content.

Another perspective on these debates is provided by Ramon Lobato. Pursuing his focus on the political nature of film distribution, Lobato provides 'a critical discussion of the power relations within this emerging market,' drawing on 'the structural constraints on online content and issues of audience access and equity.'[54] One of the issues Lobato draws upon is audience awareness. Whilst he claims that the internet enables producers and content owners to release their work direct to consumers – providing the relevant costs are covered – this, he argues, does nothing to stimulate audience awareness and demand.[55] Julia Knight and Peter Thomas pose a similar point, stating that ease of access does not guarantee a wider audience for niche and non-mainstream content.[56] In fact, they argue that despite the presence of different and lesser known content, consumers continue to migrate towards the kind of media content 'that already has widespread real world visibility'.[57] Lobato echoes this point, suggesting that those films that have achieved some form of online success have either been those with an established market profile or those which have gained exposure through an innovative approach to marketing.[58] Even in cases where consumers can access the material for free through informal networks of exchange, Lobato states that content still needs a public profile to generate demand.[59] In this respect, Lobato and Knight and Thomas challenge the optimistic claim that choice and access foster greater demand for non-mainstream material.

Virginia Crisp in *Film Distribution in the Digital Age* further disputes the apparent democratisation of online distribution. Like Tryon, Crisp draws on issues of infrastructure and internet provision which determine the speed and flow of media circulation and which impact on the connectivity of local and national communities. For instance, Crisp makes the point that most on-demand platforms only operate in a limited number of countries, reinforcing Tryon's point about geo-blocking.[60] Crisp also states that despite some progress in the diffusion of internet provision, access to the internet remains fragmented and unevenly distributed around

the world.[61] This appears to undermine the democratic sense of global community that the internet supposedly fosters. Lobato makes a similar argument, dispelling what he sees as a myth or a fantasy regarding the internet's apparent capacity to break down social barriers. In making this point, Lobato's focus is on social factors such as age and class which have fostered forms of social, political and economic division. Whilst he claims that the internet does indeed create new opportunities for consumers to access material online, he argues that these opportunities are rooted in class and age-based issues of media literacy and access to resources.[62] Rather than suppressing forms of division, he argues that existing 'forms of exclusion and division may be further compounded in the digital realm.'[63] Whilst Lobato accepts that online distribution does, theoretically, widen access to a wider range of content, he counteracts this point by broaching the issue of who in fact uses platforms like Netflix and MUBI.[64] Lobato, therefore, argues that the internet and video-on-demand (VoD) has the potential to stratify public access in a way that no other media platform does.[65]

With such issues in mind, scholars such as Crisp and Lobato present a more sceptical portrait of online distribution. As this brief discussion suggests, this is a portrait rooted in a more pragmatic analysis of content circulation – an analysis based on the practical and everyday realities of industry practice, rather than the theoretical potential of online distribution. Touching on issues such as infrastructure, public awareness and forms of media control, these accounts reinforce Lobato's argument that cultural distribution is influenced by a range of structural and political forces – 'the politics of online film distribution'.[66] The overarching sentiment, then, is that online distribution is not the revolutionary and democratic force that many promise. Indeed, speaking in 2009 in the wake of some high-profile failures in the on-demand market (discussed in Chapter Three), Lobato states that 'while increasing amounts of cinema now circulate digitally, the fantasy of total online distribution has failed to materialize.'[67] Two years later, Knight and Thomas make their position clear, arguing that whilst 'digital technology has made it far easier to make work available, it has not resulted in all work being equally available or accessible.'[68] Similarly, Virginia Crisp argues that this 'veritable smörgåsbord of content is not universally available, nor is it presented in an unmediated form where audiences are free to pick and choose the content that interests them.'[69]

In presenting such an argument, these accounts are not driven by a collective desire to present a bleak and cynical vision of the future. Indeed, as Lobato openly states, his argument 'is not intended as some kind of dystopian vision of an impoverished digital cinema future.'[70] But whilst Lobato and others accept that the internet is 'replete with democratic potential', this utopian discourse, propagated by the likes of Anderson, is guilty of neglecting and disguising some of the 'subtle forms of control and exclusion' that hinder online access.[71] In response, Lobato provides this concluding remark,

> As this analysis of the nascent online VOD industry has demonstrated, the commercial structures now emerging introduce a new and different set of gatekeepers, blockages and bottlenecks. The potential for oligopoly is distressingly high in online VOD and the very real problem of access will need to be addressed.[72]

Expanding on these pragmatic accounts of online distribution, this thesis does indeed address this very issue of access in a digital realm. To return to the question that triggered this discussion, this thesis seeks to explore to what extent online distribution widens access to specialised films. Again, it is worth stressing that the advent of online distribution has certainly expanded the volume of content available to the public. In this respect, by circumventing the physical limitations of the pre-digital market, it would also be accurate to suggest that online distribution has the potential to foster greater opportunities for consumers to access specialised films. As already discussed, though, what emerges from the existing work on online distribution by Lobato, Crisp, Knight and Thomas and, to a lesser extent, Tryon, is an evident tension between the theory and the real world practice of online distribution. Indeed, whilst online distribution promises to widen access to and interest in specialised material, the likes of Lobato have shown that the political forces that shape content circulation also exert their influence online. This thesis, then, explores this notable tension in greater depth, taking into account the issues which either hinder the flow of niche content online or which impair the public access of such material. Importantly, this also entails a necessary consideration of the issues which effect public awareness and demand of specialised films – factors which, of course, precede and influence access.

In considering a number of issues which impact on online distribution, this thesis seeks to paint a more complex portrait than the utopian renditions offered by Anderson and others discussed in Chapter Three. As already suggested, these optimistic accounts of disruptive and democratic change have a theoretical cogency rooted in the internet's undoubted capacity to 'break the barriers of geographic tyranny'.[73] Such accounts, however, ultimately neglect a range of issues which moderate the utopian promise that online distribution levels the cultural playing field. In particular, the likes of Anderson seem to lose sight of the historical pattern of change and stasis which has characterised the mainstream industry's response to technological innovation. As mentioned earlier, this is based on the notion that the history of film distribution is a cyclical narrative where change and innovation carry the initial promise of greater consumer autonomy and cultural democratisation. Indeed, as Knight and Thomas state, 'Over the years a significant part of the appeal of new media technologies – cable television, the VHS cassette, satellite television, DVD and the internet – has been the perception that they offer the potential to expand the diversity of our moving image culture and allow previously marginalised or under-represented voices to be heard by wider audiences.'[74] In truth, despite the promise of change, such innovations have failed to disrupt the structural dynamics of power, leaving niche content firmly on the fringes of the market. In this respect, this thesis demonstrates throughout how the utopian vision of change and disruption is crippled by what Vincent Mosco refers to as a form of 'historical amnesia.'[75]

In *The Digital Sublime,* Mosco frames the rhetoric of digital change and democracy against a broader backdrop of technological innovation. From the telegraph to the television, each technology arrives with the rhetorical promise of democratic change, inspiring 'great visions of social transformation.'[76] For Mosco, though, such technologies soon descended from

the euphoric heights of utopian change to enter 'the realm of the commonplace and the banal.'[77] In this respect, Mosco interprets this utopian vision for a democratic digital future as part of a renewed and cyclical belief that each and every innovation has the power to 'fulfil a radical and revolutionary promise.'[78] Like Mosco, Tim Wu has also framed the discourse of digital change within this historical cycle. For instance, in *The Master Switch*, Wu chronicles 'the turning points of the twentieth-century's information landscape' tracing the 'decisive moments when a medium opens or closes.'[79] For Wu, the history of communications technology follows the predictable course of utopian promise and social liberation only to reveal its eventual limitations.[80] This leads Wu to pose the question, 'Which is mightier: the radicalism of the Internet or the inevitability of the Cycle?'[81] In the context of content distribution, the implicit suggestion by Anderson and other optimists is that online distribution does indeed break this historical cycle, disrupting industry practice and bringing greater parity to an otherwise hierarchical market.

The central argument of this thesis, however, is not that online distribution is disruptive. Instead, by analysing the issue of access to niche content online, the argument that permeates this study is that online distribution actually presents some sense of continuation from past traditions and practices. Indeed, what becomes clear throughout this thesis, is that a number of practices, behaviours and trends which have historically hindered the wider distribution of specialised film, actually retain their presence in the digital realm. In this respect, this thesis can be seen to echo the general sentiment of what the Digital Director at the British Film Institute (BFI), Edward Humphrey, said to me during a discussion on online distribution. Indeed, despite claims of widespread change and disruption, Humphrey claimed that one of the overarching strategic issues is around what online distribution does not achieve. 'Digital distribution […] doesn't really change some of the economics of the market and it doesn't change some of the practices and the behaviours of that market,' states Humphrey.[82]

In pursuing this focus on the way past practices and trends retain their influence online, this thesis argues against a utopian vision where access to specialised film is revolutionised and interest in a broader spectrum of content takes root. Again, this is not to deny that online distribution widens access to a broader range of content or that the growth of the online market carries the theoretical potential to broaden consumer taste. However, what becomes clear throughout the progression of this thesis is that the very practices, behaviours and market patterns which have hindered the wider distribution of specialised film for decades, actually maintain their influence in a digital realm. In this respect, despite riding the wave of digital optimism, many of the challenges and barriers which have limited the wider circulation of specialised film are not simply abolished with the move online. Instead, they are relocated online, giving a double meaning to my employment of the term 'relocation' throughout this thesis. So, in effect, rather than widespread disruption, online distribution actually presents some sense of continuation from past practices and traditions.

Chapter Breakdown

In order to see how these market behaviours and practices retain their influence online, we must first establish what these behaviours and practices are and how they have shaped the distribution landscape in Britain. Chapter Two, therefore, provides a historical survey of film distribution in Britain with a particular focus on the growth and development of specialised film. In doing so, the aim is to establish how specialised film came to occupy a position on the margins of the industry by considering how film distribution intersects with a complex range of social, cultural and economic forces. The chapter starts with the First World War, a decisive period of upheaval that would leave an indelible mark on the shape of the British film market. From this point on, this chapter addresses some of the issues which have shaped and hindered the wider circulation of specialised film in Britain. In doing so, there is a particular emphasis on the advent of industry innovations, such as home video, which promised to democratise cultural access but instead simply strengthened the pre-existing dominance of market leaders. So, by establishing the ways in which specialised films have been marginalised in Britain according to certain historical patterns and market practices enables us to identify how those trends are resurfacing online in distinct and interesting ways. As a result, we can see how online distribution is less disruptive than many suggest.

Chapter Three ventures beyond the confines of history to explore the boundless promise of the digital frontier. Firstly, attention is given to the rapid growth and development of the online market. Like most nascent markets, this is not a tale of smooth progression. Instead, this discussion addresses some of the issues and challenges that delayed VoD's growth into a popular and viable delivery format. In surveying the development of on-demand delivery, this chapter demonstrates how the early development of the VoD market and the presence of niche and amateur content seemed to adhere to the democratic principles of online distribution, as presented by the likes of Anderson. Importantly, tracing the lineage of VoD's development provides a clear route into the optimistic rhetoric regarding the 'disruptive' and 'democratic' impact of online distribution. Drawing on the arguments of Chris Anderson, Peter Broderick, Dina Iordonova and others, this chapter details how the discourse that surrounds online distribution is rooted in notions of disruption, change and cultural democratisation.

Arriving at the current state of play, Chapter Four assesses the value of these claims by mapping the current infrastructure of online distribution. Taking into account the political forces which shape the distribution of films, this chapter provides a pragmatic assessment of the digital landscape by drawing on a series of one-to-one interviews with industry figures across the specialised sector. The professional expertise and experience of those interviewed can be seen in Appendix 1, whilst the questions posed to such participants can be seen in Appendix 2, along with a brief summary of the methodology applied during the interviews. In addressing such claims of access and democratisation, this chapter demonstrates how a range of issues and barriers influence and limit public access to specialised content online. In some cases, these barriers actively hinder public access to niche content whilst others address issues which precede and influence the desire to access specialised content – issues such as audience

awareness and engagement. In particular, this discussion considers factors as VoD's relationship with the theatrical sector; the role that algorithms play in guiding consumer choice; the issues of navigating the digital terrain; and some of the technological issues in delivering on-demand access, not only touching on problems of infrastructure, but also on consumer perceptions of on-demand delivery. In keeping with my emphasis on historical continuation, this discussion shows how a range of issues and barriers rooted in the physical world of distribution retain their relevance online.

Chapter Five maintains this focus on the role that practices and patterns from the past play in shaping the digital landscape through a detailed analysis of the online platform MUBI. Rather than focusing on barriers of access, this study of MUBI partly considers the role that the platform plays in stimulating engagement with and interest in specialised film. Despite MUBI's position at the heart of the digital future, this chapter demonstrates how the platform's ambition to broaden engagement with specialised film is rooted in the company's commitment to a number of practices which better define older models of linear media delivery. For instance, this discussion considers the platform's curatorial approach to content, its relationship with the theatrical sector and the striking parallels between MUBI and the model of public service broadcasting. The latter part of this chapter also broaches the prevalent concern that on-demand access undermines the communal nature of film consumption. Bringing a sociological edge to this discussion, the chapter considers how MUBI's integration of social media conventions fosters the notion of a global community of cinéastes.

Whilst this thesis largely focuses on the legal and commercial model of online distribution, Chapter Six shifts the attention towards film piracy, or what Ramon Lobato more broadly refers to as 'informal film distribution.'[83] Drawing on a range of literature that explores informal networks of exchange, this chapter steers away from the popular perception that piracy reflects an act of criminal deviance. Instead, by exploring a range of relevant literature, this chapter demonstrates how piracy intersects with issues of access, media control and notions of consumer empowerment. In this respect, piracy can be seen to serve a democratic function, widening public access to niche content and providing a potent solution to a range of local and transnational issues of access and media flow. In light of this discussion, this chapter subsequently draws on a particularly interesting account published in *Film Comment* in 2009 about an online filesharing site that specialises in rare and niche content. What this account demonstrates is that whilst the internet is seen to abolish longstanding barriers of social and political division, participation in the online world can also be prone to forms of social exclusion. What this chapter shows, therefore, is how issues of access, even online, can be influenced by the residual effects of a culture which, at times, has actively sought to cultivate an elitist form of highbrow distinction. Again, Chapter Two provides a strong historical framework through which to interpret this discussion.

Before moving on to Chapter Two, there are a couple of issues to clarify. Firstly, my decision to frame this thesis around the historical context of the British film market might appear parochial in scope given the internet's capacity to transcend the limits of time and geographical

space. Exploring online distribution through a global lens, however, particularly when considering the longstanding issues of access and market behaviour, has the unwelcome potential of conflating a range of variances between different national markets. With this in mind, framing this discussion against the historical backdrop of the British film market avoids painting a rather homogenous portrait of global film culture. Britain also constitutes a particularly interesting historical account for the study of film distribution and cultural access. Indeed, as Chapter Two shortly demonstrates, the distribution of film in Britain has a rich and complex history, intersecting with a range of social, cultural, economic and political issues which have limited the range of content available to British audiences and which have polarised patterns of consumption.

Second is the issue of terminology. Up to now, this introductory chapter has employed a number of vague and generic terms – specialised, niche and non-mainstream – to designate a broad range of films, filmmakers and distributors that occupy the fringes of the market. Whilst these terms are not without their weaknesses, they do at least connote a broader, more inclusive form of designation. For this reason, the main term employed throughout this thesis is 'specialised film', a term which has been consistently used within industry circles, particularly over the past fifteen years or so.[84] Introduced by the now defunct UK Film Council (UKFC), the term was intended to capture the diversity of films which, in various ways, stray beyond the expectations of mass audiences. Without reciting the entire framework of definition, the UKFC made reference to foreign-language films, works with a focus on minority groups and the re-release of so-called 'classics' as particular examples of specialised film.[85] The value of using such a broad term is that a film's designation as specialised is less dependent on stylistic traits and more in tune with the way films are positioned in the market. In addition, this thesis also uses the term 'niche' which both maintains the broad and inclusive nature of specialised film whilst also denoting the peripheral market position that many films assume. The employment of such terms, therefore, reflects a conscious move away from binary and textual-based models of definition such as the seminal notion of 'art cinema' introduced by David Bordwell and Robert Self in the late 1970s.[86]

Indeed, as a number of scholars have shown, such dichotomous models which polarise films according to 'artificial' notions of 'high' and 'low' culture or 'art' and mainstream' disguise the complex and protean nature of cultural reception. This is evidenced in a range of different ways, from the influential work of Jeffrey Sconce who demonstrates how cultural paradigms of 'high' and 'low' are no longer representative of the contemporary politics of cultural taste;[87] to the work of Mark Betz who shows how the reception and marketing of postwar cinema reflects a deeper pattern of crossover between the 'high' status of European art film and the 'low debased' nature of exploitation cinema;[88] to those who have noted how the cultural reception of films is rarely static but, rather, is prone to the shifting sands of time and place where geographical displacement or the passing of time can transform any given film's cultural identity.[89] Most importantly, given our focus on distribution, textual models of definition have succeeded in diverting attention away from the influence that distributors have in dictating the way that films

are perceived, positioned and defined. When turning our attention to distribution and the mechanisms that drive the circulation of films, we see how those divisions in the market are not the result of some inherent source of stable textual meaning. Instead, as Chapter Two now goes on to show, the distribution sector has been at the forefront of shaping those divisions. In this respect, we can see how such divisions which have long informed our understanding of film culture are broadly reflected in the structural dynamics of the industry – the overwhelming disparity between those conglomerate-owned companies at the top and the smaller players that operate on the fringes. Whilst intersecting with a range of social, political and economic factors, this disparity has been influenced by the employment of certain practices and patterns which, as this thesis will demonstrate throughout, assume renewed importance in today's digital landscape.

Chapter Two
The Marginalisation of Specialised Film

Introduction

Considering the overarching focus of this thesis, this historical chapter focuses on the growth and development of specialised film culture in Britain. In the process, we will look at the issues which have either helped or hindered the circulation of international specialised film in Britain, along with the concurrent factors which have developed or deterred audience demand and interest in specialised content. As the introductory chapter made clear, engaging with these issues through a historical lens will bear later significance when it comes to addressing the concept and practice of access to specialised films online. This is based on the notion that online distribution, despite some evident and significant changes, does not reflect an immediate and radical break from past practices and behaviours. Instead, the importance of this historical chapter lies in its capacity to highlight cultural patterns and industry trends which reappear in some form online. From the postwar growth of specialised film culture and the increasing influence of television, to the emergence of home media formats and the proliferation of the multiplex in Britain, each of these developments contribute in various ways to the debate about access and the current prospects of specialised film online. Any historical survey of the distribution and exhibition of films in Britain could focus on a number of early developments which shaped the industry in profound and influential ways.[1] For reasons of scope, however, our starting point is during the outbreak of the First World War, a period which saw the inevitable decline of European film industries and the opportunistic growth of American film in Britain. Indeed, as Rachael Low claimed in her detailed anthology of British film history, the war years were critical in establishing the dominance of American films on British screens.[2] As this chapter makes clear, this dominance set in motion an alternative film culture that grew in response to the saturation of American films and the perceived commercialisation of a maturing art form.

The Emergence of American Dominance and the Growth of an Alternative Film Culture

Before the hardship of the First World War, Europe had largely come to dominate the global film industry. In particular, France had assumed a dominant role in the West, exporting around 60 to 70 per cent of films in the European and American markets.[3] But the First World War hit the European industries hard. Production largely ceased as the economy laboured whilst relevant materials were redirected towards the war effort. In Thomas H. Guback's words, these conditions created a 'vacuum into which American pictures flowed, often at alarming rates.'[4] During the war years, American companies seized around 75 per cent of the British market.[5]

Come the end of war, over 80 per cent of films screened in Britain were American.[6] Inevitably, this dominance fostered a populist taste for American films in Britain, one that was strengthened with the emergence of popular stars, genres and styles that became synonymous with American movie culture. The dominance and popularity of American cinema in Britain only grew as the British market emerged as a crucial source of revenue for the burgeoning American industry. Indeed, by 1925 as much as 33 per cent of the American film industry's foreign revenue came from Britain alone.[7] This dominance was further strengthened by the introduction of a number of innovations in distribution practice, such as block and blind booking (forcing exhibitors to book multiple unseen and often unwanted films in order to access the most anticipated releases) and the exclusive rental system (only permitting one exhibitor in a locally defined area to rent the latest release for an agreed period of time). These practices had the desired effect of stifling the threat of potential competition.

By the 1920s, America's dominance of British screens had reached new heights. Indeed, by 1925 American films had secured as much as 95 per cent of the British market.[8] This dominance only strengthened with the coming of sound as audiences soon grew reluctant of subtitles for foreign-language films. The reasons behind such reluctance have confounded both the industry and academics for a number of years. One of the reasons for the immediate refusal of subtitles might be rooted in what Modris Eksteins identifies as a postwar trend towards visual culture. For Eksteins, the Great War had the polarising effect of emphasising images whilst undermining the value of words.[9] In that respect, film emerged as an important instrument in the postwar climate of visual culture. With this in mind, the process of reading subtitles might have been perceived as a distraction from the visual 'essence' of film. The shared language between American and British audiences may have also played its part in fostering resistance to subtitles and dubbing. For instance, Joachim Lembach argues that because of the shared language, the saturation of American films meant that British audiences had never experienced widespread exposure to subtitles or dubbing, meaning that British audiences had never grown accustomed to such practices.[10] Whatever the reasons, distributors responded by leaning towards American productions, creating a rapid decline in the presence of foreign-language film in Britain.

So, despite the pre-war popularity of 'Continental' films, as they were largely known, the emergence of sound cinema had the effect of relegating foreign-language film to the margins of the industry, branding it as specialised and somehow 'different' to what was offered at the local picture palace. Of course, this cultural perception would continue to hinder the wider distribution of foreign-language film in Britain. But whilst British parochialism may have played its part in the marginalisation of foreign-language film, a more complex picture began to emerge. Indeed, rather than the perceived insularity of British cinemagoers, Lembach also claims that the modest presence of non-English language films in Britain derived from a cultural snobbery that stood 'at the heart of a highly polarised film culture.'[11] As already mentioned, the war and interwar years had seen the unrivalled growth of American dominance in Britain, resulting in an upsurge in the popularity of American cinema. However, in the midst of such dominance there was also a growing dissent that emerged towards the entrenchment of American film in Britain,

one that had its roots in the social and class-based tensions of a hierarchical society. Indeed, as Lucy Mazdon and Catherine Wheatley state, resistance to the prevalent culture of mainstream cinema played a central role in the formation and development of an alternative film culture in Britain.[12] This was a culture that embraced foreign-language film and an audience that saw themselves as cosmopolitan and nonchauvinistic.[13] In this respect, their approval of international film, particularly at a time when most had firmly rejected foreign-language cinema, became crucial to this alternative's culture's retention of difference.[14]

Slightly pre-dating the emergence of sound, the Film Society emerged as a central institution in the development of this alternative culture in Britain. Established in 1925 by a group of fervent intellectuals including Ivor Montagu and the influential critic Iris Barry, the Film Society largely remained a modest institution. Nevertheless, the Society's practice had widespread implications for the future course of specialised film in Britain. In certain respects, the Society's ambitions were simple, reflecting a growing desire to counter the hegemonic presence of popular American film in Britain. This desire, however, presented itself in a number of ways. For instance, the prospectus issued at the Film Society's inauguration captured the diverse role that the Society would play. As Gerry Turvey states, the prospectus placed an emphasis on presenting 'films of intrinsic merit' with the ambition to raise the 'standards of taste' whilst helping to establish a 'critical tradition' in Britain.[15] The Film Society presented a curated programme of selected shorts, features and experimental pieces which offered some form of cultural and artistic interest. The screenings were often eclectic in nature, reflecting the Society's 'desire to counter the restricted programmes of mainstream British cinemas'.[16] Screenings were also sometimes accompanied by lectures which considered technical and aesthetic innovations. Sergei Eisenstein, for instance, provided six two-hour lectures on montage editing when he visited London in 1929.[17] This approach reflected the Society's broader ambitions to educate their audience and foster a serious engagement with film.

In order to reinforce their position at the forefront of alternative film culture in Britain, the society endeavoured to acquire rare prints of films that were not deemed commercial enough to secure distribution. In turn, work by the likes of Walter Ruttmann and Len Lye were shown whilst the Society would also bring the Soviet films of Eisenstein, Vertov and Kuleshov to Britain by the end of the 1920s. The Society, however, was not averse to showing American productions which had previously achieved success in mainstream British cinemas. For instance, the likes of Griffith, Chaplin and Disney made regular programme appearances. Whilst such programming would seemingly undermine the Society's anti-populist agenda, the educational framework that accompanied such programming choices, such as lectures, programme notes and post-screening discussions, served as a means of validation, assuring receptive audiences of their worthy addition to the canon of film 'art.' With this in mind, Montagu and his peers recognised the importance of curation and creating a contextual framework around the Society's monthly programmes. In doing so, the Film Society sought to actively counteract the increasingly 'mindless' viewing habits fostered by the mainstream circuits. Indeed, what the Film Society was offering was a distinctly different environment to the

emerging picture palaces of mainstream culture. The Society could programme popular pictures from the past because they were presented in a new light, as part of an alternative mindset that looked beyond superficial pleasures, instead championing narrative and aesthetic innovations that warranted further attention. The importance of curation and context is particularly relevant when we later consider the practice and philosophy of the online platform MUBI.

Furthermore, by providing patrons with a physical forum where ideas and views could be shared and exchanged, the Film Society would actively foster the notion of a thriving and likeminded cultural community. In the words of Haidee Wasson, this approach would 'foster a sense of intimacy and belonging rather than the ostensibly opposite feelings of alienation generated by the impersonal populist movie theatre or […] the opulent palace.'[18] In David Robinson's unpublished history of the Film Society, Ivan Montagu's older brother, Ewan, emphasised the Society's social appeal,

> There wasn't much to do on Sunday afternoons. Maybe a concert at the Albert Hall or the Queen's Hall. But generally you played golf or did nothing. That's why the Film Society was quite a social event. It was quite a thing to do, to have someone to lunch on Sunday and then to go off to the Film Society.[19]

As Montagu's statement implies, the patronage of the Film Society carried certain class-based values. Indeed, much of the Film Society's appeal derived from its tendency to attract a certain clientele. As Jamie Sexton states, the Film Society 'used its intellectual and respectable status as a cultural weapon, drawing a qualitative difference between its members and the audience that attended commercial cinemas.'[20] Whilst the cinema remained a largely inexpensive form of entertainment, the society's membership was costly, preventing widespread participation. The Film Society was keen to attract likeminded individuals who not only shared similar views and outlooks, but which met the criteria of the affluent intellectual. Discussing the demographic of one particular screening, co-founder Adrian Brunel paints the picture of a bohemian middle-class audience: 'Chelseaites and Bloomsburians were in evidence' he claimed, as well as 'younger men in beards and young women in home-spun cloaks.'[21] Somewhat tongue in cheek, Brunel's account of the Film Society's demographic conforms to the popular cultural stereotype of the 'pompous' middle-class cinemagoer and the 'pretentious' foreign film. At a time when these stereotypes were under construction, Brunel's statement is indicative of the influential role that the Film Society played in establishing these cultural perceptions. In this respect, Mazdon and Wheatley are right when they claim that the exclusivity of the Film Society and other likeminded institutions partly induced the seclusion of foreign-language film and specialised cinema in Britain by entrenching a common perception that such films were 'different' to what the popular circuits offered.[22]

Whilst the Film Society played a central role in discouraging wider public engagement with films screened outside the first-run circuits, the Society's practice helped to foster the growth of an alternative film culture in Britain. For instance, the Film Society's growing influence coincided with the burgeoning field of film criticism. As Sexton notes, at the start of the twenties, newspapers and the trade press devoted scant attention to the medium in a 'serious way.'[23]

However, come the end of the decade, there existed a range of publications, such as *Close Up*, which made the serious appreciation of film their primary purpose. Like the Film Society, these publications helped to fashion a critical language for film whilst also setting the parameters of definition for specialised cinema according to their own tastes and designs.[24] Jen Samson also notes that the 'pioneering work of the Film Society gave rise to a specific structure of independent film exhibition in Britain'.[25] For one, the Society inspired a number of imitative societies across the country such as Southampton, Ipswich, Aberdeen and Dundee.[26] As Mazdon and Wheatley state, this reduced the metropolitan bias of specialised film in Britain bringing a greater variety of films to a wider range of audiences.[27] The Film Society and its various offshoots also demonstrated that a commercial market for specialised film existed, albeit in a limited state. Come the late 1920s and early 1930s, audiences also saw the development of a specialised exhibition circuit in Britain. There was the Curzon in Mayfair, Eric Hakim's Academy in Oxford Street, the Everyman in Hampstead and the Shaftesbury Avenue Pavilion, each providing audiences with access to films deemed less commercial than those on the larger circuits.

The Film Society could also be seen as a precursor to the British Film Institute (BFI) which emerged in 1933 with a particular emphasis on preserving and promoting the social and cultural value of film.[28] Come the end of the Second World War, the BFI would evolve beyond its reputation as a modest institution on the margins of British film culture. Indeed, by the 1950s, the emergence of the National Film Theatre and the London Film Festival reflected the BFI's growing role in the promotion of an alternative film culture in Britain. However, as this chapter will later discuss, the BFI would later mature into an official institution entrusted with the sustainment and development of specialised film in Britain on a much broader scale than the Film Society ever intended. Come the outbreak of the Second World War, the Film Society had somewhat exceeded its potential as the driving force behind Britain's alternative film scene. Funded by membership fees and driven by its well-connected co-founders, the Film Society could only exert so much influence when it came to the promotion and sustainment of specialised film in Britain. The Society ceased operations once the Second World War began in 1939. In its fourteen years, the Film Society played a central role in shaping the landscape of specialised film in Britain. In particular, the Society had a polarising effect on the fortunes of foreign-language film and specialised cinema in Britain. Indeed, whilst the Society had a positive influence in laying the foundations for a network of specialised distribution and exhibition, the Society also had a tendency to actively curtail the wider reach and appeal of specialised film. So, for better and for worse, the Film Society had cast its legacy, playing a crucial role in shaping the subsequent course of specialised film in Britain.

The Postwar Distribution and Exhibition of Specialised Film

The Film Society's influence was particularly evident as the postwar period ushered in a 'golden age' of specialised film culture in Britain. Indeed, those who sought refuge from the saturation of American film were served by the growth and maturity of a viable distribution and exhibition network that adopted and refined many of the practices introduced by the Film Society. Launched in the immediate wake of the Film Society's success, the Academy in Oxford Street and the Curzon in Mayfair remained dominant forces in the exhibition of specialised film throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, there was the Cameo-Polytechnic on Regent Street (where the Lumières' debuted their Cinematograph in London), the Paris Pullman in Chelsea, the Berkeley, the Electric in Notting Hill and the Everyman in Hampstead, a repertory cinema which garnered a reputation for reviving old 'classics' to a high-standard. Particularly influential in the field of specialised exhibition was the BFI's National Film Theatre. Like the Film Society, the National Film Theatre advocated a repertory policy with an emphasis on film education, programming works that retained some cultural and historical importance. The breadth and sophistication of such programming even resulted in the influential writer and programmer, Richard Roud, to proclaim that 'the National Film Theatre is re-writing film history.'[29] Despite this emphasis on the past, the National Film Theatre also remained at the forefront of contemporary global cinema. For instance, a season entitled 'New Activity' screened foreign-language films which were neglected by British distributors.[30] Such programming reinforced the exhibitor's reputation as a sort of cultural asylum for marginalised filmmakers. The National Film Theatre also provided a platform for some of the medium's more maverick filmmakers, ushering in the 'Free Cinema' movement in Britain along with the early works of the 'French New Wave.'

These exhibitors were also served by an expanding network of specialised distributors, such as Gala-Cameo-Poly, Contemporary Films and Connoisseur Films. The likes of Essential Cinema and non-profit distributors, The Other Cinema, also emerged in the early 1970s as bastions of support for films and filmmakers with particularly limited commercial appeal. Whilst this emerged as a fruitful period for the distribution and exhibition of specialised film in Britain, the practice remained largely rooted in London, despite the ongoing efforts of regional film societies. This was captured in *Sight and Sound* during the mid-1960s,

> A magazine like Sight and Sound has to work on the assumption that readers see, or at any rate have access to, the kind of films we are writing about: that there is this much necessary common ground between critic and reader. But, as letters from readers remind us, this isn't always the case. Film critics are based on London; the National Film Theatre is in London; reproachfully, correspondents in the provinces regret their own inability simply to keep in touch with what modern cinema is all about.[31]

As this chapter shortly makes clear, the London-centred nature of specialised film culture in Britain remains very much the case today.

The emergence and postwar growth of such distributors and exhibitors also saw the

development of a number of distinct practices, many of which can be traced back to the Film Society. In an attempt to sustain the market dichotomy between mainstream and specialised cinema cultures, these practices reflected the growing polarity between the popular circuits and the types of specialised exhibitors mentioned above. For instance, whilst audience taste and demand have remained central to the popular circuits' programming policy, specialised distributors and exhibitors have largely neglected audience demand in favour of personal taste. According to Charles and Kitty Cooper of distribution company Contemporary Films,

> Our first priority in selecting films for release is based on our own judgement, taking into account both quality and content. Does the film have something important to say; is the director breaking new ground in his presentation? […]. In pursuing an adventurous policy in acquiring films, we cannot rely beforehand on being assured of an audience.[32]

This is reinforced by the Academy's George Hoellering and Ivo Jarosy,

> Our criteria for selecting a film have not really changed over the years. They are personal, […] without, we hope, being unduly idiosyncratic. To the best of our ability, we try to select films on artistic grounds – i.e., to put it briefly, on the quality of what the film has to say and the way it says it. […]. This means that 'audience potential' plays really no part at all in our selection policy (except in the case of revivals, where we try to give our patrons films they asked for).[33]

Here, both representatives of Contemporary Films and the Academy express unyielding confidence in their own capacity to select works which they believe bear some cultural and historical significance. Furthermore, by adhering to such criteria, specialised practitioners have attempted to assume an active, rather than reactive role in shaping cultural taste. For instance, Charles and Kitty Cooper claimed that releasing a film can be a long-term commitment as it can often 'take a few years for a director's reputation to become established.'[34] They continued, implying that whilst the 'commercial companies' seek immediate success, 'we see the life and potential of a film in years rather than in its immediate release.'[35] So, whilst the popular circuits sought instant gratification, those in the specialised sector were more inclined to take risks in the hope that the next Godard or Bergman was waiting to be unearthed. With artistic value high on the agenda, the cultural esteem associated with such a discovery could prove essential to the reputation of a company like Contemporary Films. In the process, the likes of Contemporary Films and the Academy strived to not only deliver 'great' films, but to act as cultural gatekeepers and tastemakers for future generations. As we have already seen, this self-appointed role of mediating taste was one of the Film Society's primary practices. Interestingly, this remit resurfaces when we consider MUBI's approach to delivering content in a digital landscape.

The other gatekeepers that had considerable influence over audience taste were the critics. Indeed, speaking in the mid-1970s, Derek Hill of Essential Cinema claimed that the support of the press is particularly crucial when 'the title, director and cast of a film are virtually unknown.'[36] With positive reviews, he implied that specialised distributors could bypass the costly practice of advertising and achieve relative commercial success.[37] Critics were also

crucial in mediating success at the Academy. 'Our relations with the press and magazine critics have always been excellent,' claimed Hoellering and Jarosy 'and what successes we have had have been due to a considerable extent to their support.'[38] Interestingly, whilst critical reviews were important to the specialised sector, they did not have the same currency and influence when it came to swaying the decision-making of mainstream audiences. John Ellis even notes that mainstream cinemagoers had come to distrust the critical fraternity, as a gulf emerged between the critics' perception of quality and those held by the general audience.[39] Interestingly, the relationship between theatrical distribution and positive press takes on renewed significance in a digital landscape, as Chapter Four shortly demonstrates.

In pursuing a cultural agenda, specialised exhibitors also strove to nurture greater audience engagement, as Charles and Kitty Cooper explained,

> […] we like to encourage far greater audience participation than the normal cinema set-up allows […]. One way is by involving directors to meet the audience and answer questions; another way is by a series of Sunday afternoon shows at the Phoenix, when we put on special screenings of films of a political or social character and follow these screenings by audience discussion.[40]

In keeping with the Film Society's educational approach, these audience-based initatives demonstrate how exhibitors sought to engage their audience by enriching their understanding and appreciation of film. In doing so, specialised exhibitors nurtured a communal environment where films were discussed and debated, rather than 'mindlessly' consumed. As suggested, these postwar practices were very much rooted in the fabric of the Film Society. This period was crucial, though, in strengthening the specialised sector's identity, enabling distributors and exhibitors to carve a distinctive space that stood in stark contrast to the commercialisation of the mainstream sector.

The Growth of Television and the Fostering of Specialised Film Culture

Interestingly, this postwar period of development for the specialised sector coincided with the widespread decline of cinemagoing in Britain. Come the end of the Second World War, cinemagoing had reached an unprecedented level of popularity with some 1.6 billion annual admissions.[41] Throughout the 1950s, however, the industry endured a steep decline with annual attendance plummeting to 501 million by 1960.[42] Consequently, cinema closures became an everyday occurrence with as much as 31 per cent of the nation's cinemas forced to close between 1956 and 1960.[43] As these figures imply, what was once the premium leisure choice had descended into little more than a 'minority entertainment and a sideline of the leisure industry.'[44] Whilst sweeping social changes (the consumer boom, social dispersion and the widening of leisure choices) almost certainly played their part in stimulating this decline, television soon emerged as the main source of the industry's concerns. Indeed, whilst cinema admissions between 1950 and 1960 suffered a drop of some 600 million, TV licenses increased

from three hundred and eighty two thousand at the start of the decade to over ten thousand by the close.[45] Films were also becoming a habitual part of the broadcasting schedule with an average of three films a week on television by the end of the 1950s.[46] Innovations, such as 3D, Cinerama and the more successful CinemaScope embodied novel attempts to reinvigorate cinemagoing. Nevertheless, the cinema industry in Britain would continue its steep and seemingly terminal decline, reaching a new low of 54 million admissions in 1984.[47]

Whilst television bore the brunt of the industry's concern, television was largely embraced by the public and particularly audiences with an interest in foreign-language and specialised film. Writing in 1963, a reader of the monthly magazine, *Films and Filming*, expressed the positive role that television was playing,

> With films by world-famous directors of the calibre of Fellini, Cacoyannis and Resnais becoming regular weekly fare, arguments that TV is destroying the cinema are more and more outmoded. Indeed, it can be argued that the cinema is helping to destroy itself by its weekly diet of stodge and trivia […]. It is not unreasonable to hope that someone seeing, say, *I Vitelloni* or *The White Sheik* for the first time on the small screen will be encouraged to seek out later Fellini, and, who knows, films by other Italian directors, on the large one. I am grateful to television for giving me the opportunity of seeing in 1963 alone such masterpieces as the *Wajda* trilogy, *High Noon*, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and *The Bicycle Thieves*. I am sure that the BBC's new policy of showing distinguished films on TV – many for the first time – can do nothing but good. In the long run, much of present-day rubbish will be forced off the cinema-screen for good. I would rather stay at home and watch good films than join the peanut-munching idiots at the local flick-house.[48]

Firstly, the elitist tone adopted by the writer provides further more evidence of the taste and social-based anxieties that splintered cultural consumption in Britain – something that we earlier traced back to the Film Society. More importantly, however, this letter articulates the positive role that television was playing at the time. For one, television's programming of foreign-language films was seen to support the cinema's cultural role rather than undermine it. In fact, as the letter articulates, television was partly seen as an initial point of access where a particular filmmaker's work could be experienced before seeking out their subsequent work at the cinema. The BBC's screening of foreign-language and specialised films also enabled spectators to watch or rewatch a number of highly esteemed works some years after their theatrical release. This became more prominent with the advent of BBC2 in 1964 when the weekly 'World Cinema' series screened numerous foreign films. There was also evidence that the BBC were keen to assume the curatorial role of tastemaker with arranged seasons and revivals of influential filmmakers. As a result, the work of the BBC could be seen to supplement the endeavours of the Film Society, the National Film Theatre and other influential exhibitors. The BBC's programming of foreign and 'classic' films, therefore, not only worked to widen access to specialised film, but also adopted an educational function. This was evident with the series, *The Cinema Today*, which took viewers across the global landscape of contemporary cinema with rigorous attention given to national styles and forms.[49] The BBC also worked with

the BFI to produce the series *Looking at Films* which aimed to stimulate and develop young people's interest in the moving-image.[50] So, whilst the BBC widened access to a broader range of films, the organisation also recognised the importance of curation and education to nurture a more engaged and receptive public for specialised film.

Whilst television played its part in widening access to specialised film in Britain, there were certain factors which could be seen to curtail the reach and influence of such programming. For instance, many of the foreign-language films often occupied late-night slots on the schedule when viewership figures were invariably low. There were also some further doubts over scheduling in the case of the BBC which tended to schedule foreign-language films on BBC Two – a channel which the former director of the BFI, James Quinn, described as one for 'the discriminating viewer'.[51] Indeed, from its launch in 1964, BBC Two was widely accepted as a channel that specialised in minority interests, catering for the refined tastes of middle class Britain. So, whilst there were no physical obstructions preventing public access to BBC Two (apart from the purchasing of a set), the channel did embody a sort of cultural ghetto protected by a class and taste barrier that might have discouraged wider viewership and broader participation. In this respect, the BBC's programming of foreign-language films were, to a certain extent, merely reinforcing the binary issues of class and taste that divided audiences in Britain. This is clearly reflected in the reader's letter to *Films and Filming* which adopts an abrasive rhetoric as a means to perpetuate the apparent divide between 'high' and 'low' culture.

As mentioned earlier, whilst audiences embraced the newfound accessibility of television, the industry greeted the new platform with fear and caution. This soon gave way, however, as the industry and rights-holders saw the ancillary value of television, providing a new revenue stream and extending the commercial lifespan of any given film. This proved particularly important for specialised distributors as the security of a television deal underwrote the commercial risks of releasing niche films. This is captured in the following passage by Essential Cinema's Derek Hill,

> A distributor keen to launch a 'neglected' film – i.e. one which no one believes can earn him any money – needs to weave himself some kind of safety net. An early commitment from the BFI can make the risk less hazardous. But BFI support has often withheld when it seemed likely. For example, Essential's biggest gamble to date was Kobayashi's superlative *Kaseki*. A five week run at the Academy earned the film splendid reviews and no money whatsoever. Print costs of this three-and-a-half hour colour film meant and still mean that the film will get no other screenings in this country on 35mm or 16mm unless distribution is effectively subsidised, a step which the Institute has rejected on the grounds that there is insufficient documentation on Kobayashi. Yet the Academy presentation persuaded BBC Television to acquire *Kaseki* for transmission. Hopefully, the impact of the BBC's enterprise may prompt the BFI to think again.[52]

In this sense, securing a broadcasting deal became a crucial means of underwriting and diminishing the risks associated with releasing specialised films in a mainstream-driven market. This notion of a 'safety net' only grew in importance as the commercial pressures mounted on

distributors. Speaking at the end of the 1980s, Joe d'Morais of Blue Dolphin Films emphasised the significance of striking a television deal: 'Television rights are absolutely vital. I wouldn't be interested in taking on a film without them. What you get from selling the film to TV goes a little way towards covering you if the film doesn't do anything theatrically.'[53] With a newfound role in the distribution and exhibition of specialised film in Britain, the BBC took active strides in widening the public access to foreign-language and specialised films by shortening the window between theatrical distribution and television broadcast. In some cases, the period was shortened from the standard three years to a matter of weeks. This was particularly the case with releases deemed to have limited commercial appeal outside of London.[54] This reflected the growing need to bypass the physical limitations of theatrical distribution in the pursuit of larger audiences, anticipating the changes to come.

The Rise of Home Video

Whilst television signalled film's migration into the home, the arrival of home video technology in the 1970s accelerated this trend further, marking what Frederick Wasser identifies as the biggest development since the advent of sound.[55] Like television before it, home video had the initial effect of triggering industry concern, as practitioners worried whether the new platform would cannibalise theatrical revenues. From the perspective of the consumer, however, home video offered the prospect of greater audience choice. The VCR (Video Cassette Recording) arrived on British shores towards the end of the 1970s as Sony's Betamax and JVC's VHS (Video Home System) grappled for consumer interest. Whilst the early valuation of video recorders outpriced many consumers, the proliferation of rental stores throughout the 1980s soon gave rise to a thriving rental market. Indeed, writing in *Film Comment*, Harlan Kennedy noted that in 1985, there was as many as 8 to 9 million VCRs circulating British homes[56] The growing popularity of the home video format, along with the continued decline of cinema admissions, did little to alleviate the industry's growing concerns over home video. Indeed, during the upsurge of home video in Britain, cinema admissions declined from 101 million in 1980 to 54 million only four years later.[57] By 1983 the video rental and sales market was even generating more than double the amount of revenue created by the theatrical sector.[58] Whilst cinema attendance in Britain had suffered a sharp decline since the end of the war, home video was feared by many to be the decisive blow to the cinema's dwindling fortunes.

However, along with television, the video market soon emerged as an integral part of the distribution industry. Indeed, with theatrical, home video and television windows to exploit, distributors imposed a sequential model of distribution where films would filter down the value chain of circulation. Much like the first-run, second-run theatrical system, this process was based on a price discrimination model in which the perceived standard of each available platform was dictated by exclusivity and cost. During my discussion with Amy Basil of MUBI, she referred to this practice as an 'arbitrary value system' imposed on content whereby its

'value is connected to its limited availability.'[59] With some minor variations, this model started with theatrical release and proceeded with an exclusive video rental period, video purchase, subscription television and then culminating in free-to-view terrestrial broadcasting. Staggering the release across each of these windows meant that distributors could maximise and exhaust the revenue from theatrical before exploiting ancillary markets. In this respect, preserving the integrity of this hierarchy became a crucial means of controlling and dictating the flow of content. Considering the limited structural support for specialised film in the theatrical sector, home video came as a particular source of relief for specialised distributors. By extending the lifespan of any given film and spreading the earning potential beyond a limited theatrical run, the home video market, much like television, helped to bolster the distribution process and underwrite the risks associated with releasing specialised films.

Most importantly, given the focus of this thesis, video distribution also carried the newfound promise of greater market space for specialised distributors to exploit, resulting in greater public access to a wider range of films. This is argued by Daniel Herbert who claims that the video market empowered cultural consumers by expanding the range of choice. Indeed, Herbert states that this new emphasis on choice transformed audiences from passive spectators to active 'media shoppers who expressed their power through selection and choice.'[60] There were some issues with the video market, however, which lessened its democratic potential to widen consumer choice and level the cultural playing field for niche distributors. For instance, in *Veni, Vidi, Video,* Frederick Wasser states that despite the utopian promise of greater choice, video retailers ultimately became a bottleneck for mainstream films.[61] This was guided by the industry rule of thumb that box office performance invariably correlates with video retail performance.[62] As a result, video stores when determining the scale and variety of stock patterns tended to prioritise those films which had some pre-existing commercial success. This is comparable with television which, as Archie Tait noted, is reliant on the scale and success of theatrical distribution when determining broadcasting rights.[63] Ultimately, in the pursuit of financial gain, Wasser states that the primary mission of retailers was to stock the most popular releases rather than widening access to a broader range of choice.[64] Discussing her youth as a budding cinephile, Virginia Crisp reinforces this point when recounting her experiences of 'perusing the shelves of the local Blockbuster video rental store' only to be frustrated by the lack of specialised titles available.[65]

Marketing and public awareness also had a direct influence over the mainstream monopoly of the video market. For instance, Wasser notes how the saturated marketing campaigns that accompanied large theatrical releases heavily influenced consumer choice in the video store.[66] Indeed, whilst browsing the shelves, 'People would still remember the saturated TV blitz for a particular title', he claims.[67] In this respect, the volume of marketing that accompanied mainstream releases could effectively render specialised videos invisible despite their physical presence on the shelf. This was also apparent with the physical means of retail display. For instance, mainstream releases were invariably accompanied by a range of marketing materials that drew attention to their presence in the store. Mainstream releases also

tended to assume an optimal position, such as occupying shelf space that correlated with the consumer's natural eyeline. Specialised releases, however, would often occupy less prominent spaces, like the bottom of a shelf or a corner in the store where a reductive label such as 'world cinema' or 'independent film' merely served to reinforce audience preconceptions. Later, we can see how the importance of visibility and the influence that content positioning has in guiding consumer choice online resurfaces in Chapter Four's discussion of the digital market.

Despite its potential to somewhat level the cultural playing field for specialised film, the home video market ultimately failed to disrupt the dominance of the mainstream cartel of American distributors. This is evident through issues such as the in-store positioning of films, the renewed importance of marketing in dictating consumer choice and the retailers' preference to stocking films with proven commercial appeal. In this respect, specialised film retained its position on the fringes of the distribution and exhibition market in Britain. Soon after video's arrival, however, came another development that carried the familiar promise of cultural democratisation. Indeed, the advent of the multiplex embodied the changing landscape of exhibition in Britain. Despite the optimism that greeted the multiplex and its potential to widen access to a broader range of films, the growth of the multiplex ultimately accelerated a trend towards greater commercialisation in the British exhibition sector. Inevitably, this served to strengthen the dominance of mainstream distributors rather than levelling the cultural playing field for specialised film. Before addressing the impact of the multiplex, it is worth noting that specialised exhibition was undergoing its own transformative period in Britain.

The Arrival of the Multiplex and the Changing Face of Exhibition

Slightly predating the arrival of the multiplex, a new breed of specialised exhibitor had emerged. Spearheaded by Romaine Hart's Screen, Engel's Artificial Eye and David and Barbara Stone's Gate Cinemas, this new breed of exhibitor drew on the curatorial and communal practices of the Film Society and other likeminded bastions of specialised film. At the same time, this new breed of exhibitor also sought some distance from the archaic politics of highbrow distinction, catering to a heterogenous audience that flourished from the previous decade of counter-cultural resistance and the breakdown of a stable class society.[68] Discussing her flagship cinema, Screen on the Green, Romaine Hart encapsulated this strategy, announcing the emergence of a new cultural space that bridged the gap between the mainstream circuits and the so-called 'art-house cinema,'

> Until the early 70s the London cinema could be seen in terms of a polarity between the commercial cinema, namely the Rank/EMI duopoly, and the 'serious' cinema, characterised by the Academy and the Curzon, archetypal art-houses. The Screen on the Green, drawing, unconsciously perhaps, upon the example of the repertory policy of the Classic Cinemas, created a new kind of cinema for people who didn't much want to go to either of the existing types. Thoughtful programming and good atmosphere created a place where watching films

> was fun. By persistently aiming our programming at new local residents we built a friendly relationship with our audience and the audience, more importantly perhaps, came to know each other.[69]

This informative passage outlines how Hart and other likeminded exhibitors engaged with a new, emerging breed of cinemagoer, one that occupied the untapped space between the commercialisation of the mainstream circuits and the 'serious' and highbrow nature of the specialised exhibitor. Recounting his experiences as a programmer for the Scala in London, Stephen Woolley suitably referred to the cinema as 'an alternative NFT' where diverse repertory programming was championed but without the elitist connotations of the Academy and other likeminded institutions.[70] Whilst retaining many of the practices that defined specialised exhibition, the emergence of exhibitors like Screen signalled a slight shift away from the ghettoization of specialised film culture and towards the reaching out of wider audiences. Indeed, whilst maintaining an emphasis on curation, diverse programming and communal spirit, these exhibitors recognised the importance of embracing a more commercial model of exhibition by actively welcoming a diversity of patrons. The emergence of this new breed of exhibitor and the changing nature of the exhibition landscape was reinforced with the closure of the Academy in 1986. This not only signalled the end of a once leading institution in the promotion and sustainment of specialised film in Britain. This also embodied the gradual decline of a certain cultural framework which struggled to survive the commercial pressures of a changing market and one which no longer seemed relevant to a new generation of cinemagoers. Given the emergence of Screen and other likeminded exhibitors, this transitionary period marked what Mazdon and Wheatley refer to as a 'changing of the guard' in London's exhibition scene.[71] As shortly discussed, this 'changing of the guard' is an important development to note considering the later commercialisation of the specialised sector and the diminishing support for specialised film in Britain.

Whilst cinema attendance continued its slump throughout the first half of the 1980s, the discourse surrounding the cinema's steep and perpetual decline soon steered away from the perceived threat of the home entertainment market. Given the growing popularity of home video consumption, the supposed slump in film's popularity no longer stood as a rationale argument for dwindling attendance figures. Indeed, as Stuart Hanson claims, 'Film viewing as a popular cultural activity was very much alive: it was cinema-going that was not.'[72] With this realisation, the dialogue turned towards the physical state of British cinemas. Writing in *Sight and Sound*, Wally Olins captured the inferior nature of the British cinemagoing experience in the 1980s when he claimed that 'most cinemas are no longer pleasant places to visit, and they haven't been for a very long time. Cinemas are, for the most part, […] nasty, dirty, grimy, smelly and miserable places in which to spend an evening.'[73] Writing in the mid-1980s, Robert Murphy paints a similar picture as stories of broken seats, littered floors and spill-over sounds from neighbouring screens came to embody the cinemagoing experience in Britain.[74] For Murphy, the cinema's deprived conditions were symptomatic of a general apathy towards cinemagoing – an environment which reflected the widespread disenchantment that people shared towards a

once cherished institution.[75] The reality was that cinemagoing was no longer valued as a relevant part of late-twentieth century culture. Indeed, the world had changed since the cinema's heyday years and the dwindling attendance figures indicated that the industry had proved both stagnant and out of the step with the modern world.

The multiplex development certainly revitalised a dying practice with annual admissions rising from a desperate 54 million in 1984 to over 171 million twenty years later.[76] Countering the cinema's archaic reputation, the multiplex redefined cinemagoing in Britain by delivering newfound comfort and cutting edge modernity. For instance, the Point in Milton Keynes, which instigated the British wave of multiplex development, boasted larger screens and 'computerised sightlines' to ensure the optimal viewing experience was achieved.[77] Another of the multiplex's principal attractions was the supposed notion of choice. Again, the Point in Milton Keynes was at the forefront of this promise, pledging to deliver a flexible programming policy 'with specialised and foreign-films not excluded.'[78] The expansion of screens further supported this promise as Britain's screen count rose from 1,355 screens in 1985 to 3,342 by 2004.[79] In an attempt to capitalise on the notable growth in British screens, the BFI partnered with multiplex chain Odeon to programme specialised films in eight Odeon sites.[80] In another step towards greater diversity across the British exhibition sector, the BFI partnered with another exhibition chain, the Odeon-owned UCI Cinemas, to launch BFI @ UCI across thirty-five cinemas, delivering a range of 'classic' and specialised releases to audiences around the country.[81] Whilst these partnerships signalled a promising new dawn for the support of specialised film in Britain, the growth of the multiplex development soon coincided with the strengthening of American interests. This was hardly surprising given that the multiplex development in Britain was an American investment. Indeed, from the outset, the likes of Warner Brothers, Showcase and AMC were quick to establish their own chains in Britain. Inevitably, these and other American owned chains were prone to nepotism, favouring large studio-releases whilst displaying a general lack of commitment to developing audiences for foreign-language and specialised films.

The strengthening of American dominance during this period was also rooted in the changing economic structures underpinning Hollywood production and distribution. The late 1970s onwards marked a period of transformative change in Hollywood production as the likes of Universal lowered the number of annual productions and redistributed their money to fewer, but bigger budgeted productions. In effect, this new blockbuster economy meant that companies like Universal had to make large returns on a small number of productions. In response, there was a renewed emphasis on saturated marketing as a costly but effective means of creating audience demand. In light of this new blockbuster economy, the multiplex was also tailor-made to cope with the demands of this high-risk, high-yield strategy. Indeed, despite the promise that the increase in screens would open up space for specialised content, exhibitors tended to rebook the biggest and most popular releases for repeat weeks. This is captured in the following passage from Barry Edson whilst discussing the poorly converted multi-screen conversions,

> […] the gradual development of multi-auditoria has, paradoxically, led to a decrease in the number of available screens for the 'floating' product (ie films available from distributors, large or small, which have not been allocated sufficient playing time in Rank and EMI cinemas). Where a large circuit cinema used to require at least forty-five new films/double feature programmes per year for its main programming, most triple screen cinemas will now usually be satisfied by a change of single feature every three weeks in the largest auditorium and every four or five weeks in the smaller two.[82]

Whilst Edson is referring to the multi-screen cinemas that predated the multiplex development, this passage duly captures the very same pattern that blighted the promise of choice and diversity in multiplex cinemas. In a similar fashion, the increase in screens also meant that the latest and biggest releases tended to open on multiple screens at once. In response, critic and programmer Geoff Andrew branded this trend as a 'complete betrayal', stating that multiplexes 'promised that one screen would be devoted to arthouse movies.'[83] Instead, they 'show *Titanic* on four different screens.'[84] Writing in 2006, Deborah Allison makes a similar claim, arguing that the economics of modern cinema exhibition and the prevalence of such practices as saturated releasing has served to narrow choice and suppress diversity on British screens.[85] In effect, she claims that despite the promise of greater choice, the multiplex development in Britain has, in fact, fostered an increasingly homogenous experience for British cinemagoers.[86] Given the dominance of American films in British multiplexes, Simon Perry of the British Screen Finance Corporation even referred to the multiplex as 'temples of American culture'.[87]

Discussing the concept of choice in the multiplex, Paul McDonald provides a more balanced response to this debate. Analysing the programming patterns of a multiplex cinema in South West London, McDonald argues that multiplex programming does provide patrons with some degree of variety in the shape of 'structured choice'.[88] This is presented through a number of 'sub-programming channels' which serve to categorise and organise choice according to certain demographics of age and ethnicity.[89] In this respect, rather than dismissing the notion of choice in multiplexes as a myth, McDonald points to the presence of sub-programmes such as Bollywood films and 'classics' from the past as evidence that some form of choice does exist in multiplexes. That being said, McDonald also claims that the programming policy in multiplex cinemas is largely underpinned by new and almost exclusively English-language releases, particularly during the summer months when the extensive roll out of big budget 'blockbusters' dominate multiplex screens.[90] With this in mind, McDonald argues that whilst the multiplex delivers some variety of choice, such choice is ultimately restricted as a 'small number of event movies support the overall programme.'[91]

Stuart Hanson reinforces this point when discussing the multiplex development in Britain. Like McDonald, Hanson makes clear that the conversion from twin-screen and triple-auditoria cinemas to the multiplex has undoubtedly served to widen choice for British audiences. Indeed, 'On any day of the week a ten-screen multiplex can offer ten to fourteen films at a variety of times and at a variety of prices', he claims.[92] The problem, Hanson argues, is that choice does not necessarily correlate with diversity. Indeed, despite the considerable increase in screens, the promise of greater diversity on screen through a renewed commitment to

foreign-language and specialised releases, failed to materialise across the multiplex sector. Amongst other problems, Hanson attributes this failure to the same commercial reasons stated above, such as saturated releasing and the tendency for multiplexes to rebook certain films over successive weeks.[93] So, at a time when the British exhibition sector was expanding, specialised distributors were confronted with a diminishing number of outlets for their films.[94] Ultimately, despite the promise of greater choice and diversity, multiplexes were driven by the same commercial principles that guided video retailers, creating even more favourable conditions for mainstream film. Whilst the multiplex development in Britain revitalised a dying practice, it also accelerated a trend towards greater commercialisation in the British exhibition sector, further hindering the perennial issue of access to specialised film.

The Mounting Pressures on Specialised Distributors

The growing commercialisation of the exhibition scene in Britain was further evident throughout the 1990s as the rising costs of distribution reached new heights. Given their limited resources, the mounting costs of advertising, prints and other distribution practices had a particularly crippling impact on the specialised sector. As a result of such pressures, Julian Petley estimated that a two print specialised release would have to take somewhere between £60,000 and £100,000 to simply cover the distributor's costs.[95] The financial pressures of distribution were also compounded by a marked decline of audience interest towards specialised film. Speaking to *Sight and Sound* on the cusp of the 1990s*,* Artificial Eye's Andi Engel captured the essence of this decline along with the escalating costs of distribution,

> When we started we could bring in a film like Marguerite Duras' *India Song* and people would come to see it – not in vast numbers […], but enough to cover our costs. If we showed a Duras film now, I'm convinced that many fewer people would come and in the meantime our costs – prints, salaries, advertising, rates, etc – have shot up. People seem to have lost their curiosity about foreign films.[96]

Like Engel, Joe D'Morais of Blue Dolphin Films articulated much the same concern,

> We don't have an audience any more that seeks things out – they have to be told what to see and have it shoved under their noses the whole time. Half the films by lesser known directors which opened in the 60s wouldn't have a chance now. I've always given audiences the benefit of the doubt, but really it gets harder and harder.'[97]

In response to this decline of public interest along with the escalating costs of distribution, the specialised sector sought to preserve its existence by embracing a more commercial means of distribution and exhibition. As a result, many specialised distributors and exhibitors grew more receptive to films that possessed some degree of crossover appeal. For instance, writing in the early nineties, Nick James identified a growing trend as specialised distributors turned to films with some marked degree of commercial appeal. Increasingly, he claimed, 'the kind of films

being picked up by the main art-house distributors – Artificial Eye, Electric and Metro Tartan – seem chosen for their crossover potential, with the result that mainstream and art-house cinemas find themselves struggling over the same film.'[98] As James suggests, this pattern gave rise to a more homogenous cultural landscape, particularly across the exhibition sector where specialised exhibitors and the mainstream circuits increasingly programmed the same films. Whilst this served to narrow consumer choice, it also signalled a new low in the sustainment of specialised film in Britain. Even the BFI's subsidised chain of Regional Film Theatres (RFTs) was not immune to the commercial pressures of the distribution and exhibition market. Launched in the 1960s as a network of regional cinemas devoted to expanding the national reach of foreign-language and specialised film, the RFTs were for many 'the only waterhole' in an otherwise barren cultural landscape.[99] Come the 1980s, however, the RFTs had also instigated a discernible shift towards a more commercial model of programming. Speaking to Julian Petley in *Sight and Sound*, Tony Kirkhope of the Other Cinema summarised the RFT's surrender to commercial demands,

> There seems to have been a shift in RFT policy. The foreign product they show is a distillation of the more commercially successful art house movies in London. They run them for very short periods of time, and they're not bothered about films which haven't entirely succeeded. There's not the commitment to this area of cinema that there used to be, and they tend to offset the more "difficult" films with ones that could easily be at a Cannon round the corner. Films at which you'd expect them to be committed, like those by Sembene for example, seem to be anathema – unless they have taken a lot in the West End.[100]

Not only influenced by the commercial demands of the market, the RFTs were in a particularly vulnerable position as the neo-liberal politics of Thatcherism saw a marked a decline in charitable state support towards the cultural sector.[101] This was particularly evident with the launch of Thatcher's Broadcasting Act in 1990 and the dwindling support from broadcasters towards the programming of specialised content. As mentioned earlier, television emerged as a crucial means of support for specialised distributors in a mainstream-orientated market – a sort of safety net that cushioned the financial hardships of the industry by underwriting the risks involved in theatrical distribution. The support of broadcasters, however, diminished in the wake of the Act. For instance, Channel 4, which emerged in the early 1980s as a progressive outlet for specialised content, was forced to raise its own advertising revenue. As a result, this instigated a notable shift away from niche and specialised content and a move towards the type of commercial programming that would attract larger viewing figures and the interest of advertisers.[102] Channel 4's dwindling commitment to specialised film is captured by Andi Engel in the following passage: 'At the start Channel 4 bought from everyone. Now even the BBC is better. We sell about one film a year to them compared with about 30 ten years ago. It's not to do with their libraries being too full, but they threw out their original brief. They want English-language films now. They sold out.'[103] The fading presence of foreign-language and specialised film on British television is summarised in mournful fashion by Ben Slater. Fondly recalling his youth in the 1980s, Slater describes this period as a 'golden age' in British television's

commitment to broadcasting and curating a diverse variety of films.[104] It was during this period, as Slater describes, that he developed a fervent, cinephilic passion for film. 'A decade later and television had become a filmic dead zone,' he states, 'all thoughtful seasons and strands gone, no context available and, worse still, an allergy for films with subtitles.'[105]

The Distribution of Specialised Film – New Century, New Dawn?

As suggested, the mounting costs of distribution, the increasing commercialisation of the specialised sector and the retreat of support from broadcasters painted an ominous picture for the future of specialised film in Britain. However, there were reasons to be optimistic as the new century approached. Resulting from the New Labour government's renewed emphasis on the cinema's social, cultural and economic value, a new government-funded body named the UK Film Council (UKFC) was created as a means to stimulate and support the British film industry. Entrusted with a diverse cultural remit – from the administering of production money to the preservation of cinema heritage – the UKFC was perhaps most active in the area of distribution and exhibition. Identifying the distribution and exhibition sector as a bottleneck for mainstream cinema, this area of commitment stressed a desire to widen consumer access to specialised film, creating a more diverse and vibrant film culture in Britain. Summarising the issue of access to specialised film, along with many of the issues discussed in this chapter, the UKFC made the following statement,

> […] in the early years of the 21st century, audiences in the UK still have access to a very limited range of material. The UK comprises a vibrant diverse cultural mix which is too little reflected in the range of films available on screen, nor does the cinema audience reflect the diverse cultural mix of the UK population. This is despite the rapid growth of multiplex cinemas, the apparent ubiquity of television, widespread ownership of VCRs and the increasing penetration of DVD. The economics of film distribution and exhibition in the UK mean that films which lie outside the accepted mainstream, particularly those made in a foreign language, receive very limited exposure.[106]

As a means of challenging the homogenous nature of the British film market, the UKFC employed a variety of schemes such as the Digital Screen Network. As Geoffrey Macnab explains, this represented a novel attempt to address the issue of access to specialised film whilst supporting exhibitors to prepare for the digital future of theatrical exhibition,

> Of all the UK Film Council's policies, its long planned Digital Screen Network is arguably the most Utopian. Over the next four years the UKFC is slated to spend £11.5 million on supplying some 250 screens in up to 150 cinemas with state-of-the-art digital projection equipment. The cinemas will receive the digital projectors (worth around £50,000 each) for free on condition they guarantee to show a certain number of 'specialised' (arthouse/foreign-language) films each year. What this ought to mean for cinemagoers nationwide is easy

> access to a range of movies that hitherto were rarely seen outside London or one or two other big cities.[107]

Despite the early wave of optimism that greeted the scheme, some were critical of its approach to the longstanding issue of access to specialised films. Indeed, as Sarah Street explains,

> While there is a degree of optimism around the inauguration of the Digital Screen Network, whether it will result in a sustained growth of non-mainstream film is not clear, especially since, as critics of the UKFC point out, unless it is accompanied by initiatives that seek to promote 'specialised' film so that audience demand for them is increased, it may well result in simply a re-alignment of screening technologies with commercial gains for the major chains.[108]

Interestingly, these issues of awareness, demand and the importance of education in fostering greater public engagement with specialised film are particularly pertinent to our discussion of online distribution. Indeed, industry professionals throughout Chapter Four emphasise the need for marketing to build demand for specialised releases, whilst Chapter Five considers the educational and curatorial approach taken by the online platform MUBI.

Another of the UKFC's initatives was the Prints and Advertising Fund (P&A), which persists today in the shape of the BFI Audience Fund (formerly known as the BFI Distribution Fund). Given the crippling costs of distribution, the P&A Fund provided distributors with a form of subsidised support. Contributing towards areas such as marketing and prints, the P&A Fund was designed to help distributors widen the reach and exposure of specialised releases. Whilst this undoubtedly emerged as a crucial means of structural support for specialised distributors, the P&A Fund developed a worrying tendency to favour those films at the more commercial end of the specialised spectrum. For instance, Universal managed to attain some £300,000 from the Fund's annual budget of £4 million to support their release of Yimou Zhang's *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006). In this case, the P&A Fund was exploited by a well-resourced company owned by an integrated mass media conglomerate simply as a way of minimising the risk of distributing a foreign-language film, rather than out of economic necessity. In the same year, Artificial Eye received a little over £1,000 for the release of Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako* (2006), signalling the type of disparity that emerged between recipients of the funding.

Despite the Council's supposed ambition to challenge the American stronghold of the British film market, the readiness of the UKFC to support the likes of Universal demonstrated a genuine reluctance to confront this problem. Such a tendency lends weight to Colin McArthur's criticism of the UKFC as an organisation that simply 'shovelled heaps of sterling into the already bulging pockets of the American majors.'[109] Indeed, many of the UKFC's main detractors were deeply critical of the Council's apparent failure to challenge the American dominance of British screens and to support the diversification of film culture in Britain. Like McArthur, the filmmaker Alex Cox passed a rather controversial assessment of the UKFC when he bluntly accused New Labour of betraying their rhetorical remit to support a more diverse spectrum of British film: 'On the one hand, individual ministers claim to be passionate about film and concerned about the

survival of the British industry. On the other, New Labour sits in the pocket of the Americans, whether the policy is culture or war.'[110] Taking a more moderate stance, Margaret Dickinson's and Sylvia Harvey's assessment of the UKFC points towards the Council's struggle to reconcile the somewhat contradictory aims of building a sustainable – and by definition commercial – British film industry, whilst also developing a more diverse film culture in Britain.[111] As a result, Dickinson and Harvey identify the Council's 'confused rhetoric' as 'indicative of New Labour's reluctance to address the depth or complexity of the problem posed by Hollywood.'[112] This, they argue, is particularly evident when considering the composition of the Council's Board which was heavily weighted towards 'the higher ranks of the mainstream industry'.[113]

Ten years after the UKFC's launch, the newly appointed Coalition government sealed the Council's fate with the announcement that the UKFC was being abolished as part of the government's strict austerity measures. As suggested in a recent account entitled *The Rise and Fall of the UK Film Council,* the reasons behind such a decision could have ranged from political spite to the lack of support from producers and filmmakers who – in a similar vein to the comment above from Alex Cox – saw the Council as a self-serving institution.[114] Whatever the reasons, the Council's commitments were swiftly reassigned to the BFI. Over seventy years had passed since the BFI had emerged as a modest institution driven by the duty to promote the medium's social and cultural value. Now, the BFI stood at the centre of official British film culture. As mentioned earlier, the BFI have continued to support distributors in the shape of the revamped Distribution Fund. Further to this, the BFI have also launched an initiative called the Film Audience Network (FAN). Acknowledging the London-centric nature of specialised film culture, FAN administers regional responsibility to nine hubs across the country (such as the Watershed in Bristol and HOME in Manchester) with the aim of diversifying content on local screens and cultivating regional audiences for specialised film. Such hubs or partners include HOME, a multimedia arts centre in Manchester and the Watershed, a longstanding arts venue in Bristol.

Whilst such schemes as FAN and the BFI Audience Fund reflect the BFI's continued commitment to specialised film, the current state of affairs across the commercial sector and away from the subsidised support of the BFI, presents a less optimistic picture. Indeed, the theatrical circulation of specialised films largely remains a London-based practice. The expansion of exhibition chains like Curzon, Picturehouse and Everyman which devote some time to specialised content would appear a promising sign. In truth, however, the trend in these cinemas has been a further move towards the type of mainstream programming found in national chains like Odeon and Cineworld. Even the London-based Curzon sites, which have shown some resistance to the commercialisation of the specialised sector, have turned to a more diluted form of specialised programming, offering a balance of mainstream and specialised content. Picturehouse Cinemas operates on a similar basis, as does the Everyman chain, both of which have shown an increasingly strong penchant for mainstream film. Picturehouse even succumbed to the commercial seduction of the multiplex chain Cineworld who bought the Picturehouse group outright in 2012. So, as a result of the increasing

commercialisation of the specialised exhibition sector, distributors have seen a worrying decline in the number of exhibitors receptive to specialised content.

Speaking at a distribution event in London, Laurence Gornall of The Works Film Group pointed towards another particularly influential factor behind the decline of specialised film on British screens.[115] Discussing the conversion to digital projection, Gornall made reference to the enforcement of the virtual print fee (VPF). Introduced as a structural means of subsidising the exhibition sector's conversion to digital, the VPF imposes an additional charge on distributors who are forced to pay an agreed fee per booking for a certain period of time. The general structure of this system is outlined in the passage below,

> While VPF models from the different aggregators may vary slightly, a rough model means that to showcase a film on one screen costs roughly £430 ($679) for the first week rate; week two comes in at 70% of the standard rate; week three at 50%; and week four at 30%. All of this is locked into a 10-year deal from the date of installation.[116]

These costs are further enforced when distributors move one print of a film from one cinema to another, creating a rather costly system for specialised distributors in particular. When discussing the VPF with David Sin of the ICO, he elaborated on the impact this additional cost has on specialised distributors,

> I think the problem […] for the specialised sector is that it's an additional fee that mostly small distributors operating in the specialised sector have to incur when they're releasing a film. So all the majors have accepted that they have to pay the VPF because they're saving money in creating their huge number of prints and it's a way of continuing a strong relationship with the exhibitor to get your films into their sites and £423 on the opening day of the latest Disney films is kind of neither here nor there – they can absorb that, they can pay that in order to maintain a good relationship with the exhibitor, so that's fine. But for a specialised distributor, £423 to pay an exhibitor that has a VPF is a lot of money from the likely first week takings of a specialised film.[117]

Despite the popular narrative of digital democracy, the impact of the VPF is testament to Gornall's assertion that 'digitisation has not made distribution cheaper,' but instead has 'made it more expensive.'[118] In this respect, the potential for more diverse content on British screens has been damaged because the costs outlined by Sin have excluded those distributors from the cinemas that follow the VPF system. Indeed, Gornall referred to the VPF as an exorbitant and artificially inflated model which 'acts as a considerable disincentive to the wider circulation of European films' and which 'has coincided with an almost virtual collapse of the foreign language market theatrically in the UK.'[119] The decline of specialised films on British screens is also a symptom of the growing concentration of power in the programming business. Some of the flagship cultural institutions, such as the BFI Southbank, HOME in Manchester and the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, boast their own in-house programmers. As a result, these cinemas have largely emulated their postwar predecessors by prioritising, or at least balancing, cultural criteria over commercial gain. For instance, the Programmer-at-Large for the

BFI Southbank, Geoff Andrew, evokes his predecessors of the past when he claims that the Institute's role is 'to introduce people to what we consider artistically or culturally important movies and to increase the range of what filmgoers are able to see.'[120] However, this degree of autonomy has proved increasingly rare in the specialised sector. Indeed, some of the more notable exhibitors now outsource their programming to central bookers. In a *Sight and Sound* article surveying the current state of the industry, Tom Abell of distributor Peccadillo Pictures summarises the effect of this consolidation,

> The arthouse circuit is now operated on the Hollywood model so it becomes very difficult for the smaller distributors to get their films into the right cinemas. The fact that City Screen now books so much and books the same thing everywhere means a lot of the variety has vanished. So it's much harder to find a screen for our films because movies like *Lady Chatterley* will be playing everywhere.[121]

Rather interestingly, Director of Programming and Acquisitions at Picturehouse Cinemas, Clare Binns, makes the following statement: 'We're here to serve our audience, not our personal views on films.'[122] This statement embodies a dramatic sea change in the mindset of the specialised sector. Indeed, as already established, the 'golden age' of specialised distribution and exhibition in Britain was partly characterised by its conscious efforts to shape audience taste, rather than pandering to the demands of mainstream audiences. This notable change in mentality, however, as captured by Clare Binns, has damaged the diversity of programming in Britain.

The increasing commercialisation of the exhibition sector in Britain has also coincided with a striking surge in average weekly releases. In the late 1990s, the market saw an average of five to eight releases a week.[123] Now, the market is flooded with anything between eight to eighteen films released weekly, depending on the week and time of year. With such an increase in weekly releases, competition for screen time has never been so greatly contested. In light of this competition, specialised distributors not only struggle to attain theatrical space, but they are no longer afforded the time needed to sustain a long-term theatrical run and develop a wider audience for specialised film. Indeed, discussing the current volume of content, Edward Fletcher of Soda Pictures claims that in the past 'you might have a break out movie from Artificial Eye and then they would keep that running at the Renoir for maybe three months. Whereas now, they might show Bond at the Renoir. So there's a sense that there isn't this ability to be able to commit to something because there's more choice to every screen in every week.'[124] Such dwindling levels of commitment to specialised film are particularly evident with Picturehouse's weekly strand, Discover Tuesdays, in which a specialised release is pigeonholed into one Tuesday at one particular time. Whilst this strand might be a valuable resource to those in underserved parts of the country, the limited nature of such scheduling is hardly an encouraging sign of commitment to sustaining specialised film and developing new audiences. In fact, during my discussion with David Sin of the ICO, he identified Discovery Tuesdays as a particularly discouraging sign of current market trends, referring to the strand as 'the thin end of the wedge.'[125]

Along with the growth of content, the British market has also witnessed a rise in distribution companies competing for market space. For instance, in 1993 there were twenty-seven theatrical distributors operating in Britain.[126] By 2015, that number had risen to one hundred and thirty-one distributors working in the British theatrical sector.[127] Despite the breadth of competition, this has done nothing to disrupt the dominance of the conglomerate-owned American distributors. In fact, the growth in competition has coincided with an even greater disparity between the dominant market leaders and those that occupy the fringes of the market. For instance, in 1993 the five American distributors working in Britain held an 82 per cent share of the box office, leaving twenty-two distributors with an 18 per cent share of the market.[128] By 2015, the six conglomerate-owned American distributors (Universal, Walt Disney, 20th Century Fox, Sony Pictures, Warner Bros and Paramount) along with the well-resourced, mainstream distributors Entertainment One Films, Lionsgate, StudioCanal and Entertainment, commanded a 95.5 per cent share of the market.[129] As a result, one hundred and twenty-one distributors handling some five hundred and ninety-five films were forced to battle for a paltry 4.5 per cent of the market.[130] As these figures suggest, the distribution of specialised film in Britain has never been so challenging.

Conclusion

Starting with the outbreak of the First World War, this chapter has surveyed the various ways in which access to specialised film in Britain has been curtailed over the past century. From the social elitism of the Film Society to the crippling conditions of today's competitive market, specialised film has long occupied a position on the margins of British culture. As seen, new developments and innovations, such as home video and the multiplex, arrived with the promise to level the cultural playing field and democratise access to a wider range of content. In practice, however, both served to strengthen the dominance of the conglomerate-owned American distributors, reinforcing the cyclical process of change and stasis – the promise to disrupt industry practice and democratise cultural access to content, only to reinforce the established cultural order. The issues surrounding home video and the multiplex, along with a number of other patterns and trends discussed within this chapter, resurface in interesting ways throughout the remainder of this thesis. For instance, Chapter Four shortly addresses issues such as the continued importance of the theatrical sector, the renewed emphasis on marketing and the influence of content visibility and positioning in a competitive online market. Chapter Five considers how many of the traditions of specialised exhibition, such as taste and curation, are adopted and reworked by the online platform MUBI. Whilst Chapter Six demonstrates that despite the internet's apparent capacity to lower the social barriers of division, the informal online consumption of specialised film can display traces of highbrow elitism – the type of which is rooted in the interwar development of the Film Society and the broader culture of specialised film.

Arriving at the current state of play, we have seen that despite the best efforts of the BFI, there has been a gradual retreat of support towards the circulation and sustainment of specialised film in Britain. In particular, the crippling costs of distribution, the increasing commercialisation of the exhibition sector and the growing volume of competition has pushed specialised content even closer to the margins of the market. The advent of online distribution, therefore, arrives at a critical period in the history of film distribution in Britain. Like those advancements that came before, online distribution carries the utopian promise of cultural democratisation. Unlike those innovations, the internet is a boundless space liberated from the shackles of physical markets. In this respect, online distribution is embraced as a powerful symbol of change. As the following chapter now shows, the digital frontier represents the dawn of a new democratic future for the circulation of niche content and the public access of specialised film.

Chapter Three
Disruption, Democracy and the Digital Frontier

Introduction

The American myth of the frontier has long animated popular perceptions of the internet. This, as Jack Shuler reminds us, is a myth driven by notions of progress, freedom and the human desire to strive towards new and brighter beginnings.[1] In a geographical sense, the frontier embodies a vast expanse of uncharted space. In a metaphorical sense, the frontier serves as a potent symbol of boundless promise – a canvas for westward expansionism where the constraints of the past are abolished and a new, democratic social order looms over the distant horizon. This vision of the frontier is familiar to most, finding romantic expression across a range of fictional media, from nineteenth-century literature to the popular movie westerns.[2] Rooted in the national ideals of liberalism, progress and democracy, these tales of the frontier are woven into the social fabric of American culture. Like a number of other technologies that came before, the notion of the digital frontier is rooted in the essence of this progressive ideology. In pursuing a utopian vision of the future, Howard Rheingold even draws direct parallels between digital living and frontier settlement in the title of his book, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier.* The frontier mythology permeates Rheingold's vision of a digital future. Here, the internet is presented as a boundless space of opportunity, untamed, ungovernable and ready to be shaped by a newly empowered public. Like the frontiers of the past, the internet represents the dawning of a new democratic order, a notion Rheingold reinforces when ending on this galvanising note: 'Armed with knowledge, guided by a clear, human-centered vision, governed by a commitment to civil discourse, we the citizens hold the key levers at a pivotal time. What happens next is largely up to us.'[3]

Published in 1993, Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* is symptomatic of what Lincoln Dahlberg identifies as a form of 'cyber-libertarian rhetoric'.[4] This rhetoric reached its apogee in the mid-1990s through the likes of Nicholas Negroponte and Frances Cairncross, both of whom emerged as leading voices of digital democracy. In *Being Digital*, Negroponte argued that the internet and digital technology has the power to foster a more harmonious, peaceful and tolerant world.[5] Whilst 'politicians struggle with the baggage of history,' Negroponte envisaged a new and liberated generation unshackled from the politics of the past.[6] In *The Death of Distance,* Frances Cairncross advanced a similar vision for the digital future. Like Negroponte, Cairncross's argument rested on a broader belief that the internet is 'profoundly democratic and liberating'.[7] This is articulated in a number of ways, but is perhaps most evident in Cairncross's recurring argument that the internet democratises access to a wealth of information and resources. In this respect, Cairncross emphasised the internet's apparent capacity to redefine the social dynamics of power, addressing the disparity between rich and poor, large and small.[8]

Like the notion of the digital frontier and the broader rhetoric of democratic change, the

advent of online distribution has also spawned a new wave of optimism towards the prospect of a more level cultural playing field for film. As briefly addressed in the introductory chapter, this belief is rooted in the notion of digital disruption, where the conflict between innovation and tradition serves to unsettle entrenched business practices. In the context of film distribution, disruption is seen to impact on everything from consumer behaviour and industry practice to the structures of power and control which have long defined the structural terrain of the distribution market. This chapter elaborates on this discourse of digital disruption and online film distribution. Drawing on the work of Chris Anderson, Peter Broderick, Dina Iordonova and others, this chapter better defines the breadth and rhetorical thrust of this argument. Before doing so, this chapter surveys the digital frontier by tracing the direct lineage of VoD's development. Drawing on a range of trade publications from the time helps to inform this discussion. Whilst this thesis is framed around the British market, this discussion must also take into account the pioneering endeavours of American innovators who helped stimulate the broader culture of on-demand viewing. Surveying this transitionary period of growth provides a particularly useful route into the optimistic rhetoric of online distribution and digital democracy. Indeed, what this early period of development demonstrates is how a number of niche and 'alternative' platforms emerged providing access to a wealth of cultural material, from rare and hard to find films to amateur-produced short form content. In this respect, we can see how this chorus of optimism partly grew in response to these promising signs.

The Early Growth of VoD and the Widening of Access to Specialised Content

Whilst the on-demand market has only recently emerged as a widespread practice, Virginia Crisp rightly claims that 'in many respects VoD is not a particularly new phenomenon'.[9] Supporting this claim, she argues that the lineage of VoD can be traced back to the cable pay-per-view (PPV) model where consumers could gain immediate access to a certain film of their choosing for a single rental fee.[10] Whilst retaining a degree of linearity, services such as Sky Box Office, for instance, anticipated the trend towards immediate delivery and greater levels of consumer empowerment. There was also evidence before the arrival of Sky Box Office in 1997 that the model of linear media delivery was under threat. Indeed, Stuart Cunningham and Jon Silver claim that the first ever VoD trials occurred in the mid-1990s via cable in New York where a selection of films from the Paramount and New Line Cinema catalogues were offered on a PPV basis.[11] In February of the same year, the trade publication *Variety* published a story about a VoD service entitled Your Choice TV, operated by the parent company of the Discovery Channel, Discovery Communications.[12] This novel service enabled viewers to watch Discovery content outside their scheduled programming, embodying a sort of nascent television catch up service. Around the same time, on-demand testing had also begun in Britain with British Telecom (BT) sending television content down copper cables and into the homes of a small

sample of consumers.[13] Writing in *Sight and Sound,* Peter Goodwin acknowledged the hyperbolic reaction from the press with one headline reading that the technology 'could put BT on the digital superhighway'.[14] But even during this primal stage of development, Goodwin somewhat mitigated such optimism by acknowledging the commercial challenges that lie ahead in delivering a successful on-demand service,

> […] unless something goes unexpectedly wrong, this spring's trial is likely to confirm the lab tests – that video-on-demand is technically feasible (at least to a significant proportion of BT customers) here and now. But technically possible is not the same as commercially viable. Oracle [the computer software company behind the technology] says that it has costed out its side of things. It says that with a million customers, it can deliver the system – back-end server, set-top box and software – for £50 per head per year. On its own, that may sound within the bounds of commercial reality, but on top there are going to be the very likely, very considerable price of necessary improvements to BT's network, substantial marketing and administration costs, and so on. All this is before any money has been paid for rights to the videos that are going to be demanded.[15]

Despite such uncertainties surrounding the commercial logistics of on-demand distribution, these experiments with on-demand technology proved to be important first steps towards a digital future of content delivery. Indeed, come the late-1990s and early-2000s, a number of new and established media players would continue to experiment with digital delivery in an attempt to cultivate a viable, online VoD market.

Whilst the prospect of a boundless market space was great, those 'entering the online distribution space during its first decade were confronted with the harsh realities of trying to establish a sustainable business within the context of a volatile, complex and emerging technological environment'.[16] Drawing on the archetypal business theory of an industry's four stage lifecycle, Cunningham and Silver refer to this evolutionary period between 1997 and 2001 as the 'pioneering' stage in the development of VoD.[17] This stage involved a marked degree of optimism, as barriers to entry were low and a number of modest but innovative platforms sought to cultivate an emerging digital market. What emerged during this period was a plethora of online platforms such as Atom Films, SightSound, iFilm and CinemaNow, which was notably backed by Microsoft and the Canadian production and distribution company Lionsgate. Whilst the emergence of CinemaNow in 1999 saw the arrival of established players in the media and technology market (other notable partners included the American technology company Cisco Systems and the telecommunications company EchoStar), this early period of development was notable for the absence of the dominant, conglomerate-owned Hollywood companies. Instead, true to the democratic promise of online distribution, what emerged during these pioneering years was a range of online platforms which focused on hard to find specialised content and amateur material.

UbuWeb was one such platform. Starting out in 1996 as a modest digital archive of rare sound and concrete poetry, UbuWeb developed into a multimedia repository where experimental works of moving image material could be streamed for free. With access to the work of over two hundred experimental filmmakers and artists, such as Maya Deren, Jean-Luc

Godard and Harun Farocki, most of which are unavailable on physical home media formats, UbuWeb created a digital space for discovery and rediscovery. Still running today, UbuWeb maintains its anti-commercial commitment to providing unrestricted and unfettered access to specialised content, with a particular emphasis on moving image history. [18] This was also evident with the platform Always Independent which again specialised in niche content and 'classic' films, such as Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925).[19] Such newfound levels of access to moving image history represented a promising step towards the potential fostering of a greater and more diverse film culture. That being said, the presence of older content online during this early stage of development was less a conscious move towards the fostering of a more receptive culture for film history and more the result of market conditions. Indeed, the reality of a new and unproven market meant that rights owners were reluctant to over commit during this phase of development, creating a dearth of available and contemporary mainstream content.

Along with catalogue content, many of the pioneering platforms during this nascent stage of development also focused on short-form and amateur filmmaking. Again, this seemed to epitomise the utopian promise that the internet and digital culture would democratise access and cultural participation. One such platform, Jason Wishnow's The New Venue, showcased amateur web-exclusive material. In this respect, whilst the likes of UbuWeb sought to reanimate moving image history, The New Venue positioned itself at the forefront of the digital future. This was also reflected in the way The New Venue offered advice and guidance to help budding amateur filmmakers navigate the demands of digital filmmaking.[20] Other, similar platforms such as Atom Films and ShortFest specialised in showcasing web-exclusive, short-form content. ShortFest took a particularly interesting approach by adopting the festival format of seasonal and curatorial programming, inviting industry specialists to guest curate themed content for the platform.[21] As Chapter Five's focus on MUBI later shows, curation has assumed a newfound importance in the vast landscape of digital content, making ShortFest a particularly pertinent example of an early specialised platform.

The large presence of short-form material during this early stage of development was hardly surprising given the limited bandwidth of pre-broadband internet. Further to this, the limited size and clarity of screen-based displays hindered a pleasurable viewing experience, making the consumption of feature-length content a particularly onerous practice. These were decisive factors which ultimately contributed to the collapse of this initial wave of on-demand development and the demise of a number of these pioneering platforms. Interestingly, the fact that amateur and short-form content dominated much of the early VoD landscape is symptomatic of the way online video and digital culture would develop over the subsequent decade. Indeed, prior to YouTube's dominance of the user-generated video market, the presence of short-form material was an early indication of a general trend towards new consumption patterns. With its small display and multi-use function, both the internet and the computer were mostly conducive to short and sharp bursts of visual information rather than longer-form content. Indeed, as Matt Hullet of Atom Films said, 'The short is going to be the preferred medium in an online environment, even after broadband access is widespread'.[22] He

continued, stating that by watching films on the computer, 'you're pretty much set up to be distracted.'[23] This is sometimes forgotten when discussing the delayed maturity and widespread adoption of VoD as a popular and viable format for feature-length content.

The Delayed Development of the VoD Market and the Arrival of the Big Players

As already mentioned, this pioneering phase of development was notable for the absence of the conglomerate-owned American distributors. This was hardly surprising given the historical tendency for established industry players to arouse a culture of fear towards emerging technologies. Indeed, as the previous chapter touched on, the arrival of television and to a lesser extent home video sparked an initial flurry of panic – a sort of existential cry that mourned the apparent damage that such technologies would inflict on the industry's future prospects. Indeed, the former President of Warner Home Video, Warren Lieberfarb, claimed that the mindset of the Hollywood studios is not to analyse new innovations as opportunities that cater to consumer demand, but instead to pose the question, 'how will it hurt us?'[24] Rather than taking an active and progressive approach to change and innovation, 'they get frozen in risk' he claimed.[25] The reasons behind such reluctance to participate during this embryonic stage of VoD development might, therefore, stem from this recurring, almost intrinsic fear of new technology. This would reinforce the notion of Hollywood as stagnant and reactionary Luddites. From another perspective, of course, this decision to withhold from the initial wave of VoD development might be perceived as part of a shrewd and balanced strategy to wait for the technology to catch up before committing large swathes of money to the technology.

Along with the undeveloped state of relevant technology, one of the other decisive factors was the thriving performance of the DVD market. In a *Variety* article entitled 'What's the Holdup with VOD?', Meredith Amdur referred to the DVD format as a 'sacred cash cow' for the industry.[26] 'Why take 70% of a $3.50 VOD buy', she said, 'when you can keep at least 10 bucks for every DVD sold.'[27] In this respect, the DVD market emerged as a precious part of the value chain, proving both popular with consumers and profitable for distributors. The industry, therefore, faced the risk of investing in a new market which might compromise the commercial performance of DVD sales, hitting the pockets of distributors in the process. 'You don't want to lose sight of what's driving your primary revenue stream,' claimed Jeff Fink, then of Artisan Entertainment before moving onto Miramax.[28] 'You have to straddle that line where you're not impacting on your primary revenue stream, especially when you're talking about billions of dollars.'[29] Writing in 2001, Roger Smith in *Variety* also pondered the necessity of VoD in a domestic market where DVD reigns supreme. In particular, Smith pointed towards VoD's subordinate position in the value chain, where the film's belated arrival on VoD some forty-five days after the video and DVD window, only served to diminish the technology's appeal.[30] As a result, he claimed that films 'are nearly played out by the time they reach the VOD window.'[31]

For this reason, Smith referred to VoD as a 'minor medium for film distribution', one in which 'the perception of value simply isn't there for the consumer.'[32] Put another way, VoD around the start of the twenty-first century sort of resembled the old third-run cinema in the windowing process – a distribution platform with little appeal to consumers and minor commercial value for mainstream distributors.

This started to change with the arrival of Movielink towards the end of 2002. Launched exclusively in the United States, Movielink enabled consumers to download films for a rental period of twenty-four hours. Significantly, Movielink was a collective venture involving Paramount, Universal, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Warner Bros. and MGM, with each company owning a 20 per cent share of the service. In this respect, the platform symbolised an attempted shift towards greater market consolidation of the VoD landscape. Alongside Movielink, Disney launched their own on-demand service called Moviebeam. Unlike the online-based Movielink, Disney's Moviebeam worked through a costly digital set top box, enabling viewers to rent films through the television from a library of on-demand content. Whilst Movielink and Moviebeam proved to be commercial failures, the launch of both embodied a significant step towards the cultivation of a viable VoD market. Further to this, both on-demand services signalled the mainstream sector's arrival in the on-demand business – a belated arrival that partly stemmed from a growing awareness of the commercial benefits that online distribution could bring. Indeed, the likes of Paramount and Universal began to realise the way that VoD could offer a more direct route from distributor to audience. This represented the apparent dawning of a new distribution ecology where the costly involvement of intermediaries could be bypassed and content delivered straight to the consumer.[33] Writing in 2000, Paul Sweeting even wrote that the internet's capacity to facilitate direct distribution from distributor to the consumer's home beggars the question, 'what do they need Blockbuster for?'[34]

Along with the potential to streamline the delivery of content, the online platform Movielink also emerged from the shadow of piracy. With the growing concern around the prevalence of illegal media exchange, Movielink embodied a reactive and desperate attempt to regain some control over the global circulation of copyrighted material. Whilst the informal exchange of media content predated the birth of VoD, the growing maturity of the internet and surrounding technologies gave oxygen to the informal practices of copying, distributing and consuming media content. Under this darkening cloud, Movielink arrived as a legal response to piratical practices and the growing culture of on-demand consumption. The apparent threat of piracy was even addressed by Kevin Tsujihara of Warner Bros. who claimed that Movielink was an attempt 'to offer a legal, high-quality, user-friendly alternative to what is currently out there on the Internet today.'[35] 'By getting out in front of this,' he argued, 'we were going to hopefully prevent some of the issues confronting the music industry.'[36] In this respect, Movielink and the wider practice of VoD was positioned as a sort of first line of defence against piracy. This was echoed by Peter Chernin of News Corporation when discussing the announcement of Movies.com, a rival VoD platform from Twentieth Century Fox and Disney which was soon abandoned before its launch. Indeed, he claimed that Movies.com 'will be an important step

toward protecting the integrity of our intellectual property in the broadband era.'[37] The fostering of piracy culture and the mainstream sector's response to this apparent threat is discussed at some length in Chapter Six.

As already mentioned, Movielink proved to be an expensive failure for those involved. One of the reasons for such failure is that the range of content remained a persistent problem, despite the involvement of Hollywood studios. Indeed, Rob Pegorano of *The Washington Post* claimed that Movielink, along with the aforementioned CinemaNow, 'might as well have tumbleweeds blowing through their aisles.'[38] In an article from *The Economist* in 2008 entitled 'Hollywood and the Internet: Coming Soon', the writer also claimed that despite the growth of online platforms promising a range of 'top-class titles', the catalogues 'in truth resemble the worst shelves of a bad video-rental store.'[39] Like the first wave of VoD innovators, Movielink also suffered from the same technical problems despite some advancements in digital delivery and online consumption. With broadband yet to supersede dial-up as the main form of internet access, downloading speeds remained relatively slow. Cunningham, Silver and McDonnell even state that downloading a single film over a dial-up connection could take hours or even days to complete.[40] The practice of consumption also remained a frustrating experience for consumers. Discussing the process of downloading and watching a film on Movielink, Samantha Clark described the experience as one riddled with imperfections. Indeed, she reported that the aesthetics 'looked a little watery', that the 'bottom of the picture was obscured by pixels that were flashing and changing colors' and that the video would sometimes 'stall when the audio connected – not the best way to follow a story', she concluded.[41] These factors proved decisive and in 2006 Movielink was sold to rental retailer Blockbuster, before ceasing operations in 2008. Disney's Moviebeam also suffered the same fate, closing in 2007 after Disney sold the service to the rental company, Movie Gallery, before their bankruptcy in 2010. This rapid period of decline appeared to symbolise a downturn in the fortunes of the nascent VoD market. However, this period proved to be a decisive one in the shaping of the on-demand landscape.

The Growing Maturity of the VoD Market and the Narrowing of the Windows

Whilst the studio-led Movielink proved a fruitless venture for the conglomerate-owned American distributors, both Amazon and Apple were undeterred, launching their own on-demand services for film and television content. Perhaps unsurprisingly for two of the dominant players in the technology and online entertainment markets, Apple and Amazon would make a success of their VoD ventures with both establishing themselves as prominent on-demand brands. The contrasting fates of Movielink and both ventures from Apple and Amazon appeared to signal a seismic shift in the dynamics of power. Whilst the mainstream distributors sought to exploit the internet as a means of bypassing intermediary outlets, Movielink's demise was evidence that the immediate future of the on-demand market would not be driven by the dominant

gatekeepers of the 'old, analogue world.' Instead, this 'new world' of content delivery would be shaped by the likes of Apple and Amazon, both representative of a new breed of multimedia giant. Indeed, whilst the likes of Paramount and Universal were tethered to the physical world of distribution, both Apple and Amazon were central in driving the online business of media entertainment. This was mentioned by Rob Pegorano who heralded the arrival of Apple and Amazon as a positive and decisive step towards the development of a viable VoD market. Writing in the wake of Movielink's sale to Blockbuster, he claimed that finally 'two companies that actually know a thing or two about selling entertainment online […] are making their own attempts to drag movie downloads into this millennium.'[42]

In Britain, the European broadband provider Tiscali was staking their claim in the development of the on-demand market. Launched in 2007, Tiscali's online rental and transactional downloading service, Movies Now, offered a range of fictional and factual content. The British postal DVD rental service, Lovefilm, also launched an online service in 2007 with downloadable content to own and rent from a catalogue of over one thousand titles. In 2009, this evolved into a streaming service before the company's acquisition by Amazon two years later. Whilst mainstream content was by no means excluded from these services, the significance of these new platforms – from Amazon to Movies Now – was that they had no existing ties to the dominant conglomerate-owned distributors. Indeed, whilst Movielink showed an inevitable preference towards the content of its owners, the likes of iTunes appeared more receptive to a range of content, giving niche filmmakers and specialised distributors a greater opportunity for exposure. This is testament to Alisa Perren's claim that the 'distribution bottleneck that the conglomerates used to maintain over film and television in the analog era is gone'.[43] The notion that online distribution threatened to undermine the mainstream distributors' stranglehold over the industry was further evidenced by the way VoD encouraged distributors to experiment with a multiplatform model of distribution. Indeed, whilst the mainstream distributors have resisted this approach, specialised distributors were swift to embrace the advent of on-demand technology as a means of narrowing the gaps between release windows. In search of the solution to the perennial problem of access, specialised distributors saw VoD as yet another opportunity to compress the various windows and narrow – and in some cases abolish – the gaps between theatrical, VoD and other more widely accessible formats.

One of the pioneering figures in fostering this distribution model was the American distributor Magnolia Pictures. In certain respects, Magnolia instigated the recent wave of multiplatform distribution when they released Steven Soderbergh's *Bubble* (2005) at the beginning of 2006 in selected cinemas, on the cable channel HDNet Movies and on DVD a few days later. Following this, the distributor also launched a number of new releases simultaneously in cinemas and on-demand, even launching some films on VoD prior to theatrical. These included Michael Radford's *Flawless* (2007), James Gray's *Two Lovers* (2008) and the pseudo-documentary *I'm Still Here* (2010) among others. Fellow distributors, IFC Films, also employed a simultaneous approach to new content, releasing such challenging works as Ken Loach's *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006), Christian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks*

and 2 Days (2007) and Catherine Breillat's *The Last Mistress* (2007) simultaneously in theatres and on-demand. By dismantling the longstanding distribution model and embracing VoD as a commercial platform, both Magnolia and IFC sought to widen access to specialised content in an American market which, like Britain, is instinctively conservative towards specialised films. So, whilst the likes of Disney and Universal persisted with the staggered theatrical-driven model of distribution, the foresight, the innovation and the risk was coming from the specialised sector as distributors saw the advent of online distribution as an opportunity to reach new audiences.

Whilst Magnolia and IFC were leading the way in the American specialised sector, Britain was undergoing its own experimental period. The British broadcasting company, Channel 4, took the lead when they premiered Michael Winterbottom's *The Road to Guantanamo* (2006) on Channel 4 in March 2006, before releasing the film on VoD, DVD and in cinemas on the following day. Taking their cue from Channel 4, Revolver Entertainment also sought to redefine the distribution template with their release of Steven Sheil's low-budget horror film, *Mum and Dad* (2008). Launched in December 2008, Revolver released the film simultaneously in cinemas, on DVD and on VoD to rent and own from the same day. Slightly modifying the model practiced by Channel 4, Revolver's multiplatform strategy was indicative of a growing willingness amongst specialised distributors to experiment with longstanding models of distribution in search of wider audiences. The British distributor Curzon Artificial Eye (the distributor Artificial Eye was re-branded Curzon Artificial Eye in 2006 after Artificial Eye and Curzon merged to form Curzon World) also entered the fray when they partnered with broadcasting giants BskyB to release a number of new releases on a day-and-date basis in cinemas and through the PPV platform Sky Box Office and the VoD service, Sky Anytime. Through this partnership, Curzon Artificial Eye was granted immediate and direct access to nearly 9 million Sky subscribers.[44] Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven* (2007) was the first release to mark this partnership, followed by other simultaneous releases such as Erick Zonca's *Julia* (2008) and Todd Solondz's *Life During Wartime* (2008). Discussing the release of *The Edge of Heaven*, Ian Lewis of Sky Movies captured the benefit that such a relationship would have to Curzon Artificial Eye, claiming that the partnership would 'expose *The Edge of Heaven* to a much larger potential audience in the theatrical window than it otherwise would have had.'[45]

Perhaps the most significant chapter in the development of multiplatform distribution was the release of Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England* (2013). Whilst this was marked as a watershed moment in the evolving landscape of film distribution, Virginia Crisp rightly notes that previous experiments (such as those by Revolver and Curzon Artificial Eye) position *A Field in England*'s release as part of a gradual process rather than a single, revolutionary moment in the history of film distribution.[46] Even so, the film's simultaneous release across Picturehouse cinemas, on DVD and Blu-ray, on VoD and on freeview television where the film aired on Film4, did give the release an event-like status. The experimental nature of this approach meant that synergy was a necessary means of mediating the risk of such a release, with both Picturehouse Entertainment and Channel 4 working closely on the film's release as well as sharing the revenue from commercial platforms. The release also received funding from the BFI's

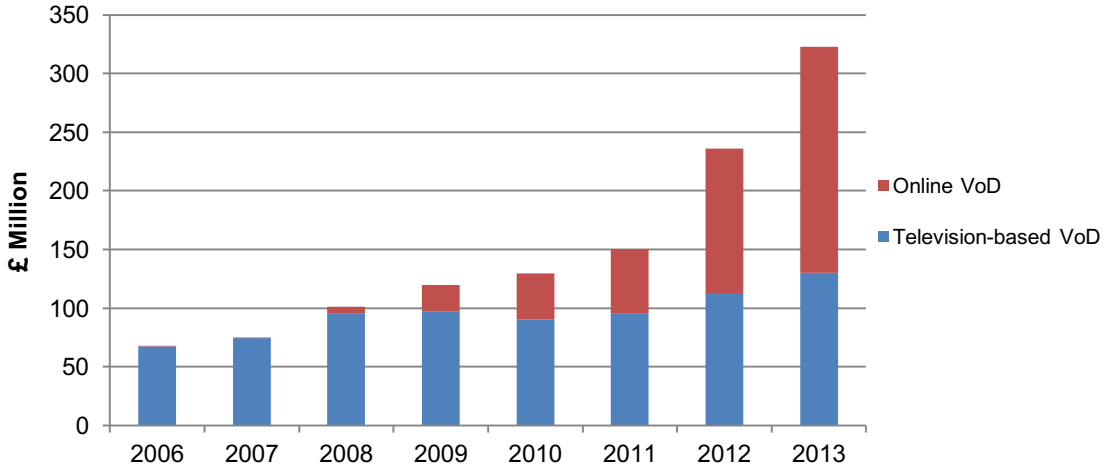
Distribution Fund which, in response to the evolving nature of content delivery, introduced a 'New Models' strand designed to stimulate and support alternative release strategies. As discussed shortly, whilst online distribution has the potential to widen a film's reach, the costly process of generating exposure and building an audience for the film grows in importance given the volume of content available. For this reason, subsidised funding from the likes of the BFI or the European Commission's Creative Europe provide integral frameworks of support for specialised distributors entering the online market.[47]

The Current Terrain

Given the dominance of conglomerate-owned American distributors in the British theatrical market, the day-and-date format has emerged as a prominent strategy for the specialised sector. For distributors such as Universal, Disney and Paramount, however, the exclusivity of the theatrical window remains a sacred ritual for the commercial reasons outlined in Chapter Two. This is also the case for large theatrical exhibition chains which have aggressively resisted the notion of narrowing or collapsing windows which is seen as an inherent threat to the exclusivity of theatrical exhibition. More recently, proposed plans for a first-run, premium rental service from the co-founder of Napster, Sean Parker, called Screening Room has gained some notable support. For the immediate future, though, the large American distributors remain wilfully locked out of the day-and-date strategy. With the declining sales of the DVD market, the mainstream industry has come to embrace the on-demand format as a substitute for physical home media. This is reflected in the recent commercial growth and public take-up of VoD in Britain. Indeed, whilst the current VoD market remains in a state of mutation, the growing prevalence and maturity of the on-demand format has seen VoD revenues increase from a paltry £200,000 in 2006 to £193 million seven years later (see table 3.1). This growth has also coincided with the dwindling disparity between the value of the online market and the television-based VoD market, such as Sky and BT, which had previously dominated the on-demand market share. Indeed, the balance of power between the two changed in 2012 with the rapid growth of the online sector superseding the commercial strength of the television-based market for the first time in Britain. Despite this evident surge in popularity, the VoD market remains a relatively minor format in the present commercial sense, with the television-based and online VoD market for film in 2013 only representing around 8 per cent of the market value for film in Britain.[48] Its recent and rapid growth, however, is sure to see VoD secure a healthier share of the market in the coming years.

Much of the recent growth in the online VoD market can be attributed to the immediate take-up and popularity of subscription VoD (SVoD) services. For instance, the arrival of popular American streaming brand Netflix in January 2012, alongside the expanding Lovefilm streaming service, coincided with the single biggest annual growth in VoD's short history. SVoD's popularity was reinforced at the end of 2013 when the likes of Netflix and Lovefilm Instant captured nearly half the annual revenue for the online VoD market (see Table 3.2). Recent

Table 3.1 Estimated value of the film VoD market in the UK, 2006-2013



Source: BFI Statistical Yearbook 2014

research from the Broadcasters Audience Research Board (BARB) has also shown that the dominance of SVoD services has only strengthened as the online market has grown. Indeed, they claim that nearly a quarter of British households subscribe to either Now TV from Sky, Amazon Instant Video which subsumed Lovefilm Instant in 2014, or the SVoD market leader, Netflix.[49] Alongside these dominant players, the SVoD market has also seen the arrival of a number of platforms with a distinct focus on specialised content. These include BFI Player Plus, MUBI (as discussed in Chapter Five) and the smaller platform, NoWave, all of which mostly specialise in catalogue programming, meaning older films as opposed to day-and-date or newer releases. Interestingly, speaking at a recent distribution event in London, Director of Digital at the BFI, Edward Humphrey, spoke about the strategic decision to launch a BFI SVoD service. In the process, he provided some insight into the potential factors behind the wider success and recent growth of the SVoD sector. In particular, Humphrey emphasised the behaviours and patterns of consumers when browsing the BFI's transactional platform, BFI Player,

> We found that audiences were browsing a lot through the library section, but they weren't actually buying very much because of the price point. So to rent a library film, which is around about £3.50, can be prohibitively high given the price point of equivalent subscription services. Also, when you consider that with a library film there is this sensation amongst the customer that at some point this film will be available on a free platform, 'so I'm not really going to rent it from you.' With a subscription offer, we found that there was much less resistance because the collection is much bigger and audiences felt that for a £4.99 price point they were going to find a few things that they really wanted to watch. Also, the programme is ever changing and developing, so over time they can start to build a relationship with the collection.[50]

Considering the popularity of SVoD services and the commanding position that they occupy in the on-demand landscape, the likes of Netflix and Amazon have an important part to play in

Table 3.2 Online VoD film revenue by type of service in 2013

VoD type	£ million	%
Subscription (SVoD)	92.8	48.1
Digital Retail	55.5	28.8
Digital Rental	41.9	21.7
Advertising (AVoD)	2.6	1.3

Source: BFI Statistical Yearbook 2014

widening access to specialised content and broadening public engagement with a more diverse film culture. The role that Netflix plays in mediating consumer choice through an algorithmic approach to content delivery is discussed shortly in the following chapter.

Along with the SVoD sector, a number of other platforms have secured a privileged position in the VoD market by offering content on both a rental and download-to-own (DTO) basis. When considering the revenue breakdown of the VoD market (see Table 3.2), it is important to note that whilst SVoD has a dominant share of the market, both rental and DTO (also known as retail) when combined command a little over half the annual VoD revenue. This is a significant factor to identify because many of the other dominant platforms online operate on a dual model of rental and retail, such as multimedia platforms iTunes and Google Play. From a platform perspective, then, we can see that combining the rental and retail revenues slightly alters the picture, creating a much more balanced market than the figures initially suggest. So, whilst Amazon and Netflix occupy a dominant position in the current on-demand landscape, this should not detract from the success of rental and retail platforms such as iTunes. In fact, whilst the annual revenue figures remain an industry secret, the BFI's latest statistical yearbook reports that iTunes were the biggest VoD provider in 2013 on the basis of annual revenue.[51] With the recent growth in revenue for the on-demand market, we can see that the expansion of VoD has been met with a surge in popularity, as consumers have grown more receptive to the practice of on-demand consumption. Considering such popularity along with the boundless reach of online distribution, we can see, on a superficial level at least, how this notion of digital democracy has developed – a notion founded on the belief that online distribution is a disruptive force in the landscape of content circulation. The remainder of this chapter expands on this argument, drawing on the work of numerous scholars, critics and industry insiders who advocate and advance this utopian vision of online distribution.

The Utopian Narrative of Disruption and Democratisation

In the introductory chapter, the concept of technological disruption was broadly defined as the conflict that arises when innovation intersects with entrenched modes of practice. From this

conflict, disruption is painted in a positive light, planting the seed of change, growth and democratic progress. Considering the current changes in the distribution of media content, this notion of disruption takes on renewed significance. For instance, writing in 2001, Kevin Zhu referred to VoD as a 'disruptive technology in the sense that it has the potential to change the entire landscape of the motion picture industry.'[52] Zhu raised the apparent possibility of disintermediation, as content producers and rights owners bypass traditional channels of distribution and deliver direct to online consumers.[53] For this reason, Zhu argued that online distribution, along with the diminishing costs of production, 'changes the competitive dynamics of the industry.'[54] Digitisation, he claimed, levels the cultural playing field, giving potential rise to a more competitive and less monopolised market.[55] With these claims in mind, Zhu's discourse is clearly rooted in the mindset of digital disruption where innovation breeds profound and democratic structural change. Some ten years later, Dina Iordonova, the co-editor of the aptly titled collection *Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves On-line,* provides a similar assessment. Like Zhu, Iordonova presents a positive portrayal of online distribution and its disruptive impact on the autocratic structure of the film industry. Advancing the familiar notion that disruption breeds democracy, Iordonova proposes the following vision,

> First, smaller players now come to be on a par with the bigger players; the latter may still exert a degree of control over the international theatrical distribution, but they no longer possess an efficient means of barring alternative content from seeking exposure on the Internet. Various inventive on-line channels for the distribution of independent and international cinema are mushrooming and niche products – such as independently produced features or international documentaries – come within easy reach. In an unprecedented move to reach out to wider audiences, more and more filmmakers bypass the gatekeepers and jump on the bandwagon; for the first time in history they have at their disposal the means to access previously distant audiences who many not be particularly large, but are sufficient to provide the modest revenue needed to keep going.[56]

Iordonova reinforces the essence of this argument in a later article, stating that the current landscape 'is so much more open and democratic today than it has ever been.'[57] This is a sentiment that resurfaces across the academic literature and the industry discourse that has emerged over the past fifteen years addressing online distribution. Here, the disruptive nature of online delivery is implicitly woven into the very fabric of this discourse.

For instance, in another aptly titled collection entitled *Distribution Revolution*, the editors proclaim that 'screen media distribution has undergone a veritable revolution in the twenty-first century, overthrowing institutional relationships, cultural hierarchies, and conventional business models.'[58] Like the statements from Zhu and Iordonova, the recent changes in media distribution are portrayed here in both a disruptive and democratic light. Importantly, this sort of sweeping statement is symptomatic of the broader optimism surrounding online distribution. Indeed, Ramon Lobato states that alongside the 'lawless frontier of copyright infringement' (as discussed in Chapter Six), the dominant rhetoric of online distribution has been its promise 'as a

revolutionary force for distributive democracy'.[59] Lobato summarises this argument in the following passage,

> According to this popular narrative, cinemas will eventually wither and die, video stores will close and the personal computer, TV and DVD player will converge into a single device serving all our entertainment needs. Viewing habits will no longer be determined by the whims of multiplex programmers and broadcasters, and consumers will be able to watch what they want, when they want. According to its advocates, digital distribution will also be a boon for independent filmmakers, who will be able to cut out the middle man and deal directly with their audiences.[60]

Part of this optimism stems from the infinite nature of the internet, where filmmakers, distributors and consumers, in the words of Iordonova, are liberated from the apparent 'tyranny of geography.'[61] No longer tethered to the theatrical market or restricted by the limited space on retailers' shelves, specialised content is supposedly granted a newfound sense of freedom. Jon Silver and Frank Alpert present this very view on the basis that the internet 'lowers entry barriers' for niche filmmakers and distributors.[62] They argue that unlike physical means of distribution and exhibition which can be controlled and monopolised by powerful players, 'nobody owns or controls' the internet.[63] For this reason, they argue that the internet provides a 'level playing field' for filmmakers and distributors which have been marginalised by the physical channels of traditional distribution.[64] Like others, Silver and Alpert therefore envision the internet as a powerful means of bypassing the theatrical market altogether. Because of the investment needed to launch a theatrical release and the monopolised nature of the theatrical sector – as discussed in the second chapter – they argue that online distribution might present certain filmmakers and distributors with a more direct and profitable model of delivery.[65] Lucas Hildebrand reinforces this point, suggesting that online delivery creates new opportunities for specialised content to reach a larger viewing public.[66] As a result, he argues that online distribution weakens the theatrical sector's influence in dictating consumer access.[67]

The distribution consultant, Peter Broderick, advances a similar argument. One of the more vocal proponents of this utopian narrative of change, Broderick proposes his vision for a 'New World of Distribution.'[68] With a particular focus on 'independent' filmmakers, Broderick paints this 'New World' as a richly democratic force. Unburdened by the hierarchal structure of the theatrical market, he argues that online distribution empowers filmmakers to shape their own destiny by taking control of their content and reaching out to potential audiences online. In this respect, Broderick argues that the digital landscape marks a profound and radical departure from the structural limitations of the 'Old World.' This apparent departure is most evident in the dichotomous approach that Broderick takes in articulating this vision. Indeed, in mapping the terrain of this 'New World,' Broderick draws on a number of direct distinctions between the 'Old World' and the 'New World' of content distribution (see table 3.3). Summarising the essential differences between past and present practices, Broderick succeeds in presenting the dawning of a new model of distribution. Freed from the shackles of the physical market and the overpowering influence of dominant gatekeepers, Broderick's vision of a 'New World of

Table 3.3 Peter Broderick's dichotomous model between the 'Old World' and 'New World' of content distribution

Old World Distribution	**New World Distribution**
Distributor in Control	Filmmaker in Control
Overall Deal	Hybrid Approach
Fixed Release Plans	Flexible Release Strategies
Mass Audience	Core and Crossover Audiences
Rising Costs	Lower Costs
Viewers Reached thru Distributor	Direct Access to Viewers
Third Party Sales	Direct and Third Party Sales
Territory by Territory Distribution	Global Distribution
Cross-Collateralized Revenues	Separate Revenue Streams
Anonymous Consumers	True Fans

Source: Peter Broderick, '"Welcome to the New World of Distribution," Part 1', *Indiewire,* September 15, 2008, http://www.indiewire.com/2008/09/first-person-peter-broderick-welcome-to-the-new-world-of-distribution-part-1-71787/ [accessed: 12.09.2016].

Distribution' is defined by its distinction from the past. As Broderick puts it, this is a world 'where the old rules no longer apply.'[69] In this respect, Broderick's argument is rooted in the notion of digital disruption where innovation fosters sweeping structural change. In fact, Broderick makes direct reference to the disruptive nature of online distribution in the following passage,

> Many of these executives seem unaware of the larger structural changes threatening their world. They recognize that video-on-demand and digital downloads will become more significant revenue streams but seem confident that they can incorporate them into their traditional distribution model. These executives do not understand the fundamental importance of the internet or its disruptive power. By enabling filmmakers in the New World to reach audiences directly and dramatically reducing their distribution costs, it empowers them to keep control of their 'content'.[70]

In pursuing this utopian thesis, Broderick acknowledges that the 'New World' is not without its challenges – although his failure to explore those challenges is possibly rooted in a general reluctance to paint the kind of complex picture that emerges in the following chapter. 'There are no magical solutions', he states, and even with dedication and persistence 'success is not assured.'[71] Even so, Broderick maintains that the digital landscape provides unparalleled opportunities for success. 'Free at last to reach audiences directly, independent filmmakers can now take control of their distribution and reap the rewards.'[72] This, as Broderick suggests, not only levels the playing field for filmmakers and content producers, but also serves to

democratise cultural access for consumers.

Anticipating the widespread adoption of online distribution, Allen J. Scott provided a similar assessment,

> […] the development of new delivery systems will in principle open up the market to more effective contestation by smaller independent film production and distribution companies […]. Thus, the eventual attainment of film distribution by means of the internet will no doubt give rise to a great increase in the amount of cinematic material available to consumers, thereby widening the market and almost certainly making inroads on blockbuster audiences.[73]

In keeping with the likes of Broderick and Iordonova, Scott's forecast chimes with a broader collective voice – a chorus of optimism that advocates for the disruptive nature of online distribution and the digital democracy of the internet. In this statement, however, Scott also raises another particularly interesting and common claim within this utopian trend of thought. Indeed, by claiming that online distribution will widen consumer access to broader forms of 'cinematic material', Scott suggests that such a widening of the market will 'almost certainly make inroads on blockbuster audiences.' The implication, then, is that by widening access to niche content, the industry will witness a profound realignment across the landscape of audience taste. That is to say that greater exposure to a wider range of cultural material will foster a more engaged and curious brand of consumer. According to this argument, the promise for niche distributors and filmmakers is that greater access will stimulate greater levels of interest towards specialised content, resulting in a larger structural demand for specialised film.

The notion that online delivery will unsettle longstanding patterns of audience taste and behaviour is evident in a special edition of *Senses of Cinema* discussing the practice of cinephilia amidst a changing climate of access and digital delivery. Published back in 2000, before the concept of VoD had entered consumer consciousness, two of the contributors – David Sterritt and Theodoros Panayides – anticipated the wave of optimism that would greet online distribution. For instance, Sterritt claimed that the burgeoning home viewing market and the rise of digital technology were 'making more great cinema available to a wider range of people than has been remotely possible in the past'.[74] As a result, he claimed that such a development would open 'the door to greater waves of cinematic literacy than we have ever known.'[75] In the same edition, Panayides echoed Sterritt's belief that greater levels of access would foster a more receptive and engaged audience for more diverse films. 'How long before at least some of these newly-empowered people start getting curious about the movies,' he claimed.[76] For Panayides, 'Curiosity about film history is bound to grow as the current transitional phase plays itself out.'[77] In a slightly later assessment of the digital future of media entertainment, William W. Fisher also argues that newfound levels of access will result in changing consumer behaviours. Fisher suggests that the newfound cornucopia of media content encourages consumers to expand their horizons of taste.[78] Without the restrictive choices imposed by mainstream-driven gatekeepers, Fisher argues that choice is a liberating force, making 'consumers more active, more discerning, more alive.'[79] In many respects, this notion of consumer empowerment and the changing dynamics of taste reach their apogee in the

writings of Chris Anderson.

Developed from his 2004 article in the monthly publication *Wired,* Anderson's book *The Long Tail* serves as a principal text for the utopian thesis of online distribution and digital democracy. In short, Anderson's concept of the 'long tail' represents the shift from a model of media scarcity that focuses on 'best-selling hits' to a model of abundance where a variety of niche material competes for consumer attention. This is reflected in Anderson's assertion that the 'long tail is just culture unfiltered by economic scarcity.'[80] In keeping with the disruptive nature of this discourse, Anderson's argument rests on the belief that online distribution revolutionises the practice of media circulation. This is rooted in Anderson's belief that because of the 'limitless' and 'infinite' nature of the internet, the digital landscape inherently overcomes the physical limitations of traditional distribution channels. Whilst the limited shelf space of the physical market favours the most popular brands and products, Anderson argues that the internet now provides niche products with a level platform to reach new audiences. Indeed, Anderson states that the new cultural landscape provides 'unlimited and unfiltered access to culture and content of all sorts, from the mainstream to the farthest fringe of the underground.'[81] Anderson makes further reference to this landscape as a 'seamless continuum from high to low' where anything from 'Hollywood movies' to 'player-created video-game stunt video' compete side by side.[82] Articulating the disruptive impact of digital change, Anderson argues that for decades the market has 'winnowed out all but the best-sellers to make the most efficient use of costly shelf space, screens, channels, and attention.'[83] Now, he claims, the infinite nature of the internet along with the rapidly lowering costs of distribution have given niche products newfound space to breathe. As Anderson suggests, niche content is now granted an unprecedented degree of market visibility,

> These niches are a great uncharted expanse of products that were previously uneconomic to offer. Many of these kinds of products have always been there, just not visible or easy to find. They are the movies that didn't make it to your local theater, the music not played on the local rock radio station, the sports equipment not sold at Wal-Mart. Now they're available, via Netflix, iTunes, Amazon, or just some random place Google turned up. The invisible market has turned visible.[84]

As suggested, whilst increasing the market visibility of niche material and widening consumer access to specialised content, Anderson's utopian belief in the digital market also has implications for audience taste. For Anderson, this newfound model of choice is revealing new and disruptive patterns of consumer behaviour,

> People are going deep into the catalog, down the long, long list of available titles, far past what's available at Blockbuster Video and Tower Records. And the more they find, the more they like. As they wander farther from the beaten path, they discover their taste is not as mainstream as they thought (or as they had been led to believe by marketing, a hit-centric culture, and simply a lack of alternatives).[85]

In articulating this new form of consumer autonomy, Anderson not only invests in the notion that online delivery stimulates new levels of interest towards niche content. He also contends that access to newfound levels of content uncovers a latent demand for specialised material. In this respect, online distribution not only instigates what Anderson sees as a sea change in cultural taste. He also suggests that a profound structural change to the mechanics of media delivery unearths a dormant public interest towards niche content – a pre-existing, but largely hidden interest that went unserved under the sovereignty of physical distribution.

Conclusion

Encompassing the work of Broderick, Anderson and other likeminded optimists, we can see that this utopian narrative of disruptive technology and cultural democratisation has assumed a prominent place at the heart of debates around online distribution. The picture that emerges from such utopian accounts is of a democratic culture where filmmakers, distributors and consumers are liberated from the shackles of physical distribution. Governed by temporal constraints and spatial-bound access, the entrenched structural weaknesses of physical distribution are seen to hinder wider forms of cultural participation and access. These structural weaknesses, along with a range of other factors discussed in Chapter Two, have also created the necessary conditions for a monopolised market ruled by an elite group of powerful gatekeepers – the conglomerate-owned, American 'Majors' as history has come to define them. This, as the likes of Anderson argue, is an industry built on scarcity, limited choice and a longstanding imbalance of power between submissive consumers and the dominant mainstream distributors. In light of this structural state of affairs, the burgeoning digital landscape is heralded as a disruptive and revolutionary force that breaks 'the barriers of geographic tyranny'.[86] The portrait that emerges is of a digital frontier where content roams free; a democratic culture where access is no longer governed by physical space and where distributors are liberated from the shackles of the dominant mainstream players; and a utopian landscape where the widening of cultural access redefines the dynamics of taste and demand as choice is seen to stimulate a wider interest towards a broader range of content. In essence, this is a vision of digital disruption – a vision in which the advent of online distribution is seen to inspire lasting change, bringing greater parity to an imbalanced market and fostering a new form of cultural democratisation. With these claims in mind, the following chapter now engages with these issues of access, demand and democratisation by offering a more pragmatic account of online distribution – an account informed by industry professionals and shaped by the practical realities of the digital market rather than the theoretical promise.

Chapter Four
Mapping the Infrastructure of Online Distribution

Introduction

Whilst the previous chapter portrayed the advent of online distribution in a positive and democratic light, this chapter challenges this utopian discourse by offering a more complex portrait of the digital landscape. This is achieved by exploring some of the infrastructural issues which underpin online delivery and dictate the flow of digital content. Here, the concept of infrastructure serves a critical purpose. Often used in an urban context, infrastructures tend to denote those systems, such as transportation and power grids, which facilitate the flow of resources and 'create the skeleton of urban life.'[1] In keeping with this definition, the notion of media infrastructures has emerged as an area of study that dissects those systems which drive and sustain the circulation of media content. Lisa Parks and Nicola Starosielski, for instance, refer to data centres and telephone towers as archetypal media infrastructures 'designed and configured to support the distribution of audiovisual signal traffic.'[2] Whilst maintaining this focus on the structural services which underpin the flow of audio-visual traffic, this chapter adopts a slightly broader and more inclusive definition. Here, infrastructure constitutes a wider range of practices and technologies which facilitate the digital ecosystem of film and which shape and drive the migration of content online. For instance, issues such as algorithms, broadband provision and the architecture of platform interfaces are considered throughout this chapter. Whilst dealing with the digital flow of content, the infrastructure of online distribution is not purely driven by digital practices. Indeed, the continued importance of the theatrical sector and its influential role in dictating the digital market is also taken into account. What becomes clear throughout the course of this chapter is the way that online distribution rests on the support of such practices and technologies, hence their recognition here as the infrastructures of the on-demand landscape.

Considering our focus throughout this thesis on issues of access and circulation, the study of media infrastructures is particularly crucial here because of the way they dictate the exercise of power. As Joshua Braun states, infrastructures have a tendency to either enable or impede our autonomy as consumers by directly influencing 'what content we are able to access, where and on what terms.'[3] For this reason, Larkin claims that infrastructures 'mediate and shape the nature of economic and cultural flows'.[4] This is evident throughout this chapter as we see the various ways that infrastructural practices and technologies influence issues of access in a digital landscape. Importantly, my interviews with leading professionals in the specialised sector greatly inform and guide the following discussion. In keeping with the focus of this thesis, what emerges is a sense of continuation between past and present practices and patterns. This is not to say that the pathways of access to specialised content are not broadened when compared to past delivery formats. What becomes clear, however, is that online distribution is

not the autonomous and democratic landscape that those in the previous chapter propose. Firstly, it makes sense to start this discussion in the same manner as my interviews with industry figures – that is by asking for a response to the optimistic claims surrounding online distribution as a springboard into some of the broader debates around the democratisation of access. What emerges is a discernible tension between the notion of access and the structural reality of demand.

Access and Demand

In response to this optimistic rhetoric of digital democracy, Edward Fletcher of Soda Pictures claims that online distribution has 'fundamentally changed access.'[5] Fletcher reinforces this transformative effect, arguing that audiences in rural parts of Britain, for instance, can access specialised releases during their theatrical run in a way that was simply not possible only five years ago.[6] 'That's the structural reality' of the market, Fletcher states, 'and there's no getting away from that', bringing a newfound sense of immediacy and directness to the delivery and access of specialised content in Britain.[7] Philip Hoile of Bulldog Film Distribution agrees, suggesting that the current digital landscape creates a more receptive market for content diversity. For consumers, he states, 'it's much easier to access a wide range of films and within that a massive spectrum of types of films, genres, subjects and scales of budget'.[8] Whilst acknowledging the hypothetical benefit that VoD brings to the widening of access to specialised content, Edward Humphrey provides a more cautious response. For Humphrey, 'as long as access is defined by the volume of content available,' then access to specialised content is theoretically widened 'because there is clear limitless amount of shelf space on digital platforms.'[9] David Sin adopts a similarly cautious tone, suggesting that this utopian theory has, in certain respects, developed as a logical, abstract extension of changing market conditions. Reinforcing the marginalised state of specialised film in Britain – as outlined in Chapter Two – Sin states that restricted access to such work has been largely predicated on the limited number of theatres unwilling or unable to show those films.[10] Sin elaborates on this point,

> In my entire career, there have only been maybe sixty to a hundred screens that could accommodate a non-English language film – a highly specialised film – and so even on the most commercial end of the specialised film spectrum, a film could only really open in sixty to a hundred venues whereas a very commercial blockbuster film these days can open on nearly six-hundred screens, so the difference is enormous.[11]

In this respect, by mediating the longstanding restrictions of the theatrical market and making these films available online, Sin suggests that VoD has the immediate theoretical capacity to make these films accessible to a wider range of people. 'That's the theory', he claims.[12] The reality, however, is very different.

One of the most important issues that surfaced during my discussions with industry professionals was the tension between access and demand. For Sin, whilst the issue of access

has broadly been addressed, the historical restrictions of the theatrical market have prevented any growth of interest in specialised film beyond its core audience. Indeed, 'because there's been limited access to those films, actually the audience that is responsive to those films is also fairly limited'.[13] Sin continues, stating that 'the fact that there isn't any access to specialised film in say, parts of Lincolnshire for example, means that there isn't any tradition of cinemagoing to those sorts of films which also means there's fairly limited interest in those films, no matter what platform they become available on.'[14] Addressing the limited structural demand for specialised content in this country, Fletcher poses one of the fundamental questions in this debate about access and demand: what happens when you transform the availability of a product?[15] Would you transform its take up and how would that materialise?[16] In making this point, Fletcher draws on high-end fashion as a pertinent analogy for this tension between access and demand – pertinent because, as Fletcher says, fashion like film deals with issues of 'culture and lifestyle and value'.[17] The recent proliferation of online fashion outlets offering clothing from high-end fashion labels at significantly reduced prices has removed the structural barriers which prevented those outside London from accessing and wearing the latest high-end brands. However, 'to what extent are people on the streets of Boston walking around in Gucci, precisely because that access has changed?', Fletcher asks.[18]

Conversely, Fletcher also draws on the revival of British football in the early 1990s when Sky revolutionised access to live football on television. Indeed, the late 1980s saw domestic football reach its nadir with limited access to live games on television and a general disinterest in the sport amongst the British population.[19] The television deal struck with Sky, however, revolutionised the game's appeal, tapping into a latent demand for British football and reviving the nation's passion for the game. Importantly, though, this revival was predicated on British football. As Fletcher states, had Sky positioned Spanish football at the forefront of their plans, would this have gained the same mass traction as domestic football?[20] Bringing this directly back to the tension between the access and demand of specialised film in Britain, Fletcher relates this football analogy to the way mainstream films remain locked out of the current day-and-date strategy. Were audiences able to access the latest and biggest releases on Curzon Home Cinema alongside a specialised release like Soda's very own *Rams* (Grímur Hákonarson, 2015), then might we see a greater penetration of these specialised platforms and films?, Fletcher asks.[21]

So, what might seem a tenuous, tripartite analogy between football, fashion and film, in fact provides an insightful and profound statement on the interdependent relationship between access and demand. Therefore, whilst Sky helped to stimulate interest in domestic football, this not only rested on access alone, but on the relationship between the product served (in this case top-tier English football as opposed to European) and the public predisposition towards that product. That is to say that over time, Britain has developed a regional, cultural heritage around football, creating a public receptiveness towards the game and a passion that needed reviving rather than building from the ground up. With high-end fashion and specialised film, however, both have been largely consigned to London meaning a broader culture has not

developed beyond the capital. So, whilst access widens the potential for broader participation, the demand does not necessarily grow in response. This is also acknowledged by Edward Humphrey who again recognises the impact that VoD has on regional access to specialised film, describing the process as 'transformative' for underserved cinephiles.[22] However, what online distribution 'doesn't necessarily do', he argues, 'is widen the pool of that audience.'[23]

With this in mind, some of the more optimistic claims from the likes of Anderson about the broadening of cultural taste and the growth of interest in niche forms of content simply because they are now more accessible, seems naive and misinformed. Indeed, the implication is that access alone breeds demand. In this respect, Anderson and others seem to overestimate the impact that access alone can bring, disregarding the current lack of audience receptiveness towards specialised content and ignoring the influence that historical patterns of access have had on audience taste and demand. By seemingly addressing the perennial issue of access, the isolated practice of online distribution threatens to repeat the apparent failure of the UKFC's much discussed Digital Screen Network. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, some were critical of the UKFC for treating access as an instant solution to the homogeneity of British film culture. What these critics saw was a general disregard of audience behaviour and a failure to deliver educational initatives and schemes to run alongside the widening of access as a means of stimulating demand and cultivating curiosity. The importance of nurturing broader public interest alongside the widening of access is acknowledged by Edward Humphrey in the following statement,

> With digital, availability is a very easy switch to flick. So you can quite easily say […] 'right, we're going to launch a player that's going to have all these films on it and we're going to take away a lot of the barriers and we've done it.' So within a matter of a year or two, you can flick the switch that says online availability, it's done. The other issue […] is getting an audience interested and making them more curious – building their appetite to explore. Those barriers are as tough as they are in the physical landscape.[24]

Like Fletcher and Sin, this statement strongly implies that demand and interest are not synonymous with access. Indeed, Humphrey claims that whilst the advent of online distribution does, to a certain extent, remove one considerable barrier, VoD does not actually change the public perceptions towards the films themselves.[25] As Humphrey states, 'whilst the availability is a switch, creating an audience demand for a film or for a type of programming is a longer term game.'[26]

The Economics of Online Distribution

As earlier discussed, the remainder of this chapter considers some of the issues that mediate consumer access of specialised films online and which impede the growth in demand and interest towards more diverse forms of content. This is considered from a binary perspective, taking into account the issues that mediate access from the consumer end and the ongoing

challenges that specialised distributors face when navigating the demands of the digital market. From an industry perspective, one of the challenges that can limit the range of content available to consumers centres on the economics of running a VoD platform, as Humphrey describes,

> Online, because of the complexity of running a digital platform, it actually means there can be less diversity of choice because the threshold that's required to operate a platform is quite high and there's only a very big company, such as a Google or an Apple or a Sky that can run a platform, or there's organisations such as us, or there are companies such as Curzon but even Curzon, though it's a private company, has had a lot of public subsidy to drive the variety of output that it has. So whilst the opportunity for digital is great [and] there is limitless shelf space, actually the economics of running a digital platform push you towards a limited range of content that you know you're going to earn your money back from in order to make a profit.[27]

In this respect, we can see that the longstanding dynamic between distributor, exhibitor and their interpretation of whether the film holds considerable appeal to a prospective audience, remains as important online as it does in the physical market. Even platforms with a range of diverse content 'need to pick films to release that they know are going to cut through with their audience', Humphrey claims.[28] The financial strains that can limit the breadth and diversity of content online is also evident when we consider the economic and legal issues around the fragmentation of rights – an issue that Amy Basil of MUBI claims has been one of the 'biggest roadblocks' for distributors and platforms. [29]

In most cases, a distributor purchases the rights to release a film through a sales agent who negotiates the details of the contract with the distributor. When those deals predate digital, then distributors are forced to pursue a complicated and often costly process of securing the necessary rights to clear the film for online distribution. Whilst the delivery of digital material to the consumer is immediate and direct, Lobato claims that 'the legal processes that underpin the digital economy are messy and slow.'[30] The challenge of preparing content for the digital age can be further complicated when the existing rights have passed through the hands of different parties. In such cases, this can lead to a lot of uncertainty around the fundamental issue of ownership. The legal process of getting to the bottom of who owns what rights is again a costly process, one which is made particularly difficult for smaller distributors with limited resources.[31] In many cases, such uncertainty can often breed a period of inactivity as the delay or failure to resolve the rights can trap the film in a sort of limbo. Because the legal proceedings to clear a film for digital distribution are often costly, laborious and, in some cases, even irresolvable, this can ultimately impede the diversity of content online – particularly older, catalogue films with longstanding, pre-digital arrangements in place. Indeed, Lobato states that distributors are only likely to invest their time and money into clearing films that have proven commercial appeal.[32] In this respect, he claims that many of the films that are cleared for online distribution tend to overlap with those which achieved some wider success and exposure across the theatrical sector.[33]

Whilst the settlement of rights can be one of the underlying issues when preparing

catalogue content for the online market, older and newer content alike must also undergo a rather fragmented route to market. Discussing the fragmentation of the online market, Humphrey claims that one of the benefits of theatrical distribution is that distributors can produce multiple copies of the same digital cinema package (DCP) and send them to various exhibitors.[34] 'When you're in the online space,' however, 'the cost of distribution […] actually operates on a one-to-one basis.'[35] Whilst it is possible to create a single digital file of the film that all platforms can access, in reality, each platform uphold their own distinct specifications which distributors must abide by. For this reason, distributors or rights owners have to work with platform-approved laboratories which encode and deliver the content to the exact specifications of that distinct platform. This is one of the realities of online distribution, a reality which is often obscured by the utopian rhetoric of digital empowerment. Indeed, whilst online distribution is often portrayed as a frictionless and streamlined delivery process, the route to digital platforms such as Google and Amazon is both time-consuming and fragmented. As Andrew Nerger of the aggregation company, The Movie Partnership, claims,

> Many don't realise the cost and time it takes in order to do that. They think it's a simple case of flicking a switch and instantly it's on iTunes like a burning a CD on their computer and then it appears on their iTunes library. It's not like that unfortunately […]. For all platforms it needs to be more specialist, it needs to go through a lab who are approved for delivery for each of those platforms and it needs to be handled with care. So that takes time and it also takes money.[36]

The solution to the fragmented nature of the digital market would be for the platforms to harmonise their standards and specifications.[37] Were the platforms to agree on a consistent standard of delivery, then distributors would only need to prepare one version of the film for multiple platforms, rather than multiple versions for different platforms. This would cut the costs of producing and delivering different technical versions of the film whilst simplifying what is a fragmented and complex process. Without that cooperation between platforms, however, the digital landscape 'ends up being quite a complex world.'[38]

Distributors face further economic challenges when releasing films online, particularly when dealing with premium, day-and-date releases. Like Fletcher, distribution consultant Adam Chapnick acknowledges that online distribution has fundamentally changed access to films. However, 'having easy access to the global audience doesn't get anyone to see your movie', Chapnick claims.[39] In this respect, marketing and generating exposure reinforces its importance as a way of building audience awareness and demand. For instance, Philip Hoile states that whilst platforms such as iTunes provide specialised distributors with a popular and accessible outlet for their content, you then face the challenge of raising the profile and visibility of the film 'to make sure that people actually know it's there'.[40] In fact, with the volume of content available to consumers and the multiple activities that people can devote their time to in a connected and digital world, marketing has become an even more important means of commanding audience interest. This is captured by Amy Basil of MUBI, who reinforces the challenge that distributors and platforms face in capturing people's attention in a multifaceted, digital world,

> You're not just competing with other films. You're competing with literally everything else because everything is available to people through their phones. Any person that has a connected device and lives in an online world knows what that feeling is like – how many times do you save a link to bookmarks? How many times do you add something to a list or think you're going to go back to something? There's just an overwhelming amount of stuff that we can spend our time doing in a digital landscape.[41]

In this respect, making an impact in a competitive online world is a challenge for most, particularly those without considerable financial resources. Indeed, Andrew Nerger claims that whilst distributors can release their content on popular digital platforms, the success of such content ultimately relies on how much money is spent on marketing and promotion.[42] Therefore, whilst online distribution enables specialised distributors to widen the accessibility of their content, 'It's all about whether or not they've got the resources – the clout – in order to actually get people to find' such films.[43] Humphrey makes a similar point when arguing for a sense of continuity between past and present market practices, stating that the 'costs and barriers to audience engagement are just as real in the digital world as they were in the other worlds – whether that's TV, home entertainment products or theatrical.'[44] So, whilst the advent of online distribution has lowered the barriers of participation for niche distributors and filmmakers, this breadth of access 'hasn't necessarily changed how you get an audience engaged in the film.'[45]

The issue for specialised distributors, then, is that the online market reinforces the pre-digital state of affairs by exacerbating the positive role that marketing – and money – plays in influencing consumer choice. Indeed, without building audience awareness, specialised releases run the risk of being cut adrift in an endless sea of content where the larger and better funded releases rise to the top. This point is reinforced by Nerger, who describes how the dominance of pre-existing market leaders translates online, despite the increased volume of competition,

> If you're Disney, you have maybe ten to twelve amazingly strong, triple-a films that you're going to market. You go to Amazon, you go to iTunes, you go to Google, you go to Sky, they're going to be biting your hand off to take all those films because you've marketed them, you've promoted them to high heaven and you're Disney, everyone knows Disney […] so they will support and they will feature those films because they've had a theatrical release, because they've had the push, because everybody wants to see them.[46]

So, in a deeply competitive online market, those films without some form of marketing that reaches out to consumers are likely to languish and drown in an ocean of content.

Because of the renewed importance of marketing and building consumer engagement for online content, subsidised support through the likes of the BFI's Distribution Fund or Creative Europe's Online Distribution scheme, has grown particularly crucial for specialised distributors. Importantly, much like the earlier comments by Fletcher, Humphrey and Sin, these schemes and frameworks of support recognise that access alone does not stimulate demand. For this reason, schemes like Creative Europe's Online Distribution fund particularly emphasise the need to strengthen visibility and awareness through innovative forms of marketing and

promotion. What these schemes also highlight is the high level of investment needed to simply give a day-and-date release a chance of success in a competitive online market. Curzon Artificial Eye's recent release of Matteo Garrone's *Tale of Tales* (2015), for instance, received a little over €300,000 to support the film's multiplatform launch.[47] So, whilst online distribution has helped distributors to circumvent the limited theatrical network in Britain and widen public access for new specialised releases, actually converting that level of access into transactions is a greater challenge. Indeed, building awareness and engagement in a highly crowded and competitive market remains a costly investment for distributors – a level of investment which many specialised distributors are simply unable to make without the intervention of institutional support. Without that level of investment, specialised releases are unable to attain the profile and exposure needed to attract consumers in a volume-heavy market.

The Continued Importance of the Theatrical Window

As already mentioned, distribution funding schemes by the likes of the BFI or Creative Europe have emerged as crucial frameworks of support for distributors seeking to widen the reach of their films through online platforms. Interestingly, though, there also remains a notable emphasis on the need to expand the physical reach of such films in the theatrical window. Indeed, whilst supporting the film's online release, Curzon Artificial Eye also drew on Creative Europe's funding for *Tale of Tales* as a means of widening the film's presence in the theatrical market. This is perhaps surprising when considering that one of the structural barriers preventing the wider circulation of specialised film in Britain, as the second chapter made clear, has been the limited number of cinemas receptive to the screening of specialised content. This, of course, is where online distribution supposedly intervenes, enabling specialised distributors to bypass the theatrical route, or at the very least alleviating the distributor's dependence on the theatrical window. However, rather than reinforcing this view, what emerged during my discussions with industry professionals was, in fact, the renewed importance of the theatrical window, despite the new opportunities afforded by online distribution. Indeed, whilst our discussions firmly centred on the practice of digital content delivery, the discourse was often drawn back to the ongoing importance of theatrical in the broader ecology of film distribution. In relation to the previous point about marketing and exposure, one particular reason for the continued importance of theatrical derives from its influence as a launchpad and a marketing platform for films.

On the one hand, there are the residual effects a theatrical run can have on the profile and performance of films on platforms such as DVD and VoD. For instance, elements such as saturated marketing campaigns retain their influence over consumer choice, whilst box office performance is seen as a determinant for audience demand on domestic platforms. In this respect, the relationship between theatrical and VoD very much echoes the interdependent nature of theatrical and home video, as discussed in Chapter Two. When we get to the

alternative space of specialised content, however, we see a shift in emphasis. Indeed, as Amy Basil of MUBI notes, whilst most commercial theatrical models 'have been obsessed with this idea of box office', this is not the same reality for the specialised sector.[48] Instead, for specialised films, the value is determined by awards, by critical reviews and by the general prestige that emanates from these structural symbols of endorsement. Whilst digital has theoretically expanded the distributor's potential to widen a film's release, Basil claims that these markers of value have not changed with the arrival of online distribution. Instead, these symbols of prestige remain an important means of distinction in a crowded marketplace. The problem for distributors is that despite the wave of digital change and the breakdown of traditional distribution models, the attainment of these symbols remains tethered to the theatrical market. Hoile, for instance, states that 'it is very hard to get the press talking about a film which is going to straight to DVD or digital.'[49] Basil elaborates on this issue regarding the role of critics,

> The review and critical community more broadly at a national level hasn't quite yet figured out how to handle digital. It's still very tied to theatrical releasing and before we did theatrical we were releasing a lot of films that had never been released before – digitally only – and it was very difficult for the critics and the papers and that whole community to cover us because they just don't have a space to do it in – they don't have the remit to do it. They might be really excited about the film, they might have seen the film at a festival, they might really love it but because it's not on the FDA [Film Distributors' Association] listing, because it's not part of the theatrical cycle, then they don't have license to write about it.[50]

Much the same principle also stands for awards eligibility, which is governed by theatrical distribution. Even the great 'digital disrupters' Netflix have surrendered to this game, sublicensing their original production, *Beasts of No Nation* (Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2015), to theatrical distributors in Britain and America for a modest cinema release alongside its launch on Netflix. As a result, the film was deemed eligible for awards consideration which helped the film gather momentum and profile during the awards season.

During my discussion with Edward Humphrey, he referred to the interdependent nature of this network and the continued role that theatrical plays at the epicentre of this longstanding model. Indeed, rather than treating the likes of critics, distributors and exhibitors as autonomous agents, these components are all guided by the structural rules and broader framework that the industry as a whole impose. This, Humphrey argues, creates a somewhat perpetual and circular process whereby the awards bodies when determining awards eligibility, for instance, ultimately adhere to the industry's rules and customs. In effect, this 'becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy,' Humphrey contends.[51] The problem, as Humphrey suggests, is that despite the way online distribution has disrupted the traditional distribution paradigm, the industry's perception of what constitutes an 'official' film release remains stagnant and resistant to change.[52] These logistical frameworks that the industry have created around film distribution, Humphrey claims, are an edifice of the industry's own making, clinging onto a perpetual and archaic belief in the value of the theatrical window in the face of sweeping change.[53] The awards, the critics, the distributors,

'they're all part of an ecosystem', Humphrey states, and to change the dynamics of that ecosystem takes more than technological innovation alone.[54] 'The whole industry needs to move its thinking on', Humphrey concludes.[55]

The temptation, then, for specialised distributors in a digital landscape is to bypass the expensive and limited route of theatrical exhibition and go direct to VoD. This is posited by Jon Silver and Frank Alpert who, whilst analysing the 'Digital Dawn' back in 2003, claimed that marginal filmmakers and distributors might secure a more stable future by circumventing the theatrical route altogether and going straight to online consumers.[56] This, however, runs the discernible risk of depriving the film of the profile and momentum needed to stimulate audience demand in a crowded marketplace. Indeed, as Fletcher states, without the launchpad of theatrical, 'where would the awareness be?'[57] In this respect, a non-theatrical release could be seen to have the undesirable effect of catapulting the film into a chasm where its minimal profile renders its presence on the virtual shelf as invisible to the consumer's eye. This point is articulated by Andrew Nerger who claims that releasing specialised content – he references foreign-language film in particular – direct to digital without any sort of theatrical launch can result in the film becoming 'very, very lost.'[58] Nerger continues, claiming that many foreign-language films online simply 'splutter and die and it's a shame because even though the platforms do open it up and people can see them, they need that theatrical awareness.'[59] Even Silver and Alpert who propose the potential of a theatrical-free future for niche content operators suggest that the challenge for distributors will be cutting through the 'clutter' or the 'digital chaos' of the online market.[60] The shortcoming of their argument, however, resides in their failure to identify the continued importance of the theatrical market and its significance as a launch-pad into a digital landscape of 'clutter' and 'chaos'.

So, without the exposure gained through national reviews, the prestige secured through awards recognition, and the word-of-mouth value that can result from theatrical distribution, how can a specialised release create the necessary demand to make wider access worthwhile? Theatrical, then, arouses conflicting sentiments for specialised distributors. As suggested, theatrical is broadly beneficial because of its role as a platform for profile and momentum. Indeed, as Julia Knight and Peter Thomas state, a theatrical release elevates the profile of any given release film, driving the film through the ancillary markets and helping to 'stimulate non-theatrical business'.[61] Also, the underlying economics of the theatrical sector make the theatrical market a potentially lucrative venture for distributors. As Humphrey claims, 'theatrical is still the place where the big revenues can be made and it's still the place where a lot of filmmakers and producers want to aim for'.[62] The costs involved in releasing theatrically, however, amplify the risks at stake, provoking a certain degree of anxiety amongst distributors.

Indeed, as discussed in the second chapter, the escalating costs of film distribution have created crippling conditions for specialised distributors. This very much remains the case today, placing specialised distributors under increasing pressure despite the lowering costs of digital prints and materials. As Hoile states, releasing a film theatrically 'in terms of finance costs a hell of a lot of money, both in terms of the manufacturing of the prints, the distribution of those

prints getting to cinemas, the printing and process of getting posters, trailers and POS [point of sale] and then the advertising and promotional efforts'.[63] In particular, the costs of advertising and marketing remain a costly outlay for distributors. In fact, Britain is one of the most expensive countries in the world when it comes to purchasing advertising space, such as television spots or physical, out-of-home spaces such as billboards.[64] Also, whilst the general costs of prints have come down, Sin argues that because of the structural nature of the distribution industry, the economic benefits are most felt by larger distributors such as Universal and Disney. As Sin explains, 'the difficulty for specialised distributors and specialised films is that they are usually releasing films on a relatively small print run, so they don't really feel the total benefit of that reduction in print cost'.[65] Elaborating on this point, Sin claims that 'there's a huge difference between the cost of five hundred DCPs [digital cinema packages] and five hundred 35mm prints [and whilst] there's still a difference for specialised distributors, it seems smaller because they're only creating maybe six to ten DCPs for a relatively small release.'[66]

Considering the importance of the theatrical window as a launchpad for films along with the continued costs involved in releasing theatrically, what emerges is an internal conflict within the distribution business. On the one hand, specialised distributors recognise the continued significance of the theatrical sector as a marketing platform and a means of building prestige and profile which can propel the film through other platforms. As Hoile states, you could look at the investment in theatrical as a 'marketing cost for other windows.'[67] On the other hand, the costs involved in theatrical releasing, along with the limited number of cinemas which are receptive to specialised films, means that more often than not the theatrical route becomes a costly loss-making exercise for specialised distributors – at least in an immediate sense. Indeed, both the costs associated with theatrical distribution and the sheer volume of content available is creating what Fletcher refers to as 'new lows in what you might do in the theatrical space' in terms of sales and performance.[68] Even so, Fletcher firmly contends that despite the new opportunities afforded by online distribution, the theatrical window is arguably more important now than ever before.[69] This discernible tension and conflict is duly captured by Humphrey who states that 'for the wrong film, pushing for cinematic release when you know it's not going to work can be the death of a film but you still have to go through that because you want to get to these other [markets]'.

Philip Hoile reinforces the importance of the theatrical window when discussing how a film's release strategy can have a residual impact on a film's financial value,

> I think there is definitely a financial value that gets changed if you've gone straight to digital because when you're trying to do a TV sale, for example, then people will obviously pay more for a film if they think the audience wants to watch it more, which will likely be the case if it has a higher profile because it had a theatrical release with a certain amount of awareness coming from a marketing and publicity campaign at that stage.[70]

In this respect, theatrical is a crucial means of leverage enabling distributors to command greater bargaining power over the value of their content. This, of course, is nothing new as the online value of content is simply integrated into this broader value system. Despite the financial

strain of theatrical distribution, the exposure and publicity that a theatrical run can generate is testament to the economic value of the theatrical model. The rapid growth of online distribution, therefore, has done little to loosen theatrical's stranglehold over the distribution business, despite the earlier claims to the contrary.

Whilst the process of creating exposure for films and generating value for content remains wedded to the theatrical sector, the theatrical market also assumes a newfound importance in building awareness of VoD platforms and demand for specialised services like Curzon Home Cinema. Discussing the reasons why distributors such as Soda have not launched their own VoD platforms and exhibitors such as Curzon have, Fletcher argues that the fundamental issue comes down to the way such companies are able to speak to potential consumers. As Fletcher states, 'we have no other way than through our social media to market a VoD platform' whereas Curzon, he argues, have a physical and 'experiential brand' to trade on.[71] Indeed, 'every time you go to a Curzon cinema you get a trailer for the platform, you get marketing for the platform all the time and there's going to be a high-crossover between a Curzon cinemagoer and a Curzon Home cinemagoer, so it's kind of in rival of that', Fletcher contends.[72] Speaking to *Variety* in a recent article, Philip Knatchbull of Curzon Artificial Eye argued that the company's grounding in theatrical exhibition gave Curzon Home Cinema a distinct advantage over its online competitors. 'Of course we have our blog and our Facebook page,' he said, 'but that's quite soulless. What's great about physical venues is that you're more connected to your community.'[73] Echoing the arguments of Fletcher, Knatchbull further reinforces the value of Curzon's 'experiential brand' for the online market in the following passage recited by *Telegraph* columnist Christopher Williams,

> He [Knatchbull] is fond of comparing Curzon's cinemas to Apple's wildly successful retail operation. The Apple Store is not only a place where the Silicon Valley giant sells iPhones, but an extension of its brand and design values, and a place for customers to get advice. Likewise well-designed cinemas that are nice places to eat and drink, and attend live events, will drive Curzon's expansion into the home, says Knatchbull.[74]

As this passage very much suggests, Knatchbull positions Curzon's 'experiential brand' as a way of driving the company's online platform, creating a sense of continuity between the theatrical network and its online counterpart.

Rather interestingly, though, is to what extent this dependence on theatrical serves to widen demand for specialised film and broaden awareness of the online Curzon brand, or whether this simply creates more opportunities for current Curzon patrons to access content when and where they like. Indeed, whilst Knatchbull talks about theatrical as a way of connecting 'to your community', there is a strong sense that by employing Curzon cinemas as a central platform to promote their on-demand service, they are simply preaching to the converted rather than broadening their potential audience. In effect, this creates a situation where those who use Curzon Home Cinema and are aware of the platform are most likely those who go to Curzon cinemas themselves. Considering how London-centric the Curzon brand is, this is particularly problematic for the broader awareness of the Curzon Home service and the

widening of interest towards specialised film in general. The same is also partly true of BFI Player which, alongside its membership base and affiliated magazine *Sight and Sound*, has one theatrical outlet in the BFI Southbank to promote the organisation's own VoD platform.[75] But, as Fletcher states, 'without something akin to the old BFI Regional Film Theatre network to act as an efficient marketing conduit, they will also face challenges of growing audiences for new releases on their platform.'[76] In this respect, the continued dependence on theatrical and the longstanding London-centric nature of specialised exhibition means that niche VoD platforms are ultimately operating from a very limited base. So whilst VoD theoretically widens access and reduces the London-centric nature of the specialised market, the interdependent relationship between specialised platforms like Curzon Home Cinema and their theatrical counterparts partly undermines this promise of access. Indeed, what we see is the renewed importance of a limited and largely London-based network of specialised exhibitors exerting influence over the take up of niche VoD platforms.

Netflix, Algorithms and the Myth of Widening Choice and Taste

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the rising popularity of SVoD services has been a driving force behind the growth of the wider on-demand market. This is particularly the case with Netflix and Amazon which have emerged as dominant players in the online media landscape. Discussing the BFI's subscription-based service, BFI Player Plus, Humphrey's earlier statement indicated that the behaviour of consumers and the appeal of a single, affordable price point emerged as influential factors behind the BFI's decision to launch a subscription service. Indeed, reiterating this point, Humphrey claimed that the costly price point of an average transactional fee can act as a disincentive for consumers.[77] Conversely, the SVoD model with a monthly, affordable membership fee granting immediate access to a wide range of content reflects a more attractive offer for consumers. For this reason, SVoD platforms such as Netflix and Amazon play a particularly important role in fostering greater interest in broader forms of content for two reasons. Firstly, because of the popularity of such services, specialised distributors have direct access to a large consumer base. More importantly, because of the single and affordable price point, there is a suggestion that consumers are more likely to venture beyond their comfort zone of taste without the high individual price points of transactional platforms like iTunes.

The problem, though, is that the diversity of choice on these sites does not have the breadth that one might hope. This is rooted in the way that Netflix and Amazon as leaders in the SVoD market are 'drawing up the drawbridge,' as Humphrey states, and reducing the volume of feature films available to subscribers.[78] The economics behind this decision are sound as popular platforms, such as Netflix, abide by a supply and demand paradigm where the films most watched by consumers influence future programming patterns. The problem, however, for the widening of access and demand of specialised film, as Humphrey argues, is that when such

a system of supply and demand is 'algorithmically driven', it becomes a reductive process.[79] Indeed, when programming 'your films based on what other people who have also watched that film have also watched, it takes you ultimately on a narrowing path rather than a diverging path.'[80] This is based on the principle that by listening to what the crowd has watched, algorithms swiftly bring you to the most popular and most consumed content. In this respect, by recycling content, algorithmic-driven platforms ultimately act as a disincentive to the widening of taste. Further elaborating on the role that algorithms play in delivering the 'Netflix experience' – or the 'on-demand experience' – will better articulate this point.

One of the guiding principles of online distribution and digital access is the newfound notion of consumer empowerment. No longer shackled by the 'old world' of content delivery and its commitment to scheduled programming, the new dawn of media distribution supposedly fosters a culture in which 'consumers become active participants in the process of navigating their entertainment choices.'[81] Armed with such power, 'Media consumers now have the ability', according to Chuck Tryon, 'to craft deeply personalized media environments, consuming texts based on personal tastes, interests, and politics.'[82] This notion of a personalised media environment, distinctive to the tastes and preferences of each individual viewer, is a particularly important concept in the culture of on-demand viewing. Indeed, Wheeler Winston Dixon claims that the most cherished and 'valuable commodity in the streaming world is personal information, a vast database of consumer preferences and desires' which equip streaming services with a distinct competitive edge.[83] Netflix, for instance, monitors its members' habits, taking into account what users have played, rated and searched for.[84] The following passage, for instance, details how Netflix have moved beyond the increasingly primitive star rating system to accumulate accurate audience data,

> Now, we stream the content, and have vast amounts of data that describe what each Netflix member watches, how each member watches (e.g., the device, time of day, day of week, intensity of watching), the place in our product in which each video was discovered, and even the recommendations that were shown but not played in each session. These data and our resulting experiences improving the Netflix product have taught us that there are much better ways to help people find videos to watch than focusing only on those with a high predicted star rating.[85]

This data is then processed through a series of sophisticated algorithms which produce a number of recommended films and shows, creating a library of content tailored to the distinct tastes and preferences of individual members.

The growth of the SVoD market has strengthened the need to harness the power of algorithms. This is particularly the case when it comes to the challenge of retaining members and maintaining audience interest. As a result, Netflix has adopted a rather elaborate and detailed approach to recommending content where they analyse and tag the content with different forms of metadata. This is performed by a group of analysts who are hired to assess the platform's content according to a range of certain criteria, taking into account numerous elements such as goriness, sexual content and romance.[86] Even the moral status of characters

are rated and tagged, along with a range of other features and elements.[87] Whilst these analysts each possess their own distinctive tastes, this system is designed to consciously eliminate those variations. As Xavier Amatriain of Netflix states, 'They obviously have personal tastes, but their job as an analyst is to be objective, and we train them to work that way.'[88] These ratings then form the basis for the many genres, or 'altgenres' as Netflix call them, which inform consumer choice and guide the platform's recommendations. In a recent study, writer and editor Alexis C. Madrigal discovered that Netflix has created nearly seventy-seven thousand of these altgenres;[89] testament to the platform's efforts to serve a multitude of tastes. This is also supportive of the platform's claims that each profile page is distinctive to each Netflix member. Even the seemingly more generic categories such as 'trending now' and 'recently added' are calibrated in terms of their relevance to the user's tastes and patterns. This gives the impression of a tailor-made streaming service that caters to the distinctive tastes of its members – people's very own library of content.

Whilst this process is clearly indicative of Netflix's technical and logistical prowess, it can also be seen as a conscious move towards the narrowing of consumer choice, despite the promise of user empowerment. Indeed, as Sarah Arnold claims, whilst 'Netflix's brand identity centers on notions of user choice, its algorithms work to actively negate choice.'[90] As already mentioned, one of the more distinctive features of the on-demand landscape is the widening of choice compared to linear and scheduled models of delivery. This, according to optimists such as Chris Anderson, serves to empower consumers who embrace their newfound freedom by browsing and exploring extensive catalogues of content before making an autonomous choice. However, in reality, there is little evidence to support this picture. Instead, what seems to emerge from this landscape of abundant choice is a portrait of consumer frustration as audiences struggle to reach a decision based on the volume of content available. This is more commonly known as the 'paradox of choice' and is discussed in greater lengths in the following chapter. Indeed, as Netflix themselves state, 'Consumer research suggests that a typical Netflix member loses interest after perhaps 60 to 90 seconds of choosing, having reviewed 10 to 20 titles (perhaps 3 in detail) on one or two screens.'[91] For Netflix, the algorithmic recommendation system serves to counteract this scenario by ensuring that each member finds 'something compelling to view,' whilst understanding 'why it might be of interest.'[92] With this in mind, human agency becomes a burden, 'something best surrendered so that the user is not overwhelmed with uncertainty and, in the worst case, indecision.'[93] Therefore, whilst Netflix members retain an element of choice and diversity, this system actually has the desired effect of narrowing consumer choice by compressing thousands of pieces of content into digestible libraries of relevant and user-specific material.

This can be seen as part of a broader technological shift away from a culture of search and discovery and towards push-orientated services that narrow choice through instant and targeted delivery. Writing for *The Atlantic,* Michael Hirschorn traces this shift to the transition of power between the browser model of engagement to the application model and the growth of portable media devices.[94] This, he argues, 'signals a radical shift from openness to a degree of

closed-ness'.[95] 'Smart phones in general, and the iPad more pointedly, are not driven by search', he argues.[96] Instead, these devices emphasise convenience, immediacy and the direct delivery of relevant and desirable content without the tedious process of searching. 'On a more conceptual level,' Hirschorn states, 'the move from the browser model to the app model (where content is more likely to be accessed via smartly curated "stores" like iTunes, Amazon, or Netflix) signals the first real taming of the Wild Digital West.'[97] Hye Jin Lee and Mark Andrejevic reinforce this point, stating that the push-orientated nature of this model serves 'to tame the less structured character of the Internet' by 'preselecting customized forms of information and service delivery.'[98] This move away from search and discovery is indeed supported by Netflix's claim that around 80 per cent of hours streamed on Netflix are influenced by the platform's algorithmic-determined recommendation system.[99]

Going back to Humphrey's point about algorithmic infrastructures being reductive, the problem with this approach is that whilst it counters the user's frustration, it also fosters a less active consumer culture, giving users only a moderate sense of control and autonomy. Discussing television interfaces in the digital age, Daniel Chamberlain suggests that content deliverers such as Netflix present the viewer with an implicit sense of control 'through the language of personalization' and the sleek and seductive nature of user interfaces.[100] However, whilst such interfaces appear to offer users with a newfound sense of empowerment, Chamberlain points out that most consumers are also wilfully ignorant of the way such interactions have, in fact, further empowered media providers by making our actions trackable.[101] Netflix are one such company that stand at the forefront of this 'intersection where Big Data and entertainment media intersect.'[102] As Andrew Leonard notes, 'Netflix doesn't know merely what we're watching, but when, where and with what kind of device we're watching. It keeps a record of every time we pause the action – or rewind, or fast-forward – and how many of us abandon a show entirely after watching for a few minutes.'[103] Inevitably, Netflix champions such levels of surveillance and data mining as a means of serving its members and catering to the personal idiosyncrasies of each individual user. The implications, however, are worrying for the integrity of consumer autonomy and user empowerment – the so-called bedrocks of on-demand culture.

Indeed, beneath the surface of Netflix's claims to consumer empowerment resides an infrastructural system designed to make users more susceptible to the type of narrowed, targeted programming that maintains user interest. As Leonard states, by knowing 'more about us than we know ourselves,' companies like Netflix are able to 'push us towards where they want us to go,' rather than where our own sense of curiosity might lead us.[104] This leads Leonard to question that 'at what point do we go from being happy subscribers, to mindless puppets?'[105] This statement echoes Arnold's argument that despite the rhetoric of empowerment, choice and individuality, Netflix's data mining and its algorithmic infrastructure actually 'strips away human agency, personality and character.'[106] In this respect, Arnold claims that 'the data mined by Netflix is not used to infer anything about the human agent interacting with the service'.[107] Instead, she claims that Netflix seeks to establish a relationship between the

actions and tastes of individual users and the digital identities that Netflix cultivates through its algorithmic system.[108] Advancing a similar point, Neta Alexander states that Netflix works by effectively recommending the same content to those who make similar viewing choices.[109] Whilst the results are both accurate and consistent, Alexander claims that such a system does not enable Netflix 'to intimately map our taste and personality' with any great human insight.[110] The human touch of curation and the impact this has on the concept of taste is considered in the following chapter.

Going back to Leonard's point about being pushed towards certain content, this algorithmic system of recommendation means that Netflix tends to steer users towards the genres and the content that fits their digital profile – what 'similar' people have watched. As a result, Netflix ends up 'ghettoizing the user in a prescribed category of demographically classified content.'[111] Put another way, Netflix actively discourages its members from venturing beyond their own safety net of taste in the hope that tailoring the service to the existing tastes and preferences of its members will retain their interest. In this respect, algorithm-based VoD platforms such as Netflix are less inclined to widen consumer taste. Instead, they are invested in the process of reinforcing preexisting taste, providing each user with more of the same material. As Alexander states, 'the more information you (consciously or unconsciously) provide Netflix, the less likely you will encounter any "great films" outside your comfort zone.'[112] Considering, therefore, that Netflix are reducing the volume of their catalogue (or 'drawing up the drawbridge' as Humphrey stated earlier), this is a worrying sign for the future of specialised film on popular platforms such as Netflix. Indeed, when driven by an algorithmic design, the content that invariably gets left by the wayside and which, as a result, are more likely to be withdrawn in a process of refinement, are those which historically have garnered limited appeal.

Consumer Navigation and the Architecture of Platform Interfaces

As suggested, the awareness and accessibility of specialised content on algorithmic platforms like Netflix is greatly compromised by the reductive nature of algorithms. Further to this, the visibility of content is also undermined by the way that algorithms influence consumer navigation of online platforms. Indeed, as already alluded to, there is a definite sense that platforms can hide and exclude, burying the more obscure content under a deluge of mainstream-orientated material. This is particularly important when we consider how influential VoD interfaces are in terms of arrangement and product positioning. For instance, take the following comment by Carlos Gomez Uribe of Netflix: 'Placement matters. The closer to the first position on a row a title is, the more likely it will get played. The higher up on the page a row is, the more likely it is to generate a play.'[113] As already mentioned in relation to personalised libraries, this is particularly problematic for specialised content bearing in mind how the immediacy of on-demand culture has dissuaded consumers from searching and discovering new content. In effect, the above comment from Carlos Gomez Uribe reinforces the way that algorithmic

platforms largely encourage consumers to stay within the confines of familiar taste. This importance on placement is also problematic for specialised content when we think about the general user interface for SVoD platforms like Amazon and Netflix which are increasingly commissioning their own original content. Inevitably, these platforms have a vested interest in pushing their own original content ahead of others, which is reflected on the home pages of such services. In this respect, specialised material is pushed down the hierarchy of content, hidden from the view of consumers whose eyes are inevitably drawn to the latest Netflix or Amazon production and the newest and most popular arrivals. In his article, 'The Politics of Content Aggregation', Patrick Vonderau even refers to the notion of 'digital fringes' or 'waste' as designators for 'invisible' content buried deep within a streaming platform's extensive catalogue.[114]

What is striking about the importance of placement in mediating consumer choice online is the way this echoes and reinforces pre-existing market patterns. For instance, consider the discussion in Chapter Two around home video and Daniel Herbert's argument that rental stores turned consumers into 'media shoppers' where they could exercise newfound forms of cultural autonomy.[115] Whilst this may have been true to a certain extent, this notion of consumer autonomy was severely compromised in a number of ways. Indeed, stock patterns and the variety of choice was often low whilst the physical means of display by retailers invariably placed those films which received saturated theatrical releases in an optimal position to capture consumer attention. As already argued, this largely remains the case online, despite the widening of market space. For instance, when talking about the crowded nature of the theatrical market, Edward Humphrey states that 'the same rules apply online as they do for theatrical release.'[116] Take iTunes, for example, where the films with the biggest marketing budgets tend to command an optimal position on the iTunes home page.[117] Going back to Andrew Nerger's earlier comment, he also states that platforms such as Amazon and Google will inevitably support and feature those titles by Disney and other leading brands 'because they've had theatrical, because they've had the push [and] because everybody wants to see them.'[118] Discussing what he calls the 'copyright-crisis era' and the cultivation of a commercially viable online market for media, W. Edward Steinmueller reinforces the continued dominance of prominent media brands by emphasising the prevailing conditions of the market,

> At present, the economics of physical media promotion and distribution make it highly desirable to focus on "hits" that will sell tens of thousands more copies than the average recording. Hits or "blockbusters" offer important economies of scale in promotion and important advantages in competing for shelf space in the physical media outlets where such shelf space is very limited (e.g., retail stores in which recorded music is only one department that must compete with other products for shelf space). There are some corresponding features in the online environment – the "home page" and various "departments" of an online media store will have limited space for display advertising with the likelihood that "best selling" media will be highlighted.[119]

Steinmueller does acknowledge the potential for discovery, stating that when 'the user begins to interactively state preferences and search for material […], the "shelf space" for storing media offerings has no inherent limits.'[120] As discussed, though, the passive culture of immediate access and the push-orientated nature of online delivery work to discourage this type of active engagement. Indeed, arguing against a radical change in consumer behaviour, Humphrey claims that when people enter 'an entertainment sofa frame of mind, they don't want life to be difficult – they want life to be really easy'.[121] For this reason, longstanding methods of product placement and tried and tested practices such as recommended programming continue to hold sway over consumers. This again is testament to the way online distribution remobilises certain patterns and practices of the past as Humphrey again acknowledges,

> I've been doing this in different forms for a long time and there's nothing different between an on-demand user face and an EPG [electronic programme guide]. They look prettier and they move in different ways but the same logic applies – what you put on page one of an EPG for TV channels is what gets watched. What you put on page one of your on-demand home screen is what gets watched.[122]

Such issues of visibility and positioning are one of the critical areas where digital aggregators purport to play a role.[123] Indeed, Patrick Vonderau claims that aggregators validate the notion of the long tail by pushing content further up the digital shelves of platforms such as iTunes.[124] Aggregation companies, such as The Movie Partnership and Under the Milky Way, serve an increasingly important role in helping smaller distributors and rights owners to navigate the digital terrain. Because of the volume of content available, the likes of iTunes, Google and Amazon do not have the resources to deal with smaller distributors and rights owners on a one-to-one basis.[125] As a result, aggregators collate a range of content from different distributors and rights owners and then meet with platforms like Amazon who are able to acquire an array of content from one single place. In this respect, aggregators act as intermediaries that streamline the migration of film online and 'oil the wheels between the distributors and the platforms'.[126]

As mentioned, part of the aggregator's role in supporting smaller distributors and rights owners to succeed online is helping them to maximise the visibility of their content. In some cases, particularly with content that has failed to accumulate much interest, the distributor and the aggregator might choose to reduce the price, giving the film more of a chance to be featured by the platform in a 'deals' or 'sale' section.[127] However, this aside, Andrew Nerger, when asked about the process of elevating the visibility of content, claims that ultimately 'you're down to the whims of the platforms.'[128] Unlike physical retailers where distributors can spend money to promote their film in store as a means of enhancing its placement, the digital market is 'driven by the tastemakers that work for the platform'.[129] The visibility of content, therefore, largely rests on whether the platforms like the film and whether they see a broad enough appeal for it. Given that the placement and visibility of content online is not directly governed by an exchange of money between the distributor and the platform, the digital landscape would appear to level the cultural playing field for specialised content. As both Nerger and Humphrey have already stated, though, the content that platforms consistently support and feature tends to overlap with those

films which have secured an established market profile through costly ventures like a saturated theatrical release and an extensive marketing campaign. The alternative for smaller distributors in a digital age is to exploit the potential of social media and encourage those involved in the film to promote it and spread the word. This might elevate the public awareness of the film and positively influence its positioning on platforms but, in truth, this is only likely to have a marginal impact without the involvement of high-profile figures that command the attention of millions.[130] So, without a strong and distinctive market profile, content is unlikely to secure a prominent editorial position on platforms such as iTunes. As suggested, this can result in platforms burying specialised and niche content online. Considering the influence that content positioning has on consumer choice, this is a worrying trend that impedes and discourages the wider access of specialised films on popular, digital platforms.

Broadband Infrastructure and the Public Perceptions of On-Demand

As discussed, algorithm-driven platforms like Netflix can heavily influence consumer choice, steering consumers away from more diverse forms of content. Whilst this acts as a disincentive to the widening of taste and interest in specialised film, there are also some logistical issues surrounding the delivery of broadband services in Britain which prevent or hinder on-demand access. The widespread provision of broadband providers and the declining costs of broadband and computer technology around much of the world and in Britain have lowered the barriers to online participation, with internet access now a daily occurrence for much of the population. The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics, for instance, show that as many as 45.9 million people had recently used the internet, making up nearly 90 per cent of the country's population.[131] Something which continues to plague public access to the internet, however, is the issue of broadband speeds and connectivity. David Sin makes this very point, stating that the country continues to suffer from 'terrible broadband connectivity and broadband speeds'.[132] This, Sin suggests, has delayed the development and wider take-up of VoD as a media platform because the practice of downloading and streaming content can be a frustrating and laborious exercise for many consumers.[133] Indeed, despite the apparent ease and convenience of access, delayed downloading times, intermittent buffering and momentary lapses in sound and image quality can sometimes characterise the online viewing experience. Whilst considerable strides have been made in the delivery of online content, such issues of performance are indicative of some of the early problems previously discussed which hindered the initial development of the on-demand market.

In particular, these issues of performance and broadband speed in Britain are directly related to geographical location. Indeed, whilst areas of urban density, such as London, Manchester and other British cities benefit from high broadband speeds, residents of rural areas are burdened with slower speeds and a general lack of broadband infrastructure. This is reinforced by the latest Ofcom report on broadband speeds and national internet connectivity.

Whilst this report reveals an increase in average broadband speeds compared to the previous year, this level of infrastructure is clearly channelled towards urban areas as a striking disparity emerges between the levels of speed and broadband connectivity in urban and rural parts of the country. For instance, whilst urban areas averaged 50.5Mbps (megabits per second) for downloading speeds, rural areas only averaged 13.7Mbps, pushing rural Britain to the fringes of the online world.[134] This disparity is particularly pertinent for this discussion of access to specialised films. Indeed, whilst online distribution has the apparent capacity to widen access to specialised content for underserved communities in rural parts of Britain, the truth is that those very communities are less likely to access content online with the same convenience as urban and semi-urban dwellers because of a lack of broadband provision. In this respect, poor levels of broadband infrastructure across large parts of Britain serve to impede any potential and gradual widening of interest in specialised film outside the capital.

Whilst broadband speeds and regional infrastructure represent one technological barrier for some consumers, audience perceptions of technology can also play an influential role in discouraging consumer access of online platforms. For instance, Edward Humphrey states that whilst VoD removes the physical barrier of location, online distribution arguably imposes another in terms of the consumer 'perception of digital as a platform.'[135] Humphrey elaborates on this point,

> So, for example, someone who isn't interested in video on demand, but lived in a rural town, you could say, 'great I've now got all these films available that never come near my local cinema.' Tick, that's one barrier removed. But I've added a barrier because I've said you've got to go onto your laptop to watch it or you've got to try and get it to work on your TV and you could be technophobic and go 'I hate all that stuff, I'm not going to bother'. So we've taken a barrier away and we've added one barrier.[136]

Philip Hoile also addresses this point, suggesting that the various VoD platforms and the numerous technological devices through which content can be accessed and viewed have created 'a very complicated landscape'.[137] Whilst Hoile claims that many are 'media savvy' and able to navigate this digital terrain, he states that other 'age groups and demographics' are not necessarily as knowledgeable about these access points.[138]

The consumer 'perception of digital as a platform' can also manifest in the problems consumers have when making sense of the burgeoning on-demand market. Such issues, as Edward Fletcher suggests, are rooted in the increasing fragmentation of the windowing which he describes as 'very confusing to the customer.'[139] For instance, one of the issues relates to terminology, as industry professionals grapple with the numerous strands of the on-demand service. This degree of uncertainty surrounding on-demand terminology emerged as a prominent theme during one of the debates at the Next programme at the Cannes Film Festival in 2014 – a centre for industry discussion and collaboration over new and innovative models and trends. Reflecting on this discussion, Michael Gubbins states that the adoption of broad labels such as VoD were seen to be misleading, concealing crucial differences in models and approaches from different platforms and distributors.[140] Hoile reinforces this point about the

range of on-demand models, stating that 'there's so many different variations of VoD, so whether it's SVoD (subscription VoD), TVoD (transactional VoD), or you get TV-VoD and IVoD for internet and all these different ways people in the industry talk about it.'[141] Echoing Gubbins' point, Hoile claims that such a range of commercial models has prevented the industry from settling on an agreed and consistent framework of terminology.[142] This has led to an inevitable crossover of language, with different terms used to describe the same practices and models, such as EST (electronic sell-through) and DTO (download-to-own) which, despite their interchangeable use, actually encapsulate slightly different on-demand models.[143] Importantly, this uncertainty also filters down to consumers.

Indeed, Hoile states that because the industry has yet to settle on the terminology for models of on-demand practices, this can cause an inevitable sense of confusion for consumers.[144] Fletcher even contends that the generic industry term 'VoD' has yet to gain wider currency amongst consumers. As Fletcher states, 'obviously you can't use a word like 'premium VoD' to a consumer – 'my mum is on premium VoD' – what on earth is that? What does it mean? It doesn't mean anything to anybody. VoD is not a word people use, so that's a problem.[145] This point is supported by Hoile who recalls one particular conversation,

> You always have to try and take a step back when you're thinking about the consumer and how they understand things. The other day I was talking to someone [who] asked for a release date and [I said] 'it's going to be on DVD and VoD' on a certain date and they said 'thanks, that's great. What's VoD?'[146]

Whilst terminology is a problem for consumers, pricing is another issue which can cloud the public's understanding of the on-demand market. Bringing the discussion back to the issue of demand, Fletcher provides an interesting perspective,

> Before you start measuring and questioning whether there's been a growth in demand, one has to establish whether the offer is clear […]. [The fact that] twenty million people are not watching Curzon Home Cinema can be one argument, but the other argument is do they fundamentally understand why something on Curzon Home Cinema is £10 as opposed to £2.99 on iTunes, as opposed to nothing more for their Netflix subscription. The difficulty is people don't really understand and […] it needs curating to help them understand.[147]

As Humphrey mentioned earlier, the rental or retail cost involved in accessing content online can seem prohibitively high from a consumer perspective. This is particularly the case when it comes to premium, day-and-date content which has a standard charge of £10 across different VoD platforms – comparable with the cost of a cinema ticket but without the 'superior' experience that theatrical exhibitors trade on. The issue for distributors and platforms such as Curzon Home Cinema is effectively articulating how this price discriminatory system works along with conveying to consumers why different films are designated different values. Discussing this issue with Philip Hoile, he suggested that consumers might approach the discrepancy in pricing in the same way they would approach the traditional hierarchical pricing system of physical media retail,

> I would like to think that the consumer would look at different pricing within somewhere like iTunes and view that in the same way they would if they were in HMV or Tesco or wherever there are different prices for similar products so they would make their own decision why it could be and that could be that one's a massive blockbuster studio release and the other […] is a kind of indie, low-budget film or it could be that one's a new release [and] one's a catalogue. So you have to assume there's a certain amount of knowledge in that.[148]

Whilst Hoile makes a credible point, he also acknowledges that there is no definitive proof that indicates how consumers think.[149] Without clarifying the on-demand landscape for consumers, though, the variable price structure of online content might act as a disincentive to the immediate growth of the VoD market. This might have a particular impact on the broader take up of premium day-and-date releases which have a significantly higher price point. Indeed, without articulating to the consumer why a premium release in particular is priced at £10, the comparatively high price point might dissuade consumers from renting day-and-date releases. Again, this issue of pricing perhaps reinforces the reasons behind SVoD's popularity, providing a clear and more transparent system for consumers, as well as the perception of better value for money.

Conclusion

As this thesis had made clear, there is a prevalent strand of thought that has come to dominate much of the discourse surrounding online distribution. This centres on the intrinsic, almost instinctive belief that online distribution will open new pathways of access to specialised film and a wider range of content. In response, this is seen to stimulate a profound sea change in consumer taste as people embrace the newfound diversity of choice, growing more receptive to diverse forms of content in the process. In articulating this vision, advocates of this optimistic perception invest in the sometimes implicit belief of digital disruption. This is rooted in the notion that digital change is weakening the dynamics of power by levelling the cultural playing field for niche content; that online distribution is disrupting longstanding practices and models of business which have dictated what content audiences can and cannot access; and that on-demand technology is empowering cultural consumers, leading to a greater diversity in consumer taste. As discussed, there is of course a certain degree of change brought about by the advent of online distribution. However, this chapter has challenged this utopian rhetoric by painting a more complex picture of the current digital landscape. Indeed, this complexity manifests itself in a number of infrastructural issues addressed throughout this chapter.

So, whilst online distribution has the potential to widen access and interest in specialised film, there are a number of barriers and issues which distributors and consumers have to navigate in order to realise the potential that access can bring. Importantly, as this chapter has made clear throughout, these barriers and issues are distinctly rooted in past practices and traditions, such as the parallels between the positioning of online content and the

physical means of display in the conventional video retail store; the continued reliance on the London network of cinemas to promote specialised on-demand services such as Curzon Home Cinema; and how the underlying costs of marketing and theatrical distribution retain their influence online. With these types of issues in mind, there is less a sense of disruption or change with online distribution and more a sense of continuity, as though history is repeating itself as the promise of wider access to specialised films is weakened by recurring patterns and practices. In this respect, it is worth repeating the words of Edward Humphrey who claims that online distribution 'doesn't really change some of the economics of the market and it doesn't change some of the practices and the behaviours of the market.'[150] The following chapter reinforces this sense of continuity by providing a detailed look at the SVoD service MUBI. What MUBI clearly demonstrates is how the culture of specialised film is relocated online. Interestingly, this is not achieved through a radical reinvention of film exhibition. Instead, this sense of relocation, rather than reinvention, is achieved by adopting and adapting longstanding models, practices and approaches which have characterised the delivery of films, particularly in the specialised sector, for decades.

Chapter Five
'Your Online Cinema, Anytime, Anywhere': MUBI and the Online Culture of Specialised Film

Introduction

This chapter provides an in depth analysis of the on-demand platform MUBI which emerged in 2007 during a decisive period of digital evolution. In the wake of some high-profile casualties such as Movielink, the notion of on-demand access remained a marginal practice in the landscape of media consumption. The arrival of established digital players in the shape of Apple and Amazon, however, signalled a period of thriving development. The significance of this period was discussed in the third chapter with the contrasting fortunes of the studio-led Movielink and the newfound influence of established and innovative digital brands serving as a symbol of the changing landscape. In keeping with the utopian narrative of democratic change, this apparent loosening of the stranglehold which conglomerate-owned distributors imposed over the distribution and exhibition market was seen as a means of levelling the cultural playing field – a utopian rhetoric which Chapter Four largely argued against. In the context of MUBI's birth, the significance of this period stems from its influence in driving the concept of on-demand access forward, helping to transform a marginal practice into a viable market. In certain respects, MUBI stood at the forefront of this change. Reciting a personal anecdote that inspired the birth of MUBI, or The Auteurs as it was known at the time, the platform's founder, Efe Cakarel, provides the following statement,

> It was eight years ago in 2007. I was sitting in a café in Tokyo. I wanted to watch a particular movie, "In the Mood for Love", by Wong Kar-wai but I could not find a service that allowed me to watch it – and here I was in the third largest film market in the world. The consumer experience I started to observe was already shifting at the time. We were already watching long form content TV series on YouTube. And yet in a place like Japan where the broadband speed was incredibly high, people were really media savvy and device savvy, there was not a single platform that I could watch a movie. So I started looking at the opportunity.[1]

What is interesting about this statement is that it reveals how MUBI emerged in response to the longstanding issue of access to specialised films which has characterised the distribution landscape for decades. Given the focus of this thesis, this makes MUBI a rather interesting and pertinent subject for discussion.

Through the cultivation of the platform's distinct brand identity, MUBI has positioned itself at the forefront of the online specialised market. Unlike other VoD platforms such as Netflix which strive to cater for a broader range of consumers, MUBI attracts the attention of a 'discerning' clientele with an active interest in highbrow cultural engagement. This is evident in the following statement from Elizabeth Evans and Paul McDonald who claim that MUBI

'distances itself from the casual movie consumer to make self-conscious appeals to cinephilia.'[2] For £5.99 a month, members gain access to MUBI's distinct service – a service captured in the following passage from the MUBI website,

> MUBI is a curated online cinema bringing you cult, classic, independent, and award-winning movies. Available in over 200 countries around the globe and on multiple devices, a subscription to MUBI is a passport to the world of cinema. Each day our film experts introduce you to a great film, and you have a whole month to watch it. That's 365 extraordinary films a year curated by MUBI.[3]

This chapter demonstrates how MUBI deviates from the path of empowerment, choice and freedom that supposedly characterises on-demand culture. This sense of deviation is articulated in a number of ways, many of which are alluded to in the above statement. Much of the chapter deals with the practices that underpin the platform. There is a particular emphasis on the company's curatorial approach to content and the platform's commitment to the thirty films, thirty days model where members can only access a rotating catalogue of thirty different films in any given month. This chapter also considers the role that social media plays in fostering a thriving community of likeminded film enthusiasts. As discussed, the integrated social experience that MUBI nurtures intersects with notions of taste, community and identity, countering the notion of a private and reclusive culture of media consumption. Discussing the significance of these practices against the broader backdrop of on-demand culture helps to build a detailed portrait of the platform. Like the previous chapter, this portrait demonstrates that rather than signalling disruption or change, what we see in the case of MUBI is, in fact, a sense of continuation between past and present practices.

Indeed, despite the company's commitment to the virtues of digital delivery (as discussed shortly), the platform adopts and reworks a number of practices and traditions which have shaped older models of linear media delivery, particularly theatrical exhibition. Whilst this commitment to long-established practices might seem strangely out of step with the apparent shift towards empowerment and choice, MUBI's strategy is not driven by an anti-democratic impulse. Instead, what becomes clear throughout this chapter is the way that MUBI mobilise and rework certain practices because they support the platform's broader ambition to stimulate a more diverse film culture. This chapter, therefore, demonstrates how MUBI have negotiated many of the challenges that were discussed in the previous chapter regarding the difficulty of stimulating greater public engagement towards a wider spectrum of films in a volume-heavy digital market. This discussion is guided by my conversation with MUBI's Co-Head of Brand and Marketing, Amy Basil, who provides a number of interesting observations on the platform's practices and the company's underlying philosophy. As a starting point, we can consider how MUBI's philosophy and the emphasis on creating an integrated environment of curated content is rooted in the changing relationship between value and access.

‘Creating an Integrated Environment’

Discussing MUBI’s philosophy, Amy Basil identifies the broader changes in the market as a driving force behind MUBI’s curatorial approach to online delivery,

> Looking at where we are today in a digital landscape where everything is instantly available […] then availability of content – access – is no longer the reason why people watch something. So, there’s something really radical happening. You have, previous to now, theatrical distribution or any part of the funnel where the value of a piece of content was associated to its scarcity, to how limited it was. So, a film was worth £15-£20, the first weekend it was out. Four weeks later, it’s worth £5-£8. Few weeks after that, it’s worth X, Y, Z. So, the value is connected to its limited availability, which is an arbitrary value system that is placed on top of content. Now with everything being available […] accessibility is no longer where the value is. The fact that something is only available in some places or other places is not really where the value is. Actually, the value is: what is that film?[4]

Reinforcing this point, Basil states that the value of content to the consumer is no longer about ‘scarcity monopolies anymore or window monopolies.’[5] Instead, the value derives from the contextual framework that surrounds the film and makes the film distinctive and desirable for consumers in a volume-heavy market. Basil makes this point in relation to the practice of piracy,

> The reason that people illegally watch and stream films online is not because they went to a URL and saw a long list of blue hyperlinks and said ‘that hyperlink looks great.’ They are there because someone wrote a review about it, because their friend told them it was good and because it was advertised to them and any other number of reasons that bring people to those URLs.[6]

For Basil and MUBI, then, the importance is not to treat the process and practice of content delivery as a simple means of facilitating access. Instead, the emphasis is on the notion of building and ‘creating an integrated environment’ for film where reviews, interviews and curatorial insight build consumer engagement with content.[7] As explored shortly, this is part of the underlying philosophy that shapes MUBI’s practice – one which, as already alluded to, deviates from the standard means of delivery and presentation that characterises the on-demand landscape. Indeed, Basil reinforces the difference between MUBI and other VoD platforms when she implies a certain sense of responsibility towards the content they provide and the members they serve. For instance, alluding to the monotonous nature of VoD interfaces and the seemingly endless catalogue of online content, Basil suggests that a number of online platforms simply imitate the physical means of retail display by presenting online content like a ‘DVD cover in the midst of three and a half thousand other DVD covers’.[8] For Basil, however, ‘that’s not a good case for the user, that’s not a good case for the filmmaker [and] it’s not doing right by the film’.[9] In effect, this approach is simply ‘saying this is a supermarket shelf’ of film, an approach that Basil states is ‘completely at odds with what cinema is.’[10] As already suggested, MUBI take a very different approach, one that epitomises the company’s curatorial philosophy behind the practice of on-demand delivery. As discussed shortly, part of this approach and

philosophy is rooted in the platform's thirty films, thirty days paradigm. Firstly, though, we can better define MUBI's 'integrated' approach when taking into account the platform's emphasis on catalogue programming and older films. In doing so, we can elaborate on Basil's claim that the value in a digital landscape now resides in the wider context that helps define the question, 'what is that film?'

Whilst MUBI has more recently ventured into the arena of exclusive and premium programming (as discussed shortly), older catalogue content remains the backbone of the service. This is particularly evident through the platform's reliance on the canon of classical Hollywood filmmakers and celebrated European auteurs – the type of which have been the mainstay of specialised film culture – along with some lesser known names. For instance, over the past few months during the writing of this thesis, MUBI have screened films by the likes of Godard, Bergman, Wyler, Rivette, Capra, Hitchcock, Varda, Żuławski, Schlesinger, Minghella and Huston, to name only a few. In this respect, MUBI's emphasis on catalogue programming clearly works to counter Wheeler Winston Dixon's rather dismissive claim that the on-demand landscape – and the digital future more broadly – serves to diminish and undermine the history of film. 'What about all the classic films that aren't available as streaming video?', he says.[11] 'In essence, they will cease to exist.'[12] When discussing the broader shift towards digital, Dixon even argues that in the digital age, 'Everyone is headed full force into the future, and no one has time for the past.'[13] Conversely, as outlined in the introductory chapter, the likes of Dina Iordonova proposed a more optimistic picture for the digital landscape of on-demand viewing. For Iordonova, rather than disposing of film history, online distribution has the obvious potential to serve a historical purpose with 'unseen treasures of the celluloid era' merely a few clicks away.[14] Considering MUBI's commitment to catalogue programming, Iordonova's conviction seems the more accurate.

MUBI's efforts to revive rather than dispose of film history is particularly evident when we consider how the platform not only widens access to such canonical works, but also assumes an active role in fostering greater levels of engagement with film. This is achieved through the platform's emphasis on creating what Basil calls 'an integrated environment [or] world [of] stories, reviews' and other contextual features that bring those films to life.[15] The 'our take' feature, for instance, provides a brief but evocative description of each film on the platform. Unlike the more traditional synopsis, however, the 'our take' feature provides members with some form of rationale behind the film's selection on the platform along with the topical, cultural or historical significance of the film. For instance, as part of a D. W. Griffith two-part programme featuring *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), the service provided the following descriptions,

> D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* is, pure and simple, one of the most troubling pieces of film history: cinematically groundbreaking and ideologically indefensible. But it must be seen and dealt with by every new generation of cinephiles – cinema's first epic, and its original sin.[16]

> In response to the uproar caused by *Birth of a Nation*, D.W. Griffith set out to make what's now regarded as the cinema pioneer's greatest work: *Intolerance*, a non-linear epic, a high-

> point of the silent era, the biggest movie that had ever been made, and a breakthrough in film storytelling.[17]

In effect, these types of descriptions perform two crucial functions. Firstly, in keeping with the traditions of specialised film culture, the 'our take' feature serves to reinforce the process of canonising those films and filmmakers deemed important by the gatekeeping community. Evocative terminology such as 'groundbreaking' and 'breakthrough', for instance, have a certain currency and cultural value within the culture of specialised film, emphasising the significance of the film and the filmmaker. Secondly, in capturing this significance, the 'our take' feature serves an educational purpose, providing members with a contextual frame of reference – a lens through which to view and interpret the film. In this case, references are made to Griffith's troubling ideological vision of American history and the pioneering nature of his craft. In providing such a frame of reference, the 'our take' feature demonstrates MUBI's commitment to fostering a greater understanding of film language whilst engaging its members in the richness of film history. In this respect, these accompanying descriptions can be seen to mirror the function of programme notes (such as those found in the Film Society's monthly programme), or even the descriptive labels that accompany the exhibition of historical artefacts in a museum – a fitting analogy when we shortly consider MUBI's curatorial approach to programming in more detail.

The 'our take' feature is also supplemented by MUBI's online magazine, *Notebook*, which also serves an educational function. Consisting of a range of features, interviews, reviews, think pieces, news and festival reports, *Notebook* often elaborates through such features on the topical trends and themes which inform MUBI's programming decisions. For instance, coinciding with a retrospective programme of films celebrating the work of Jacques Rivette, *Notebook* produced an article 'paying tribute to the great, but too-often-forgotten' filmmaker.[18] Other features and articles also regularly engage with trends or topics from the wider world of film, such as a detailed and thoughtful piece on the work of Theodoros Angelopoulos coinciding with a New York retrospective of the late Greek filmmaker. This wider engagement with film is also expressed through regular reports and reviews from renowned international film festivals such as Cannes and Locarno. Through such reports on wider topical trends across the landscape of film, MUBI strengthens its reputation as a critical commentator on the current state of film culture. Furthermore, *Notebook* also assumes an active role in educating its members on a range of film-related topics, issues and critical trends, fostering a greater appreciation of international film in the process.

This emphasis, then, on context and education through both the 'our take' feature and the online magazine, *Notebook*, serves a critical purpose in delivering what we might call 'the MUBI experience.' This, as mentioned earlier, centres on the premise that content delivery is not merely defined as the facilitation of access to content – we might say a rather primitive transactional contract between provider and consumer. Instead, MUBI curate the content they deliver, creating a contextual framework around each film with the aim of enriching each member's experience of the platform and refining their understanding of the films. As discussed

shortly, MUBI also programme more recent and exclusive content which, like the older content on the platform, also receives this editorial treatment. This approach, however, is particularly important for catalogue content because, as Basil states, the curatorial approach that MUBI takes is not about trading on the appeal of exclusive or recent content. Instead, when operating in a market where films are instantly available to the consumer, both in a legal and an illegal sense, the importance of this approach is 'about taking something that's not exclusive and making that exciting for someone again'.[19] As discussed, this is achieved through the way MUBI curate content through the 'our take' feature and their online magazine, creating an integrated digital environment for film. 'It's about discovery, it's about context, it's about the richness of content that's around that film', states Basil, reinforcing the importance of this curatorial and educational approach.[20] In this respect, MUBI is indeed more than a content delivery platform. Instead, the service strives to build what Basil calls a 'house of cinema'.[21]

Before elaborating on the significance of MUBI's curatorial paradigm of thirty films in thirty days, it is important to note how this approach also relates to the broader debate around access and demand. In the introductory chapter, the likes of David Sterritt and Theodoros Panayides when discussing the home entertainment market and the impending rise of digital technology, addressed the prospect of a more cine-literate viewing culture. Sterritt, for instance, argued that the widening of access to a greater diversity of films would open the door to greater levels of understanding and cine-literacy than ever before.[22] Similarly, Panayides argued that greater access to films from the distant past would serve to stimulate curiosity towards film history.[23] The issue with these statements, however, is that they seem to imply that access alone is enough to cultivate a more receptive viewing culture towards specialised film and revered works from the past. In fact, as discussed in the previous chapter, transforming the availability of a product does not necessarily transform its take up or appeal. This is particularly the case when you have a cultural product, like specialised film which, in the past, has had limited opportunities to nurture a broader structure of public support or demand. Consider this statement, then, from Cakarel who addresses the notion of MUBI's (or The Auteurs as it was at the time) desired audience,

> Our goal is simply to become an on-line destination point for film lovers – anybody who loves film. The Auteurs is a place for cinephiles as well as those just beginning to become interested in film. From our private beta to the early days of our public beta, the community we have attracted is varied but all have one thing in common: an ardent passion for film. We hope in the future to attract those who haven't yet found their passion but are willing to try. We are providing a varied experience: come to watch, come to read, come to discuss, come to discover. We have built a social network platform that spreads interest in and awareness of smaller films to a wider audience; and our platform gives our audiences a wide range of activities that can cater to different levels of interests and involvement in film, and to encourage them to expand both.[24]

The importance here is on the emphasis that Cakarel places on the platform's active engagement with spreading 'interest in and awareness of smaller films to a wider audience'.

This endeavour, Cakarel suggests, is rooted in the platform's emphasis on providing a layered cultural service, one in which the practice of content delivery is not treated as a simple means of facilitating access. Instead, the emphasis is on the cultural, educational and social experience of film – a place to watch, read, discuss and discover as Cakarel states.

As discussed later, the practice of discussion and engagement with other MUBI members is made possible by the platform's integration of social media conventions. For now, though, we have seen that the process of discovery is predicated on the platform's tendency to weave a cultural tapestry of context that can enrich members' understanding of film. This is seen as a means of fostering greater levels of engagement in a way that access alone cannot achieve. Indeed, when discussing this issue with Amy Basil, she reinforced these very doubts over the role that access alone plays in stimulating demand and interest towards specialised content. 'Everyone was promised this big idea with the internet that all you needed was access. Just access was going to be enough and some algorithms. So good search functions and access. That's what people needed. But actually, in truth, that's really not what people needed', Basil claims.[25] In order to drive a cultural agenda that achieves 'some kind of cultural opening up of cinema', as Basil puts it, then a curatorial and editorial approach to content has to take centre stage, Basil argues.[26] Only then can platforms like MUBI foster a more approachable environment for consumers that might perceive the content MUBI show as somehow different and 'not for them.' MUBI's emphasis on film education, then, and building an editorial framework around the films they programme is partly indicative of the company's understanding that access alone does not necessarily stimulate an immediate interest towards a wider range of content. Instead, as MUBI demonstrates through both the 'our take' feature and the online magazine, *Notebook,* consumers need content curated for them, particularly in a digital landscape where copious amounts of content roam free.

The Paradox of Choice and the Mediation of Cultural Taste

Curation is a crucial piece of terminology in MUBI's lexicon. Derived from the Latin phrase 'to care,' curation and 'this idea of caring for the films' is something that Basil describes as 'fundamental' to MUBI's philosophy.[27] This very human process of care and cultivation is seen in stark contrast to the automated, algorithmic-driven process that partly defines the Netflix approach to content delivery. But whilst MUBI's emphasis on curation means to care and nurture, curation also involves a process of selection, refinement and distinction. In effect, curation in the context of content delivery means selecting what to programme and what not to programme. This process of selection is particularly important to MUBI because of the platform's distinctive model, granting its members limited access to thirty films in thirty days. This marks an interesting departure from the standard practice of VoD platforms and the broader essence of what Chuck Tryon refers to as 'on-demand culture' – an evocative phrase that encapsulates the shifting landscape of content distribution. In particular, the essence of on-

demand culture rests on the notion of consumer empowerment. Indeed, no longer shackled by the limited and linear nature that characterises traditional forms of media delivery, on-demand culture is seen as granting consumers with immediate access to a greater range of media content. Like Gubbins states, 'The early narrative of digital change was of a democratising trend away from 'gatekeepers' restricting choice.'[28] This has resulted in a more autonomous cultural landscape where 'consumers become active participants in the process of navigating their entertainment choices.'[29] As Tryon states, 'Media consumers now have the ability to craft deeply personalized media environments, consuming texts based on personal tastes, interests, and politics.'[30]

The previous chapter discussed this notion of 'personalized media environments' through the popular SVoD platform Netflix and their emphasis on an algorithmic approach to online delivery. Here, by adopting a rather elaborate approach to tagging and categorising content, Netflix have devised a sophisticated system that tailors specific content to the distinctive tastes and preferences of each and every member. In this respect, Netflix strives to provide members with their very own library of content, reinforcing this notion of a personalised media environment. With access to such a wealth of content, the everyday reality of VoD platforms like Netflix does indeed reflect a notable move away from the restriction of choice that characterised older forms of content delivery, such as theatrical exhibition or broadcast programming. However, this notion of cultural democratisation is somewhat weakened by the reductive nature of algorithms. Indeed, as discussed in the previous chapter, whilst the digital landscape invites the prospect of a more active and autonomous form of consumer engagement, research suggests that audience behaviour is not entirely supportive of this claim. Rather than embracing the newfound freedom to roam across a seemingly boundless landscape of content, consumer research suggests that 'the typical Netflix member loses interest after perhaps 60 to 90 seconds of choosing'.[31] In response, the algorithmic approach to recommending content reflects the need to prevent consumer frustration by steering members towards the content that best suits their taste. Netflix, then, would seem to epitomise the paradoxical state of on-demand culture – one that seeks to somewhat narrow the variety and volume of content available to consumers whilst also providing some sense of empowerment through a renewed spectrum of choice.

In certain respects, MUBI also operates on this binary model. Unlike Netflix, however, MUBI places a greater emphasis on the practice of narrowing consumer choice. In fact, despite Netflix's approach to narrowing the volume of material and influencing what members watch, Cakarel is highly critical of the Netflix experience. For instance, Cakarel argues that the current culture of on-demand access means 'we are drowning under a deluge of content'.[32] 'Think about your Netflix experience and how frustrating it is', he says, 'how long it takes you to find a film that you want to watch'.[33] Instead of feeling empowered, Cakarel argues that the volume of content weakens the consumer's ability to make an informed decision. 'This is the paradox of choice,' he states, a phrase coined by the American psychologist Barry Schwartz.[34] From buying clothing to broader lifestyle choices that impact on people's careers, friendships and

romantic ventures, Schwartz paints a portrait of conflicting human behaviour in the face of infinite choice. For Schwartz, whilst the absence of choice creates an oppressive climate of conformity, the liberation of choice and the growth of consumer autonomy comes with its own problems. The escalation of choice, he argues, acts like a form of paralysis as the multitude of options becomes oppressively overwhelming. 'At this point, choice no longer liberates, but debilitates', he argues.[35] In the context of online content delivery, then, the escalation of content that consumers can instantly access is seen by Cakarel to serve a debilitating function. Indeed, choice no longer empowers the consumer, but paralyses. In this respect, the thirty films, thirty days paradigm that MUBI follows is part of the platform's strategy to counter this sense of frustration – to cut though the noise by limiting what members can access, offering a more direct and curated service that liberates the consumer from the taxing and tedious nature of choice.

Whilst MUBI's commitment to their thirty films, thirty days model stems from Schwartz's notion of the paradox of choice, this approach is also rooted in the longstanding values of editorial branding – a trusted source that helps consumers navigate the cultural terrain whilst articulating a certain value-driven perspective. As Basil claims, 'people buy into brands and newspapers because they want that newspaper's viewpoint on something. That's what we're doing.'[36] Basil reinforces this point in relation to the underlying appeal and popularity of Twitter. 'Why do you follow someone on Twitter? Because you like their point of view, because they cut out the bullshit and give you their perspective on it. That's all we're doing', she argues.[37] The utopian narrative of digital disruption, as outlined at various point throughout this thesis, has a tendency to paint a revolutionary change in consumer behaviour. The earlier discussion, however, regarding the continuing importance of context and discourse demonstrates that immediate access to more content does not necessarily change how consumers make decisions. 'This notion of editorial line and context,' Basil states, and 'all of that stuff we fell out of love with for ten years, fifteen years maybe' has been revived and reclaimed in a digital landscape where unfiltered and unfettered choice threatens to disempower the consumer.[38] Rather fittingly, considering how curation and editorial branding has been revived, Cakarel likens MUBI's approach to the 'staff picks' section that used to mediate consumer choice at the increasingly obsolete local video rental store: 'You go in there and you don't care how many thousands of titles they have, you only go for the staff picks – the 30 titles they choose – and there's always something there that you like. That's what MUBI is; we are a trusted advisor.'[39] Reinforcing the essence of MUBI's strategy, Cakarel emphasises the company's commitment to this curated and editorial approach. 'We select our titles one by one, we're about quality not quantity' he proclaimed in an interview with Ruby Cheung.[40]

So, whilst MUBI takes an active approach to narrow the range of content, this not only emerges in response to the paradox of choice, but is also seen as a necessary means of raising the perceived standards of quality. But who moderates this vague conception of quality? MUBI's programming choices are determined by a select group of in-house programmers. As suggested earlier, the films selected are indicative of what MUBI's programmers class as

valuable or important in a cultural and historical sense. In this respect, personal taste forms a guiding influence in shaping the variety of content on MUBI. This is less the case when it comes to some of MUBI's catalogue programming which, as suggested earlier, is largely guided by the surrounding discourse and canonical nature which has shaped the reverence of works like Griffith's *Intolerance*. The inclusion of newer, more exclusive content, however, along with some 'forgotten treasures' of the past are guided by the tastes and preferences of MUBI's very own 'elite cadre of would-be cinematic tastemakers.'[41] In keeping with the dichotomous pattern of practice that guides the conflicting methods of Netflix and MUBI, it is interesting to note that the personal tastes of Netflix analysts are actively suppressed. Indeed, as discussed in the previous chapter, the Netflix recommendation system is knowingly objective as the personal tastes of Netflix analysts are suppressed to ensure the diverse tastes of its members are served. In contrast, MUBI relies on the apparent expertise of its programmers, drawing on their own personal perspectives of good taste. For this reason, MUBI can be seen to assume the longstanding role of cultural tastemaker, implying a return to the taste-based traditions that characterised the programming criteria of specialised exhibitors.

In the second chapter, we considered how the Film Society's programming reflected the personal tastes of its founders. This was again evident with the likes of Continental's Charles and Kitty Cooper and the Academy's George Hoellering and Ivo Jarosy who, in pursuit of cultural and artistic value, expressed a blatant disregard for audience demand. As Hoellering and Jarosy claimed, 'we try to select films on artistic grounds', meaning ''audience potential' plays really no part at all in our selection policy'.[42] Whilst MUBI's programming decisions are shaped by a similar, taste-based and cultural-driven agenda, this is not to say that MUBI are averse to listening to their members. Indeed, in a recent interview, Cakarel made this point,

> We use a lot of data. We use a lot of data because we have more than 7 million people on the platform globally right now. They are giving statistically significant feedback on what they want to watch. Based on what they rate, what they add to their watch lists, what they become a fan of, what they actually watch or share…[43]

What this suggests, then, is a programming strategy that emphasises curatorial autonomy whilst retaining an acute insight into the preferences of its members. This is particularly evident when we consider how MUBI draws on a range of international data to tailor the service to the broader tastes and cultural traditions of each country. For instance, whilst the Turkish market shows a preference for Middle Eastern dramas, the Scandinavian region has a tendency to favour anime.[44] Whilst these cultural preferences are reflected in the programming choices for each country, there is a sense that like the loyal patrons of Hoellering and Jarosy's Academy, MUBI members trust the company's curatorial brand and the taste-based judgements of its programmers. In this respect, the way that programming decisions are knowingly shaped by the 'refined' tastes of MUBI's programmers suggests a return to the taste-based traditions that once typified the specialised sector's approach to programming.

Such parallels between the past practices that defined the specialised sector and MUBI's own distinct approach is further evidenced in the way MUBI curate and arrange their

content according to certain thematic trends. Indeed, discussing the platform's curatorial approach to programming, Cakarel makes direct reference to the influence of theatrical, repertory exhibition,

> We programme in a fairly classical manner; like a traditional independent cinema we might run a Fellini retrospective over a month or when a director wins Cannes, we'll celebrate by screening their previous work. But we're also incredibly nimble with our programming so we can be reactive to current events, [such as] when an icon passes on or if it's Stanley Kubrick's birthday we [can] screen a film that makes sense. For us, the programming is really about creating context and backing up our choices; why is this film interesting?[45]

During the writing of this thesis, for instance, MUBI arranged a number of programmes committed to a range of social and cultural trends, such as a series of films by American filmmaker Kelly Reichardt entitled 'American Outsider: The Films of Kelly Reichardt' and a 'Cannes Takeover' coinciding with the Cannes Film Festival in 2016, screening a number of influential films from the festival's past. As discussed earlier, these programming decisions are supported by the 'our take' feature and often by the platform's magazine, *Notebook*, which provides supplementary interviews and features which further contextualise MUBI's curation. These contextual frameworks that shape MUBI's thematic and curatorial programming are particularly important when it comes to screening more mainstream-orientated work.

Whilst MUBI largely focuses on specialised content, the platform is not averse to screening the type of work that would be more commonly associated with mainstream and populist culture. Recent content deals with Sony Pictures Television and Paramount, for instance, are testament to MUBI's conscious attempts to widen the platform's appeal by embracing a broader spectrum of work. Placing a further emphasis on quality, Cakarel provides the following statement regarding the platform's programming policy,

> It's quite simple: we want to show the best films. This may mean a mainstream film or something that was never distributed in a country; it may mean a festival hit or a recent DVD release. We want to fill our library with a breadth of great cinema, emphasising both the known and unknown, the established and emerging, the distributed and undistributed.[46]

The implicit point here is that MUBI's programming decisions are less determined by the types of cultural labels that designate whether a film is supposedly 'mainstream' or 'arthouse.' Instead, the emphasis is on the perceived quality of the film, regardless of its cultural reputation. Amy Basil makes a similar point when discussion MUBI's approach to content,

> We're really agnostic about the types of films that we show. We'll show big films, small films, unknown films, famous films, films that people hate, films that are universally reviled, films that people love. Really, the only criteria for us is that it's got something distinct about it; it's got something going on; there's something to say about it.[47]

Whilst Basil largely reinforces Cakarel's implicit point about dismissing cultural labels, the important distinction here is that programming decisions are not determined by quality alone. As

Basil suggests, the underlying criteria is that each film exhibits something distinctive – something that the editorial team can build around the film in order to rationalise its inclusion. For instance, in keeping with the educational and editorial approach which, as already discussed, partly defines MUBI's service, Basil provides the following example where thematic programming, such as double or triple-bills, take on renewed importance,

> Maybe you do a double-bill and you do the good adaptation of a novel and a shit adaptation of a novel – or what's understood to be a shit adaptation of a novel – and you put those two films side by side and you put them in those contexts and it tells a story between the two of them and one's maybe really entertaining and one's more educational or whatever.[48]

So, the underlying philosophy driving MUBI's brand and the platform's approach to content delivery comes back to this well-defined process of building context – of creating a contextual framework around each and every film that articulates the significance behind the film's inclusion and provides a context through which members can interpret, read and appreciate the film. In certain respects, Basil's statement is similar to the following passage from *The Place of the Audience* by Jancovich, Faire and Stubbings. Indeed, drawing on the comments of the then director of the Broadway cinema in Nottingham, Adrian Wootton, Jancovich, Faire and Stubbings identify the importance of thematic and contextual programming in the specialised sector,

> Wootton was also keen to point out: 'There's certainly no way that we're in competition with the city centre mainstream cinemas … I just can't conceive of us showing *Jurassic Park* for instance.' However, he then qualifies this remark in an interesting way: 'not unless we were doing a season on special effects films, or we got Steven Spielberg over to do an introduction to it'. It is therefore not so much the films that distinguish the Broadway from the mainstream but rather the context within which they are placed. *Jurassic Park* might be shown, but only within a context that defined it as interesting within educational or intellectual terms.[49]

In light of this passage, we can determine that MUBI's criteria for programming content is not driven by an elitist impulse to actively exclude mainstream-orientated content. Instead, MUBI embrace a broad range of work on the basis that each and every film has 'something distinct about it', as Basil puts it – something distinctive that can be shaped and designed by the curatorial influence that characterises MUBI's service. This might be a retrospective of a certain filmmaker or, as Basil suggests, different interpretations of the same novel or story which, when placed side by side, creates a critical framework for comparison. So, by presenting and delivering content within a certain cultural and curatorial framework, MUBI validates the presence of each and every film on the platform. For a platform that largely focuses on specialised content, this process of validation is particularly important for the type of content that we might associate as more mainstream in a cultural sense. In this respect, MUBI's emphasis on editorial context creates an environment where the so-called mainstream can sit alongside the more specialised content. This creates a diverse spectrum of films without surrendering

MUBI's distinct brand of thoughtful curation and without damaging their reputation as a purveyor of refined taste. This is another reminder of the way these cultural labels, such as 'mainstream' and 'arthouse' are changeable and are ultimately determined and shaped by those gatekeepers that define the standards of taste.

Premium Programming and the Persistence of Theatrical Exhibition

As already mentioned, MUBI's emphasis on curating catalogue content echoes the cultural function of a repertory cinema, reinforcing the relationship between MUBI and the specialised theatrical sector. This relationship is further strengthened, albeit in a different way, through the increasing presence of exclusive and premium programming. As discussed earlier, catalogue programming forms the backbone of MUBI's service. But whilst the platform remains committed to older content, MUBI has more recently ventured into the burgeoning arena of exclusive and premium programming. For instance, 2015 saw MUBI strike a deal to stream Paul Thomas Anderson's music documentary, *Junun* (2015), following its premiere at the New York Film Festival. In the same year, MUBI secured the exclusive global rights to screen Lav Diaz's *From What is Before* (2014) fresh from its run on the international festival circuit. Interestingly, Diaz's previous film, *Norte, the End of History* (2013), was the filmmaker's only other film to reach British shores after a limited theatrical run and home entertainment release by New Wave Films. This is hardly surprising given Diaz's reputation for creating deeply complex works with lengthy running times – *Norte, the End of History* is actually one of Diaz's shorter works coming in at a little over four hours. In this respect, MUBI's screening of *From What is Before* – a film marked decidedly difficult to release theatrically on account of its five and a half hour running time – is a powerful illustration of the way digital delivery and platforms such as MUBI can overcome the barriers of theatrical distribution and facilitate access to a film that might have otherwise never received a commercial release.[50]

In addition to exclusive content, MUBI's recent release of Miguel Gomes's highly acclaimed trilogy, *Arabian Nights* (2015), reflects the platform's growing desire to venture into the arena of premium content. Interestingly, the film was purchased and released in partnership with New Wave Films, a distribution company founded by the former chiefs of Artificial Eye, Robert Beeson and Pam Engel. What makes the release of *Arabian Nights* so interesting is that despite the central involvement of MUBI, the film was released in cinemas by New Wave Films for a limited theatrical run before the first part of the trilogy premiered online a month later on MUBI. As Basil explains, this strategy came about in response to the company's difficulty in buying content on a purely digital basis,

> With Arabian Nights we wanted to buy something theatrically and so we went in with that idea in mind, but the whole reason that strategy emerged was that we couldn't buy just the exclusive streaming rights far enough up in the food chain in the windowing to make it worth the price we were going to pay. So, we decided to go all in on a title and then we could take

> control of the whole chain – all of the different windows of exploitation so we can be involved in the film in the way that we want to be involved and we were then in a position to break those windows because we operate the whole value chain.[51]

One of the important aspects to note here is that in describing the strategy behind *Arabian Night'*s release, Basil alludes to the way the industry and the business of distribution continue to revolve around the abiding concept of theatrical. In the case of MUBI's acquisition of *Arabian Nights*, this is evident in the way the windowing and the value chain were weighted towards the theatrical market. Another important aspect that influenced MUBI's strategy was the continued role that theatrical plays in building awareness and stimulating demand for films.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the theatrical window retains its importance in a crowded digital market as a way of building profile for films through marketing, awards and critical reviews. This is very much the case with MUBI's release of *Arabian Nights.* Indeed, part of the reason behind the film's theatrical release was to capture the attention of the critical community and accumulate a surge of positive publicity. Furthermore, whilst the temptation was to launch the film on a day-and-date basis, Basil emphasises that the exclusive theatrical period of a month was an important way of providing the film with some space to breathe and generate 'repeat coverage week on week.'[52] As Basil says, 'we've got this film, it's really mammoth, it's difficult for people to understand so we need to give it time to breathe and so that was why the choice was ultimately made.'[53] So, whilst online platforms such as MUBI symbolise the growing influence of on-demand access, releases like *Arabian Nights* reinforce the importance of the theatrical market as a launchpad for new titles – even those owned or co-owned by digital content providers. In this case, MUBI and New Wave Films even eschewed the increasingly common day-and-date approach to observe an exclusive theatrical period before the film's release on MUBI – an approach that was deemed appropriate for the specific challenges that the film posed. Since the release of *Arabian Nights*, MUBI has expanded its portfolio of premium content, releasing films such as *The Blue Room* (Mathieu Amalric, 2014), *The Son of Joseph* (Eugène Green, 2016) and the Un Certain Regard winner at Cannes, *The Happiest Day in the Life of Olli Mäki* (Juho Kuosmanen, 2016). Again, these films all received limited theatrical runs. Unlike *Arabian Nights,* however, MUBI handled the theatrical releases themselves.

There is one more important point to make about MUBI and the continuing influence of the theatrical market in an increasingly digital age. As Fletcher pointed out in the previous chapter, it is no coincidence that two of the biggest online providers of specialised content in Curzon Home Cinema and BFI Player are both 'experiential brands' which predate digital and have a network of physical cinemas – or in the case of the BFI, a single but significant cultural institution in the BFI Southbank. The significance of this relationship is rooted in the way these exhibitors draw on their grounding in theatrical exhibition as a way of promoting their digital platform and communicating directly with potential online consumers. Whilst MUBI does not have their own network of cinemas like Curzon, the company have seemingly identified the importance of having a physical means of exposure through their partnership with the national

exhibition chain, Picturehouse Cinemas. The passage below outlines the reciprocal nature of this partnership,

> The agreement will see Picturehouse provide on-screen promotion, digital and social media marketing, and in-cinema point-of-sale materials to advertise the partnership, and Mubi's subscription service. Mubi will offer Picturehouse members 90 days of free access as part of their annual membership, while other Picturehouse customers will receive a 30-day free subscription.[54]

Further to this, MUBI also programme Picturehouse's weekly strand, Discover Tuesdays which, as mentioned in Chapter Two, offers many Picturehouse patrons the rare opportunity to see an acclaimed, specialised release. MUBI's role in this scheme reinforces the platform's reputation as cultural tastemakers and gatekeepers, mediating what Picturehouse patrons can and, importantly, should see. Bearing in mind Fletcher's point about the reliance on the theatrical sector to promote online platforms such as Curzon Home Cinema, this partnership with Picturehouse reflects a shrewd attempt from MUBI to raise awareness of the platform and to develop the brand amongst Picturehouse cinemagoers. What is particularly important about this partnership is that unlike the largely London-based brand of Curzon, Picturehouse is a national chain with a greater reach, giving MUBI a wider platform with which to promote their brand. What is most revealing about this partnership, then, along with the broader discussion about theatrical, is that even a digital brand such as MUBI are dependent on the theatrical market as a means of promotion and a platform for brand awareness. As already seen, this relationship with theatrical is also emphasised by the defining role that taste, curation and limited choice play in shaping MUBI's approach – practices which are more in keeping with the traditions of specialised theatrical exhibition rather than the customs of on-demand culture. Now, the attention is shifted towards MUBI's relationship with another model of linear and scheduled delivery: television.

'What's on MUBI Tonight?': MUBI and the Philosophy of Public Service Broadcasting

In many ways, the stimulus for such a comparison can be found in the following statement from MUBI's founder, Efe Cakarel, when attempting to articulate the company's global ambition. 'We want everyone from Buenos Aires to Tokyo, when they want to watch a movie, to think: "What's on MUBI tonight?"'[55] What is particularly interesting about this phrase is that the very wording of this expression, 'What's on MUBI tonight?', is indicative of the way MUBI deviates from the current trend of online viewing. Indeed, a similar and more appropriate phrase for on-demand viewing might be 'what shall we watch tonight?', a phrase that implies choice, autonomy and empowerment. Whilst such a phrase signals a profound change in the audience mindset, 'What's on MUBI tonight?' conversely serves to reinforce longstanding traditions which have defined viewing customs and habits for decades. The implicit suggestion is a return to the

linearity of scheduled programming, a strengthening of trust in cultural and curatorial brands and even the sustained value of communal viewing despite the sometimes solitary nature of on-demand consumption. The phrase 'What's on MUBI tonight?', then, reflects a subtle difference in semantics, but one that speaks volumes about the underlying philosophy that drives the platform. In particular, this phrase 'What's on MUBI tonight?' evokes the essence of public service broadcasting – a concept and model which seems increasingly archaic in the face of sweeping digital change yet gains renewed pertinence in light of MUBI's approach.

One of the obvious parallels between public service broadcasting and MUBI is the role that both play as gatekeepers of content. Indeed, as Rod Allen and Nod Miller state, 'Broadcasting organisations were seen as gatekeepers, regulating access to the airwaves, reflecting a narrow spectrum of opinion under the guise of consensus and thus excluding many varieties of opinion, taste and interest.'[56] Interestingly, the somewhat negative tone that colours this view of public broadcasters emerged in response to the impending growth of cable television and the later arrival of satellite commercial broadcasters such as Sky Television. For many, the likes of Sky represented a democratic loosening of the monolithic stranglehold that public broadcasters had over audiences. This was vehemently argued by Sky's very own Rupert Murdoch when he launched a controversial attack on the notion of public service broadcasting in 1989. Indeed, Murdoch spoke about Sky as a conduit for 'true democracy' and a means of suppressing what he saw as a form of ideological propaganda – a channel to promote and protect the self-interests of a 'British broadcasting elite' disempowering the public through a narrowing of choice and diversity.[57] Whilst the credibility of Murdoch's claims is another matter, the important point to make is that this discourse of democratisation mirrors the utopian rhetoric of online distribution. Indeed, to repeat the words of Michael Gubbins, 'The early narrative of digital change was of a democratising trend away from 'gatekeepers' restricting choice.'[58] So, like the traditional paradigm of public service broadcasting, MUBI persists with a model that actively limits what its members can access, despite a broader and supposedly democratic shift towards greater choice and audience autonomy.

As discussed earlier, this strategy is partly rooted in the paradox of choice dilemma. In this regard, the thirty films, thirty days model functions as a means of countering consumer frustration rather than actively pursuing a regressive and undemocratic form of delivery. Further to this, MUBI's persistence with a more 'archaic' model can be seen to mirror the underlying ethos of public service broadcasting. In tracing the lineage of public service broadcasting, David Hendy reinforces the popular view that the European vision of enlightenment, education and progressive societal change 'was woven deeply into the fabric of public service broadcasting during its foundational years.'[59] Paddy Scannell reinforces this sentiment, describing the popular conception of public service broadcasting 'as a cultural, moral, and educative force for the improvement of knowledge, taste and, manners'.[60] In keeping with this philosophy, the notion of public service broadcasting advocated the need to serve the public not as consumers, or 'pleasure-seeking zappers' in Jostein Gripsrud's words, but as active citizens.[61] Indeed, the public broadcasting model was not only predicated on the basis that quality programming could

inform and educate the public. Instead, the hope was that informative and enlightening programming would inspire viewers to actively exercise such knowledge whilst stimulating a thirst for knowledge that viewers could actively pursue. As Trine Syvertsen notes, 'the success of a television service lies not in the time people spend watching the programmes, but the time spent elsewhere, exercising what they have learnt.'[62] In contrast, the competitive nature of the commercial model dictates that broadcasters compete for public attention by persuading consumers to continue watching.

Indeed, a similar dichotomy can be identified between MUBI and the broader culture of on-demand viewing. As already discussed, contemporary consumers have immediate access to a range of content across a number of on-demand platforms. Even algorithmic-platforms like Netflix, which dictate or guide consumer choice, provides its members with a number of different choices. In light of such immediate and convenient access, the notion of binge-watching has emerged as a popular cultural practice – a consumer indulgence particularly rooted in the 'addictive' nature of high-end serial programming. This culture of binge-watching has become largely synonymous with SVoD platforms like Netflix and Amazon which both take active strides – like commercial broadcasters – to encourage its members to keep watching, as evidenced by the countdown to autoplay that both platforms exercise. The subsequent failure to resist yields a feeling of guilt familiar to most Netflix or Amazon members. MUBI, on the other hand, with its catalogue of thirty accessible films, is less invested in fuelling this binge culture. Indeed, there is less of an active attempt to envelop viewers in a perpetual cycle of content. Instead, MUBI advocates a culture of discovery, where the practice of consumption is supplemented and enriched by the platform's emphasis on context and education. As discussed earlier, MUBI weaves a cultural tapestry of context that serves to enrich members' understanding of film. So, similar to the ethos of public service broadcasting, MUBI places a strong emphasis on the role that consumption can play as a springboard for further enrichment. Here, the value resides not in the immediate and fleeting practice of consumption, but in the subsequent process of discovery.

Through the concept of citizenship, the public service broadcasting model also assumes a social and political function by fostering a sense of collective good and national unity. In this respect, Scannell refers to broadcasting as a sort of 'social cement binding people together in the shared idioms of a public, corporate, national life.'[63] Whilst, in certain respects, this sense of the national stood at the heart of the public broadcasting model, my main interest here resides in the way broadcasting, at least in theory, reflected a new communal paradigm that transcended geographical boundaries. As John B. Thompson aptly states,

> Television and other media have generated a new type of public realm which has no spatial limits, which is not necessarily tied to dialogical conversation and which is accessible to an indefinite number of individuals who may be situated within privatized domestic settings. Rather than sounding the death knell of public life, the development of mass communication has created a new kind of publicness and has transformed fundamentally the conditions under which most people are able to experience what is public and participate today in what could be called a public realm.[64]

As Thompson suggests, many saw the public broadcasting model as a liberal embodiment of the public realm, or the public sphere and its democratic principles popularised by German scholar, Jürgen Habermas. Here, broadcasting is valued as a progressive institution divorced from the pressures of a market economy and the ideological sway of the nation state. Supposedly divorced from such pressures, public broadcasting works to 'nurture the public sphere as a means of serving the public good.'[65] As already suggested, this notion of a democratic pubic sphere – a liberal platform where public discourse takes shape for the collective good of societal change – gains particular significance in the broadcasting model because of its capacity to transcend distance and collapse space. For this reason, Paddy Scannell argued that television widened the potential for greater public participation because it democratised access to certain forms of knowledge and culture that were previously restricted to public places. 'The fundamentally democratic thrust of broadcasting lay in the new kind of access to virtually the whole spectrum of public life that radio first, and later television, made available to all', Scannell states.[66] Much of the essence of public service broadcasting, therefore, centred on notions of democracy and community; a private window onto the public world; a platform where a broader sense of community could be shaped; and a ritualistic and collective practice that brings people together. Of course, this represents but one, rather idealistic vision of public service broadcasting – a vision that others have sought to challenge.[67] Whilst such arguments reflect an important part of the discourse of public service broadcasting, the intricacies of such a debate ultimately transcend the scope of this chapter.

Instead, the importance here is to take the underlying ethos of community and citizenship that supposedly drives the public broadcasting model and identify its relevance to MUBI. For instance, we can return to the semantic connotations of Cakarel's phrase, 'What's on MUBI tonight?, which evokes a sense of collectiveness. As suggested earlier, the wording of this phrase bears an implicit reference to the essence of linear scheduled broadcasting where content is programmed within a specific and restricted time frame. Whilst MUBI expands this time frame across a thirty day period, the platform's emphasis on a 'film of the day' does imply a sense of linearity. So, even though members have the freedom to consume content whenever they like over a thirty day period, MUBI's approach does cultivate the notion of an intimate, but expansive community – a space where members can watch and engage with the same films despite the geographical distance. This sense of community is captured by Cakarel who states that 'our audience is a community, a group of people spread around the world but united by a love of film, a love of watching it, discussing it and sharing it.'[68] In keeping with the pattern of this chapter, this notion of a thriving online community is again at odds with the broader culture of on-demand access. Indeed, as Chuck Tryon states, the on-demand culture of platform mobility fosters 'fragmented, and often deeply individualized media consumers.'[69] As this chapter now goes on to show, MUBI counters this sense of isolation through the platform's emphasis on social media. Here, much like the notion of the public sphere, members are encouraged to exchange ideas and engage in cultural debate strengthening this democratic vision of a thriving online community. In turning our attention to the 'social experience' of MUBI,

this discussion slightly shifts the focus towards a sociological interpretation of the platform, one which intersects with notions of taste and identity.

Social Media, Identity and the Sociality of MUBI

As many have argued, the advent of online distribution and the growth of digital culture have partly eroded the communal nature of cinemagoing. The resulting argument poses that we are collectively moving towards a 'more fragmented, individualized media culture.'[70] Indeed, as Charles Acland claims, 'Individualism rules the world of entertainment.'[71] This, he suggests, is most evident with the recent surge of 'mobile, hand-held, and personalized technological trinkets' which dominate the modern media landscape.[72] In response, Wheeler Winston Dixon states that contemporary spectatorship 'has become, more and more, a solitary vice in which one person tunes out the rest of the world […] without having to participate in a group experience.'[73] Matt Hills similarly states that the mobile nature of media consumption means that 'users can arguably retreat, within public spaces, into their own (semi-) private realms of familiar media consumption.'[74] Martine Beugnet paints this very picture, stating that the image of 'smartphone owners hunched over miniature, self-contained wonderlands' has become a familiar sight within both domestic and public space.[75] Francesco Casetti and Sara Sampietro also reinforced this point. When analysing the consumption of moving-image material on the iPhone, they discovered that viewers often construct 'existential bubbles'.[76] These 'existential bubbles' act as a means of refuge, enabling viewers to inhabit a private and insular space despite being in a collective and public environment.[77] For many, this sense of social retreat evokes a sort of wistful nostalgia.[78] There is, however, more at stake here than a nostalgic longing for the past.

Indeed, whilst we speak about the social experience of the cinema, we often neglect the symbolic significance of this experience. What interests me here is the way cinemagoing and this sense of community or collective practice intersects with notions of social performance and identity. For instance, discussing the 'multi-coded' nature of cinemagoing, Thomas Elsaesser alludes to the performance of identity. Going to the cinema, he claims, implies 'an element of seeing and being seen'.[79] Through a 'recursive effect of 'ritual' and community,' patrons are rewarded with the social privilege of 'being there and being seen to be there.'[80] In this respect, cinemas are more than mere points of access. Instead, they can be seen to propagate, shape and reinforce identity in a communal, public setting. This point is captured in the following passage by Acland,

> In the end, the curating of cultural offerings and the industrial forces producing material sites and encounters are an articulation of lifestyle and ultimately of class. The immersion into the process of public consumption – that is, the root definitional criterion for cinemagoing – marks the associated sites as more than service goods. They are relations *among* cultural commodities and practices, calling to audiences as particular kinds of consumers, with

> particular kinds of interests, tastes, expertise, and disposable income and time. For this reason, the public event of moviegoing activates a structure of everyday existence in which various forms of identity and community take shape.[81]

As implied, 'the public event of moviegoing' is predicated on the physical practice of patronage. This, in the words of Elsaesser, entails 'an element of seeing and being seen'. In light of Acland's argument, then, what we have is the social significance of 'being seen' in a certain cultural space where collective notions of taste, lifestyle and identity are shaped, formed and presented to others. The private nature of online consumption, however, threatens to intensify a culture of social retreat. Without the physical presence of others in a public setting, we seemingly surrender our capacity to practice and promote some sense of collective cultural belonging. Online distribution, then, can be seen to anonymise film consumption, creating a culture which is more about 'seeing' and less about 'being seen.'

MUBI, however, actively counters this notion that online consumption fosters a reclusive culture of consumption by relocating the social experience of cinemagoing online through the employment of social media conventions. So, in addition to watching films, users are able to create their own profile, follow other members, share reviews, comment on films and curate their own personal lists for people to view and comment on. Cakarel describes the 'ideal' member as an active participant in a thriving, global online community. Indeed, he states that 'they watch, they discuss, they read, they write, they spread the word.'[82] Cakarel reinforces this point, stating that 'our audience is a community, a group of people spread around the world but united by a love of film, a love of watching it, discussing it and sharing it.'[83] Whilst the notion of community implies a sense of intimacy and closeness, MUBI's emphasis on social media, as Cakarel suggests, helps to foster more of a global sense of community – a borderless network of interactive users. In this respect, Tryon is right when he suggests that social media and platform mobility have, in fact, stimulated new forms of audience interaction,

> Users of mobile devices such as the iPhone and Kindle Fire may be capable of isolating themselves in a media bubble, but platform mobility can also enable new forms of interactivity and participation in a wider media culture as audiences connect with each other and sometimes with the producers of the entertainment they watch.[84]

So, whilst on-demand viewing is deemed to foster a more reclusive form of spectatorship, it could be argued that platforms such as Facebook and practices such as live-tweeting have, in fact, fostered a more communal and interactive viewing culture.

In light of the role that technology and online interaction play in facilitating discussion and cultivating a borderless sense of community, the rest of this chapter considers how social media serves a sociological function – a function that is evident with MUBI members. What interests me here is the way social media acts, in the words of Candida Yates, as a form of 'self-management and self-promotion'.[85] That is to say that social media, according to Sonia Livingstone, is 'an integral means of managing one's identity, lifestyle and social relations.'[86] Platforms like Facebook, for instance, have nurtured an increasingly visual culture where

images and videos are shared and 'tagged' between friends. This, Andrew L. Mendelson and Zizi Papacharissi argues, functions as a 'performative exercise of identity and belonging'.[87] Indeed, analysing the influential role that visual imagery on Facebook plays in articulating the 'college experience', Mendelson and Papacharissi argue that the posting and tagging of photos enables 'college students to speak to each other visually'.[88] This, they argue, is a conscious and strategic process of self-management, enabling students to articulate notions of lifestyle and friendship through the 'authenticity' of visual documentation.[89]

This strategic process of identity management has also fostered a particularly narcissistic and self-conscious culture. Matt Hills, for instance, states that the potential of identity play makes platforms, such as Facebook, a particularly 'narcissistic vehicle for one's visibility to others'. [90] Such platforms also enable people to exaggerate and even fabricate the virtues of their lifestyle. Indeed, social media platforms enable users to construct 'online fronts' which may bear no real relation to their day-to-day existence.[91] Whilst representing a means through which identity can be shaped and formed, the internet also provides a cloak of anonymity, triggering an 'assortment of role plays, deceptions, half-truths, and exaggerations'.[92] That is to say that with social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, 'the physical distance and low social presence' enables users to exaggerate certain truths without being detected by others.[93] In the context of MUBI and social media, my intention is not to suggest that MUBI members are deceitful in the way they present themselves to the MUBI community. Instead, 'the physical distance and low social presence' of the internet serves to reinforce the way that online platforms enable users to better manage and shape their identity through self-conscious displays of lifestyle, values and taste. Of course, the notion that identity is a malleable concept that can be shaped and reshaped through public and performative displays of lifestyle is nothing new. The significant difference, as Laura E. Buffardi and W. Keith Campbell identify, is that unlike many social situations, social media profile pages provide people with 'complete power' when it comes to managing their identity.[94] Certain pictures, for instance, can be selected according to their perceived social value whilst descriptions and posts can be carefully constructed to promote a particular identity, lifestyle or ideology.[95]

Unlike Facebook, MUBI does not allow its members to upload, share and tag photos on the platform – although each member can upload a picture to represent their profile. Even so, MUBI members very much engage in the process of identity-management through the performance and articulation of cultural taste. As Camilla Vásquez states, 'The performance of taste can be an important aspect in constructing an online identity'.[96] Imagery, however, is not the only means through which social media users can manage, shape and present their taste and identity to others. Indeed, Hugo Liu claims that the crucial materials in the performance of taste are cultural signs, such as books, music and films which, when composed together, form a '*taste statement.*'[97] This is very much at the forefront of MUBI where taste is foregrounded through the process of rating and reviewing films and the way members can construct lists of their favourite films for others to view and comment on. Members can also compile lists according to certain themes or trends, such as the greatest films of a certain decade, or the

films of a certain filmmaker ranked in order of quality – a process that enables MUBI members to also actively engage in the cultural process of canonisation. Other members can then 'like' or 'comment' on such reviews and lists as they scrutinise the credentials and tastes of other users. Like the way photos enable Facebook members to visually articulate their lifestyle and identity, the uploading of these reviews and the compilation of these lists function as a form of self-governance – they act as a way of maintaining and reinforcing one's identity through the display of a certain taste statement.

As already alluded to, the reviews that members post also perform a similar function, articulating a certain taste-based identity through the language and discourse that members engage with. Ever present in discussions of taste, identity and capital, the influential sociologist Pierre Bourdieu proposed the notion of 'linguistic capital' as a marker of social distinction. Bourdieu saw language as a subset of cultural capital because it helps to reinforce social differences and strengthen the symbolic order. As a result, Bourdieu refused to divorce language from social setting and, as such, considered '*the relationship between the structured systems of sociologically pertinent linguistic differences and the equally structured systems of social differences*.'[98] In the following passage, Bourdieu elaborates on the way that language and linguistic capital intersects with notions of identity and social hierarchy,

> To speak is to appropriate one or other of the expressive styles already constituted in and through usage and objectively marked by their position in a hierarchy of styles which expresses the hierarchy of corresponding social groups. These styles, systems of differences which are both classified and classifying, ranked and ranking, mark those who appropriate them.[99]

Adopting Bourdieu's emphasis on the social value of language, Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall state that 'among the many symbolic resources available for the cultural production of identity, language is the most flexible and pervasive.'[100] In a similar fashion to Bourdieu, both Bucholtz and Hall advocate the value of a 'sociocultural linguistic perspective on identity – that is, one that focuses on both the details of language and the workings of culture and society.'[101] Rather than treating language as an inherent source of stable meaning, this entails an understanding of language as a self-reflexive process – a stylised affectation which draws on a certain syntactic structure because of its association with a particular social group and lifestyle. In short, people draw on certain forms of language because they communicate more than mere words. Instead, the language we employ and the discourse we engage with helps to convey our identity to others. This appears particularly important in the culture of online communication which places an ever greater emphasis on the nuances of language. Now, members can scrutinise the vernacular in even greater detail as a means of gauging the identity and cultural capital of other users. Online forms of written communication, then, such as forums function as a crucial means of self-management.

Camilla Vásquez strengthens this view, arguing that discourse and language serve as crucial resources in the construction of people's identity.[102] In a recent article, Vásquez considers a number of amateur reviews posted on a popular travel website to consider 'how

aspects of reviewer identities are constructed and interwoven within the textual fabric' of the reviews.[103] She claims that the amateur culture of user-generated content means that 'reviewers must work to establish their expertise and credibility'.[104] For this reason, Vásquez states that language is the primary resource which users can draw upon, providing an indication of the reviewer's identity. The remainder of this chapter adopts a similar approach by focusing on the language and discourse that MUBI members draw upon. The following sample has been chosen from some two-hundred reviews of Jean-Luc Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960). Whilst any film could have been chosen, Godard's film does stimulate a number of interesting responses from members. These reviews are particularly revealing because they demonstrate how MUBI members often employ certain forms of language and patterns of discourse which are consistent with both the culture of specialised film and the type of thoughtful, highbrow engagement that MUBI endorses and cultivates. The following reviews, then, demonstrate how MUBI members engage with the platform as a form of self-promotion – an exercise in brandishing one's identity and membership of the global MUBI community. In order to preserve the authenticity of members' reviews, the following posts recited below are copied in exactly the way they were posted, including certain vernacular and grammatical oversights.

The Language and Discourse of MUBI Members

As suggested, a number of reviews demonstrate a collective engagement with a sort of highbrow critical discourse. For instance, a number of reviews adopt a position of critical distance, enabling members to assess the film through an analytical lens. Many, like the reviews below, achieve this by making reference to the film's inventive style, inferring an appreciation and understanding of film language,

> Beautifully shot in an anarchic style that renders straight narratives irrelevant and celebrates a free-flowing, carefree visual style.[105] (Member A's four-star review)

> A lot of fun. Quirky characterisation revelling in the unpredictable whimsies of its leads. Intimate camera work and some fascinating use of cutting to manipulate time. (Member B's four-star review)

> Indeed groundbreaking, and while maybe not as impressive as it was when it debuted, it's still none the less impressive in its own right, and a piece of snappy, pulpy, pure cinematic genius. The pace never lets up, leaving the viewer in a state in which its title alludes to, and uses inventive and just plain cool cinematic techniques and shots to convey its simple yet engrossing story. (Member C's five-star review)

Member A draws on Godard's 'anarchic style' as a deviation from conventional filmmaking, whilst Member B draws on the film's editing as a way of manipulating time. Indeed, other members not cited above also make explicit reference to Godard's distinctive use of jump cuts

as one of the film's defining features. Others, such as Member C, offer a vaguer appraisal of the film's style, perhaps indicating an inferior understanding of film language. Nevertheless, the consistency of terms such as 'stylish,' 'groundbreaking,' 'inventive' and 'original' imply a collective understanding of the film's aberrant style – as a cultural anomaly that breaks away from the traditions of mainstream convention. Of course, these distinctions are consistent with the deep-rooted dichotomy between mainstream cinema and the notion of 'arthouse' film, as implied by the two reviews below,

> Style, satire, sensuality. Belmondo and Seberg. A film Hollywood could never make. Cinema as it should be: Irreverent and Subversive with a smile. (Member D's five-star review)

> Pure visual jazz, defying convention every step of the way. (Member E's five-star review)

Unsurprisingly, a number of members also refer to the film's association with the French New Wave, as evidenced by the three reviews below,

> Godard created this film with such purpose and vision, I could discuss it for hours. The films gradual development of the two lead personas, is incredibly well devised. As it opens with Michel a cool and collected hood, and Patricia a somewhat näive 20 year old. Then concludes with a complete and unexpected role reversal, exposing Michels coolness as a facade. The finished film, is the definition of French New Wave. (Member F's five-star review)

> Arguably THE crowning film of the French New Wave. (Member G's five-star review)

> Certainly Godard's original and stylish opera prima was a breakthrough in film-making at the time and gave way to the French New Wave. Echoes still reverberate but how relevant is Breathless, and by extension La Nouvelle Vague, today? Time is an unkind master and it might have diluted the initial shock factor. Beside, the pointless dialogues and unadulterated misogyny might look infantile half a century later. (Member H's four-star review)

Such references indicate a wider understanding of both the film's cultural impact and its place in the course of film history. In the process, these members and others strengthen the film's reputation as the singular, pioneering work of the French New Wave. In general, the positive nature of these reviews reinforces (and perhaps conforms to) the film's reputation as the hallmark of 'good taste' whilst strengthening its status as an 'arthouse' classic. This type of collective acclaim, therefore, contributes to the process of canonisation that MUBI and the broader culture of specialised film engages with. This largely explains the repetition of terms such as 'masterpiece' and 'groundbreaking.'

Even when voices of dissent do emerge – a rarity in this case – they often draw on the same linguistic and analytical techniques that distinguish many MUBI members,

> Worthless as Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" A clumsy mess! But it has the same value as an example of a new way of doing things, and is a seminal work. It is Morally, and artistically repugnant IMHO. The image, made using sensitive still camera film, a hand held camera, and little lighting is perfect: a GREAT Bluray. But for what purpose: BORING! That is what you get when you write the script as you film. (Member I's one-star review)

> Sorry, but "Shoot the Piano Player" is better. It's probably a sin to not like this, but...sorry. (Member J's two-star review)

Here, for instance, the first review demonstrates an understanding of Godard's filming process whilst making fleeting reference to the film's pioneering nature. Indeed, by apologising, Member J draws attention to the film's acclaimed reputation by describing their dislike of the film as a form of cultural sacrilege. Both also draw on other pieces of highbrow work to reinforce their point and parade their cultural capital – another tradition of specialised film culture that manifests in a number of MUBI reviews,

> Reminded me: Jean Vigo's films and Film Noir. Jazz - spontaneity - jump cut - vigor of the masterworks, I liked it very much. (Member K's four-star review)

> Contempt and Breathless are two of the greatest movies ever made. Plus Godard had a wealth of other excellent films. It amazes me how prolific and consistently good he was between 1959 and 1969. Truly one of the greats. (Member L's five-star review)

> band of outsiders is much better.. (Member M's three-star review)

For many members, such brandishing of wider knowledge and taste assumes an important role in the promotion of their persona. For instance, through the designation of a particularly prolific period in Godard's career, Member L conveys a passion and appreciation for Godard's broader body of work. For other members, this type of comment indicates a certain degree of cultural capital which, in the culture of MUBI, bestows that member with authority and prestige – someone who demands to be heard and 'followed.' In Vásquez's research, she encountered a similar trend as reviewers referenced their travel experience or their knowledge of a local area as tokens of authority.[106] This expression of authority amongst MUBI members is also evident in the way certain members make reference to their personal relationship with the film,

> seeing breathless at 16 years old provoked a response in me that resonates still. (Member N's five-star review)

> My first exposure to Criterion and Godard. It'll always be something important to me. (O's five-star review)

> A beautiful movie: self-reflexive, moving, beautifully shot - my induction to art house cinema and I never looked back. (P's five-star review)

These sort of anecdotal narratives which evoke a sense of personal history, are not as common in reviews as the references to other films or filmmakers. But they do serve a similar purpose, functioning as a form of cultural authority. Indeed, a phrase like 'my induction to art house cinema' implies a sort of membership or a badge of honour that the member proudly wears. Each member also makes some reference to their first encounter with the film as a sort of cultural awakening. Member N, for instance, states that the film 'provoked a response' whilst Member O refers to the film as 'something important' to them. As a result, the image that these reviews summon pictures a long-serving cinephile with a personal and deep-rooted attachment

to the film and the culture of 'arthouse cinema.' For this reason, these brief but evocative personal histories serve as a performative means of conveying one's identity.

Earlier, it was suggested that the individualised nature of modern media consumption was fostering a culture of social retreat. In response, the growth of this isolated and private viewing culture is seen to undermine the communal essence of cinemagoing. Whilst there is an undeniable sense of wistful nostalgia that permeates this view, the focus here instead has been on the sociological implications of this apparent shift in consumer behaviour. When discussing the interwar and immediate postwar years of specialised film culture in Britain during the second chapter, the argument proposed was that this culture was partly fuelled by a divisive politics of distinction. Here, the patronage of the Film Society and the Academy provided a form of refuge where patrons could secure some distance from the 'mindless' culture of mainstream cinemagoing and the 'crassness' of mass consumerism. Of course, the current landscape of specialised film is no longer entrenched in the same elitist values that polarised film consumption in Britain during the interwar and immediate postwar years. This is not say, however, that notions of distinction are no longer relevant when it comes to the patronage of specialised cinemas. In *The Place of the Audience,* Jancovich, Faire and Stubbings discovered that the local arthouse or specialised exhibitor in Nottingham, the Broadway, had a polarising effect on the local cinemagoing population. For instance, some respondents employed derogatory language to paint the cinema as distant and highbrow, using terms such as 'snooty' and 'elitist.'[107] Those who did regularly attend the Broadway reinforced this view, suggesting that the cinema bestowed them with a sense of distinction and exclusivity.[108] Whilst many felt alienated from the cinema which was seen as 'not for the likes of us', others were clearly attracted because they saw it as being associated with 'our sort of people'.'[109]

Like the earlier statement by Acland, these comments relate the practice of cinemagoing with a sense of communal identity and tribal distinction. In the case of Broadway patrons, this is an identity rooted in the physical practice of patronage – of 'being seen' as Elsaesser puts it.[110] The argument, then, in light of the apparent changes in consumer behaviour, is that a culture of social retreat where films are accessed and consumed in isolation, is undermining the relationship between cinemagoing and notions of community, lifestyle and identity. As suggested, this relationship is particularly important in the culture of specialised film. Without this physical process of patronage, then, online distribution can be seen to anonymise film consumption. MUBI challenges this, however, by allowing its members to practice a sense of collective identity online. This is performed through the reviews that members post where the language employed and the highbrow critical discourse that members engage with promotes the same kind of cultured identity that MUBI cultivates through its distinct approach to content delivery. Whilst members do not always share the same opinions, what does emerge from these reviews is a collective voice based on a shared understanding of language and film-related vernacular. In this respect, the reviews and social customs of exchange and dialogue that MUBI fosters helps to achieve Cakarel's vision of a thriving 'community, a group of people spread around the world but united by a love of film, a love of watching it, discussing it and sharing it.'[111]

Conclusion

In less than a decade, MUBI has evolved into a thriving global platform and network for cineastes and passionate film lovers. From its modest roots in 2007, MUBI now serves over two-hundred countries, delivering content to some seven million members. But whilst the company have been at the forefront of driving the on-demand format, particularly for foreign-language and specialised films, MUBI's strategy is much closer in form and philosophy to older models of linear media delivery. As this chapter has argued throughout, rather than disengaging with the past, MUBI provides a strong sense of continuity through an active engagement with past traditions and practices. We have seen this engagement with past practices manifest in various ways, from the role that programmers play as gatekeepers mediating choice in accordance with their own perspectives of good taste; to the relationship between MUBI's approach and notions of community and citizenship present in the model of public service broadcasting; to the way MUBI often curates and arranges their content according to certain thematic trends in the same fashion as specialised and repertory exhibitors like the BFI Southbank; and the social, communal experience that MUBI fosters where members can practice and promote their taste-based identity despite the absence of shared physical space. Whilst rooted in past traditions of linear media delivery, these practices are very much at the heart of MUBI's philosophy and central to the platform's broader mission to nurture a greater public receptiveness towards a diversity of films.

In certain respects, MUBI's success in nurturing a wider and less esoteric form of cine-literacy hinges on the company's brand and the platform's approach to content delivery. However, with the evolving nature of the on-demand market and its potential openness to new trends and innovations, MUBI's success in driving forward this cultural mission also rests on the future prospects of the SVoD market. Both Amazon and Netflix, for instance, have been at the sharp end of industry debates around the sustainability of the SVoD model. Both trade on the appeal of a large volume of accessible content and a single monthly price point which, as mentioned in the third chapter, constitutes a desirable offer for the consumer. In this respect, the success of such a model rests on the costly exercise of buying a plethora of content. The alternative to simply buying content – something both Netflix and Amazon have pursued with great commitment – is investing in the production of original content. The vast investments needed to sustain the high production values of Netflix and Amazon productions, however, casts further doubt over the sustainability of the SVoD model. Only recently, the Chief Content Officer for Netflix, Ted Sarandos, announced that moving forward the company would exceed the $6 billion budget for original programming that the company invested in 2016.[112] In comparison, MUBI's model appears to deliver a more sustainable method of business. Up to now, this chapter has largely focused on the cultural agenda that MUBI drives. As Amy Basil explains, though, the platform's thirty films, thirty days model also has a logistical advantage over its competitors,

> [For] an online distributor […] [that] operate[s] a library of thousands of titles, you're going to have to acquire thousands of titles for two year license periods. We acquire a lot more than we actually need, but we only need to acquire 365 films for thirty day license periods. So, in terms of the efficiency of the business model, it's a highly efficient business model. You don't have any latent, dead stock.[113]

So, whether the company can successfully drive its cultural mission to nurture a wider form of cine-literacy remains to be seen. What does seem clear, however, is that the sustainability of MUBI's model – which serves both a logistical and cultural function – promises to secure the platform's position at the heart of the digital future, whilst keeping its footing firmly in the past.

Chapter Six
Rethinking Informal Distribution and the Democratisation of Film Culture

Introduction

Up to now, this thesis has explored the legal channels and practice of online distribution. Whilst firmly maintaining our focus on issues of cultural access, this chapter shifts the attention towards the unsanctioned and piratical exchange of media goods, particularly in a digital environment. In turning our attention to media piracy, we can approach the issues of cultural democratisation, empowerment and choice which stand at the centre of this thesis. Indeed, whilst the advent of online distribution has been seen as a disruptive and democratic force in the cultural landscape, the older practice of media piracy predates such claims of cultural democratisation. In a climate of apparent disruption, piracy promises to empower media consumers whilst threatening to weaken the control that the gatekeeping elite hold in dictating public access. With this in mind, Virginia Crisp rightly states that multiple forms of piracy, from counterfeit DVDs to online filesharing networks, raise fresh doubts over who controls and mediates the flow of film distribution.[1] This has led to Michael Franklin's assertion that online piracy 'poses an existential threat to the film industry.'[2] Whilst piracy is at the forefront of such issues, there is sometimes a temptation to understate its importance as a fringe activity that operates in the shadows. However, there is no denying that piracy forms a prevalent part of the global media landscape, intersecting with issues of cultural access and the balance of power between distributors and everyday consumers.

The first part of this chapter provides a detailed look at the relevant literature on media piracy. Whilst the focus is on the exchange and consumption of films, some of the more general literature on media piracy is brought into play as a means of supporting the arguments. Indeed, some of the work on music piracy is particularly pertinent considering the clear parallels between the oligopolistic structure of the music and film industries. Here, the main emphasis is on the way that piracy functions as an alternative network of exchange and consumption rather than a purely criminal practice. Importantly, the so-called 'war on piracy' is considered, taking into account how the dominant distributors and the industry at large have strived to criminalise the practice and moralise the debate. Rather than supporting these claims, this chapter reinforces the argument that the 'war on piracy' is a reactive and rhetorical form of control – a means of serving the dominant interests of the mainstream media elite and a way of disempowering media consumers. Following this, we consider how piracy circumvents the broader issue of cultural access across a range of different national contexts. In doing so, we can see how piracy serves to empower media consumers by democratising access to a broader spectrum of content. Whilst our focus is on the practice of online piracy, drawing on the practice of physical media piracy also helps to establish this empowering trend.

Following this, these issues of access and empowerment lead us into a discussion about a particular filesharing site which appeared in an article in *Film Comment* in 2009. The article, entitled 'Black Crow Blues', provides some insight into a particular online service where members are granted access to a wealth of rare and specialised content. In this respect, Black Crow seems to epitomise both the democratic potential of piracy and the supposed power of the internet to make specialised content more widely accessible. In practice, however, the situation proves very different. What should be open and unrestricted is, in fact, governed by punitive rules and exclusionary tactics. As the chapter makes clear, rather than widening access to specialised film, Black Crow actively impedes the wider participation of the public. In this respect, a detailed focus on the Black Crow club serves as a springboard into the debates around online piracy, access and the broader discourse around digital democracy. Drawing on the work of Frances Cairncross, Nicholas Negroponte, William J. Mitchell and others, this discussion revisits the claims that the internet fosters a profound collapse of social division and an unrestrictive form of social mobility. Before exploring these issues, it is important to briefly assign the relevant terminology.

Rather than conforming to the popular perception of piracy as a thoughtless and transgressive act of pure criminality, this chapter follows in the footsteps of scholars such as Ramon Lobato who reframe the piracy debate. In this respect, this chapter considers a range of social, economic, cultural and political issues which drive the daily practice of piracy. For this reason, Lobato's use of the term 'informal distribution' seems a relevant concept to apply throughout this chapter. In *Shadow Economies of Cinema*, Lobato settled on the binary concept of 'formal' and 'informal' distribution as a way of encapsulating the various ways that media content circulates. Whilst formal distribution travels through the legal channels of exchange, informal distribution operates beyond the purview of the state.[3] Denoting multiple forms of media reproduction and circulation, informal distribution operates within the shadows of '*unmeasured*, *untaxed* and *unregulated* economic activity.'[4] The significance of this notion of informal distribution is the way that Lobato consciously steers the discourse away from the language of criminality and the overtones of moral deviance – aspects which define the popular and industry-led perception of piracy. Instead, Lobato's concept of informal distribution engages with the many social, economic, political and cultural issues which stimulate media piracy. Tristan Mattelart makes a similar point when he claims that to better understand piracy 'we need to move away from the approaches which criminalize it and to consider the various possible social, economic and political reasons for its rise.'[5]

In response, this chapter adopts Lobato's notion of informal distribution as both a form of terminology and a concept rooted in the complexities of modern media piracy. In doing so, we can move beyond the reductive portrayal of piracy as a rampant criminal practice. Like Lobato, this chapter considers the way that piracy serves 'as an alternative distribution system rather than a nefarious criminal network.'[6] This is reinforced by Burcu S. Bakioğlu who describes piracy as an alternative means of distribution and consumption, one which 'falls outside the parameters legitimized by the media industry.'[7] Whilst the term 'informal distribution' is

employed throughout this chapter as the main designator for a range of piratical practices, the term 'piracy' does retain its usefulness as a historical concept with deep-rooted connotations. This is certainly the case when discussing the debates surrounding the so-called 'war on piracy' and the longstanding efforts to enforce punitive sanctions on piratical practices. The remainder of this chapter, therefore, draws on both informal distribution and piracy as general descriptors for the underground exchange and the unsanctioned consumption of media content.

The Internet and the Acceleration of Media Piracy

There is a tendency to treat informal distribution as a distinctly contemporary practice. The prevalence of online piracy has certainly contributed to this perception. In fact, the practice of piracy actually shares a deep history with the media and content industries. Bearing in mind that the common definition of piracy is the infringement of intellectual property rights, Lawrence Lessig claims that the history of the content industry can be characterised as a history of piracy.[8] This is particularly pertinent when it comes to the commercial film industry, one which grew in large part through the piracy of Edison's creative property.[9] Indeed, certain accounts of film history portray the industry's early years as a chaotic period of rampant piracy and creative theft.[10] The resulting chaos even drove one film historian to describe the early years of the American film industry as a 'lawless frontier.'[11] But whilst the practice of piracy has long been entrenched in the commercial film industry, the acceleration of economic, political and technological change has seen the more recent escalation of media piracy.[12] This is particularly the case with the internet which, as W. Edward Steinmueller states, supplies the necessary speed and accessibility to facilitate large scale copying and global circulation.[13] This poses greater problems for policymakers and industry professionals who are forced to confront the sheer scale and speed of the piracy 'problem.'

Furthermore, unlike other formats, the internet provides consumers with the necessary conditions to assuage the moral guilt of piracy. For instance, Freestone and Mitchell argue that the internet has provided a fertile breeding ground for multiple forms of aberrant behaviour.[14] They support this claim by arguing that the internet provides its users with a 'cloak' under which they can conceal their identity, shielding themselves from the scrutiny of the law and the stigma of society.[15] This sense of anonymity might, therefore, drive 'good' citizens to make the types of unethical decisions they would otherwise refrain from. Sameer Hinduja argues this very point in the context of piracy, stating that the decision to consume pirated content can be attributed to the notion that we 'lose' ourselves in cyberspace.[16] This state benefits from a sense of detachment where the physical distance from others and the relative anonymity of users lowers the ethical barriers of online behaviour.[17] Certainly, the implication is that the convenience and anonymity of downloading and sharing media online has turned informal consumption into a sort of 'guilt-free' practice.[18] As a result, the concern for the formal sector is that such an apparent absence of moral obligation has turned piracy into a more acceptable practice in the eyes of

consumers – or at least in the eyes of younger generations.

In a study on university students and their behaviours and attitudes towards downloading music, Jason R. Ingram and Sameer Hinduja found that nearly 90 per cent of their sample perceived their behaviour as appropriate and acted without any sense of moral guilt.[19] In another study on the relationship between legal purchasing and informal downloading, Francesco D. Sandulli found that whilst younger respondents were habitual downloaders, the older members of the study largely accessed their music through formal means of purchasing.[20] Whilst this pattern may have been the result of a correlation between age and income, Sandulli also points to a possible generational divide based on the conflicting values and beliefs of older and younger consumers.[21] The notion that older generations are more sensitive to the ethical dimensions of piracy is not entirely surprising. The concern for the formal sector, however, is that such an attitude as 'everybody's doing it' becomes a default setting for successive generations of media consumers.[22] This, in the process, could be seen to normalise such behaviour, helping to alleviate any lingering sense of personal guilt. The online terrain of informal distribution, therefore, takes on renewed importance as industry professionals and researchers are faced with the increasing normality of piracy as a habitual consumer choice.

There is even an argument that such a concern is exacerbated by the way the digital market tends to blur the boundaries between legal and illegal online access. This is proposed by Stuart Cunningham who suggests that the online environment diminishes the distinctions between the formal and informal because legal and illegal content are accessed through the same screen and through similar pathways.[23] This results in a bewildering market for consumers where the lines between what is legal and what is not are faintly drawn. Lobato even suggests that a number of so-called pirate consumers are most likely unaware they are complicit in copyright infringement.[24] With this in mind, we are not only made aware of the overlapping nature of formal and informal media access, but we are also drawn to the way the informal market 'drives continuing innovation in the formal.[25] Indeed, Choi and Perez argue that despite their stigmatisation, online pirates have become pioneering leaders in the creation of new and innovative digital markets.[26] In this respect, Peter Decherney argues that 'today's pirates are often tomorrow's moguls,' pushing the limits of new technologies in dynamic and innovative ways.[27] For this reason, Joe Karaganis argues that piracy has been the catalyst for the recent emergence of the on-demand paradigm.[28] The former president of the Disney-ABC Television Group, Anne Sweeney, forecast this very destination back in 2006 when approaching the issue of piracy during a conference at Cannes. 'Piracy is a business model,' she argued, one that 'exists to serve a need in the market'.[29] Sweeney's statement provided a refreshingly pragmatic take on the piracy debate. Her views, however, were not shared by the film industry at large.

The War on Piracy

The perceived threat and prevalence of consumer piracy has incited a moral panic in the formal film industry. Driven by British and American interests, the strategic response from governments and the Western media elite has been to entrench the everyday practice of piracy within a language and discourse of criminal transgression. The resulting 'war on piracy' amounts to little more than the moralisation of modern media piracy – a political attempt to shame and criminalise media pirates by portraying the practice as a legal violation of copyright law and a moral breach of 'clean' and 'ethical' behaviour.[30] For instance, Michael Parks demonstrates how FACT (Federation Against Copyright Theft) – Britain's leading trade organisation in the fight against piracy – have attempted to combat consumer piracy with a number of marketing campaigns which appeal to the moral and ethical nature of consumers through a discourse of criminality.[31] This trend was accelerated in the wake of the terrorist attacks in September 2001 as bodies such as FACT sought to exploit the moral outrage towards terrorism by directly associating piracy with terrorist activity. For instance, consider this following passage from an industry report on the apparent threat of DVD piracy,

> The relatively high returns and low risks associated with DVD piracy apparently make it an attractive proposition for criminal organisations and gangs who use it to launder cash and fund other activities. Today, there is hard evidence from across the UK that the people behind the sale of pirate DVDs are also connected to drug dealing, people smuggling and even terrorism.[32]

These types of assertions are indicative of the industry's draconian approach to managing informal distribution. In this respect, the so-called 'war on piracy' has been driven by a rhetoric of fear – an attempt to frame informal practices as a serious form of moral transgression and a sign of rampant criminality. Whilst the accuracy of such a rhetoric is open to debate, the criminalisation of piracy has become a potent weapon for the industry to wield in the battle for control over the circulation of content.[33]

As mentioned earlier, much of the literature on informal distribution has moved beyond such industry rhetoric to explore the dynamics of modern media piracy. Whilst this involves a thoughtful consideration of the industry's response and relationship to piracy, a number of scholars have also sought to expose the industry's approach as a form of ideological control. For instance, Lobato argues that whilst the formal industry share legitimate concerns about the impact of revenue leakage, this so-called 'war on piracy' is 'inevitably driven by a public relations imperative.'[34] This, he claims, is a way of garnering political and public support by reinforcing the 'sanctity' of copyright law and the supposed damage that piracy inflicts on an otherwise powerful industry.[35] Majid Yar further states that industry bodies share a vested interest in exaggerating the damage that piracy causes.[36] Doing so creates a more convincing argument for punitive legal action, the type of which would serve the dominant interests of the formal sector. Indeed, as Crisp notes, the notion that piracy is a destructive force 'belies a specific neoliberal ideological viewpoint that privileges the proprietary rights of the individual

copyright holder over the cultural prosperity of society at large.'[37] For this reason, Jason Rutter claims that what professes to be about ethics and morality is, in fact, a facade concealing the self-serving attitude of the mainstream media elite.[38] Whilst the moral coercion of anti-piracy rhetoric is seen to act in the interests of loyal consumers, this disguises the real need to protect the monopolistic interests of the mainstream formal sector.[39]

This dichotomy between consumers and formal distributors is reinforced by Tarleton Gillespie who notes that piracy and the internet as an alternative delivery method threatens to unbalance the market in favour of consumers.[40] Faced with the newfound 'threat' of consumer empowerment, the film industry turned to defensive and reactionary strategies as a means of preserving their business model and reinforcing their dominant market position.[41] As already discussed, this resulted in the so-called 'war on piracy' which sought to characterise piracy – and the internet in general – as a pervasive threat to the future of commercial film. This had the desired effect of gaining legal support by framing piracy within a context of criminal and moral transgression. For this reason, Lee Marshall describes piracy as an ideological concept rather than an economic one.[42] Copyright, he argues, is not a natural right but a form of rhetorical control which protects the interests of rights holders and reflects the wider power relations between industries and audiences.[43] This reinforces the importance that copyright law plays in balancing the rights of powerful media conglomerates to control the market against the rights of consumers to access the goods they desire at a price they deem reasonable.[44]

High-profile legal cases against the peer-to-peer music service Napster and the BitTorrent media site, The Pirate Bay, both of which were found guilty of violating copyright law, shows the aggressive response of mainstream media industries to protect their interests. Recent legislation, such as the UK's Digital Economy Act 2010, has also provided greater legal support for the formal sector, inciting considerable concern and criticism regarding the perceived disempowerment of consumers and the reinforcement of corporate monopoly.[45] Such legal action serves to remind us that whilst the internet promises the unbounded movement of content and information, parts of the internet can in fact be closed and shut down. Consider this against some of the early, libertarian responses to the internet which promoted freedom and the loosening of top-down autocratic control. Indeed, as Jonathan Zittrain and John Palfrey note, the internet prompted a liberal belief that cyberspace would constitute an alternative jurisdiction beyond the legal reach of the state.[46] The promise, as Lawrence Lessig claims, was the utopian vision of a liberal society – a boundless space which, by its very nature, was ungovernable and free.[47] For this reason, the internet has long elided with the broader democratic principles of social activism and free speech. With this broader discourse in mind, high-profile cases like Napster and The Pirate Bay raise important questions about the democratic potential of the internet and the freedom of online access – issues which this chapter shortly revisits.

That being said, the legal reinforcement of copyright law has hardly hindered the growth of online piracy. Instead, cases such as Napster and The Pirate Bay have seemingly galvanised public support against the perceived violation of digital liberties and the draconian tactics of media conglomerates. Indeed, Bowrey and Anderson state that a decade of increasingly

stringent protection has invigorated a thriving counter-movement in support of the unrestricted sharing of resources and information.[48] In this regard, Chris Rojek considers online piracy and file sharing as a form of social banditry. Indeed, he argues that the practice of downloading becomes an anti-corporate and anti-capitalist form of resistance against the imbalance between the power of media conglomerates and the disempowerment of consumers.[49] This political motivation reflects a broader moral conviction that the internet should serve to strengthen cultural democracy and support consumer empowerment.[50] This is reinforced in a primary study by Lloyd C. Harris and Alexia Dumas on peer-to-peer downloaders. Drawing on the experiences and views of informal media consumers, Harris and Dumas found that piracy was employed as a form of cultural emancipation – a means of fighting against the system and defending the rights of consumers.[51] The same respondents also made reference to the indefensibly high prices of media content as a way of defending their actions.[52] This was echoed in Freestone's and Mitchell's study where younger consumers, in particular, portrayed themselves as the victims of excessive inflation and corporate greed.[53] Therefore, such pricing strategies have seemingly contributed to the growth of informal practices, creating an incentive for those unable to afford such prices, or those who simply contest such greed.[54]

Informal Distribution and the Democratisation of Film Culture

Whilst the practice of piracy can function as a form of political resistance, some have been reluctant to portray informal practices in such a light. Brian Larkin, for instance, describes piracy as nonideological, arguing that informal distribution and consumption do not reflect a self-conscious opposition to capitalism.[55] Lobato also distances piracy from any sort of ideological or political agenda. Rather than perceiving piracy as a form of political resistance, he states that we should be mindful of the ways informal distribution serves millions of people in markets with no legal alternatives.[56] In this respect, piracy functions as a means of access, a banal everyday practice devoid of political intent.[57] Larkin reinforces the importance of this perspective, suggesting that informal distribution is a crucial infrastructure for many consumers who are deprived of legal access to global media content.[58] In making these claims, Lobato and Larkin are right to point out how piracy facilitates access to content, particularly in markets where issues of cost and cultural variety come into play. Even so, this should not detract from the way in which local problems of access are inherently embedded within a range of cultural and political issues. This, as a range of relevant literature attests to, is particularly the case in undeveloped countries or emerging economies where access to global media comes burdened with its own local problems of social and cultural infrastructure.

Indeed, much of the literature on informal distribution examines the prevalence of piracy against the social, cultural, economic and political backdrop of specific national settings. This has contributed to a multi-layered understanding of piracy where locally defined issues intersect with the global practice of piracy. The conservative climate of China, for instance, provides one

such case. Here, piracy has intervened as a viable way of accessing content otherwise rendered inaccessible by the country's crippling quota on foreign content and its restrictive censorship system.[59] In this respect, online piracy enables its users to circumvent the political barriers which hinder access to a wealth of global content. In the context of contemporary India, online piracy serves a different but similarly democratic purpose. Here, under the growing commercial influence of a dominant multiplex culture, piracy provides access to a broader range of domestic and foreign content.[60] This democratic trend is deemed particularly important at a time when India's commercial growth has turned cinemagoing into an increasingly expensive habit reserved for the affluent middle classes.[61] Even recent work on Bulgaria has shown how a dearth of rural cinemas has driven many locals to informal downloading sites as a way of compensating for a lack of cultural infrastructure.[62] Whether dealing with the political restrictions on cultural material or the overwhelming dominance of mainstream films, such research demonstrates how a range of political issues heightens the global dependency on piracy. Most consumers, as Lobato and Larkin state, may not deploy piracy as a conscious form of political resistance. Nevertheless, their increasing dependence on informal distribution is indicative of the political undercurrents which drive the global practice of piracy. In this respect, piracy intervenes as a democratic force, dealing with the underlying problems which influence cultural access at a local level.

Another trend which surfaces in some of the literature on piracy is the role that informal distribution plays in widening access to specialised film in particular. For instance, in *Shadow Economies of Cinema*, Lobato references an article from *The Bangkok Post* published in 2006 about a thriving market for pirated copies of specialised films. Lobato recites a portion of the article which details the pleasures of a 'self-confessed cinephile' in accessing a diverse range of films.[63] Acquiring the likes of Bergman, Fassbinder and Eisenstein, modest market stalls and shops provide access to an array of specialised films which, according to the article's author, would never be screened by formal exhibitors in Thailand.[64] The article also states that these informal copies also come with Thai subtitles, a privilege that most of the expensive and imported formal copies do not provide.[65] In this respect, Lobato recognises that these informal networks of production and exchange 'may be helping to foster a nascent cinephile film culture in Thailand,' one which is evidently modelled on the European paradigm of 'auteur cinema.'[66] This is particularly evident in the work of Jasmine Nadua Trice and Jinying Li who both show how informal distribution gives rise to a form of collective cinephilia – a culture rooted in the practices and traditions which characterise the broader, historical practice of specialised film culture.

Jasmine Nadua Trice draws attention to a network of informal exchange in a notorious market district for pirated goods in Manila. Here, as Nadua Trice explains, locals can purchase a range of specialised material, from bootlegged copies of Criterion DVDs to experimental works by the likes of Maya Deren.[67] As this thesis made clear in the introductory chapter, our understanding of what constitutes specialised film is always prone to the shifting sands of time, taste and geography. What is interesting to note here, though, is that the pirate market for

specialised film in Southeast Asia is largely dependent on the Western model of specialised film culture. Whilst there are inevitable variations from region to region, this demonstrates the global reach of cultural brands and institutions, such as the Criterion Collection, to inform and shape a collective understanding of specialised film. According to Nadua Trice, it is this reliance on the canon of specialised film that lends the area its reputation as a sort of informal cinémathèque.[68] This analogy is strengthened by the way locals have fostered a vibrant online community where likeminded enthusiasts converse through blogs and forums. In particular, Nadua Trice draws attention to the way locals announce their recent purchases and express their desire for certain films in the hope that other members might point them in the right direction.[69] In this respect, there are evident similarities between this online community and those MUBI members that engage in the process of taste formation through the creation of personal lists.

In Jinying Li's work on the 'D-buffs' subculture in urban China, a similar sense of community is mobilised, albeit in more concrete settings. Li traces the rampant growth of disc-based piracy from the late 1990s with the concurrent rise of 'disc buffs' or 'D-buffs' who share a collective passion for collecting and consuming pirated discs. This growth of disc-based piracy coincided with a burgeoning cineaste culture as a series of modest film clubs emerged throughout urban China, hosting weekly screenings of pirated films such as Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959) and Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* (1983).[70] Li references one club in particular which not only screened the canon of specialised film, but also showcased the work of emerging underground Chinese filmmakers, many of which were members themselves.[71] The club, which soon amassed hundreds of loyal members, also organised panels, workshops and even published its own journal.[72] These initatives, therefore, not only fostered a vibrant cineaste community, but also paved the way for a new generation of filmmakers and critics who spoke from the margins of Chinese film culture.[73] As we have seen, these types of educational accompaniments have been a central part of specialised film culture. Indeed, whilst there are certainly some distinctions between the culture Li describes here and the Film Society outlined in Chapter Two, there are also some striking similarities in approach.

This portrait of piracy in Asia provides a further reminder of the ways in which informal networks of exchange can empower consumers by widening access to cultural material. Rather than representing a reckless form of criminality, these forms of piracy provide a much needed cultural service by helping audiences to bypass local issues of access. This strengthens the notion that piracy functions as an alternative network of distribution and exhibition, one that provides access to films which, in most cases, are simply not accessible. What makes these particular cases of piracy so interesting, however, is how informal distribution not only serves to widen access, but also plays a central role in fostering a thriving culture for specialised film. Whether congregating at public screenings or conversing online through forums and blogs, piracy makes these types of communities possible. These portraits of piracy also serve to remind us that the practice or concept of cinephilia is no longer the privilege of Western culture. Indeed, Laurent Jullier and Jean-Marc Leveratto claim that the increasing climate of globalisation means that 'cinephilia is not an exclusive characteristic of Western societies.'[74] In

facilitating the global flow of media goods, informal networks of distribution such as those evidenced by Jasmine Nadua Trice, have been and continue to be at the forefront of expanding cinephilia beyond the Western world.

However, whilst piracy fosters a sort of global cinephilia by widening access to a range of cultural content, we must not conflate the practice of informal distribution and consumption with the types of developing or non-Western countries cited above. Reinforcing this point, Virginia Crisp rightly states that we must avoid the narrow-minded and ethnocentric argument that portrays piracy as some 'ingrained characteristic of some imagined Other.'[75] Rather than submitting to this portrayal, we should be mindful of the ways in which British and American governments, in particular, have distorted the piracy debate by stigmatising non-Western nations as being integral to the growth and rampancy of media piracy. In truth, this form of Othering has a tendency to distract from the ways in which informal means of media circulation and consumption have also prospered and thrived in the Western world. Indeed, as Martin Fredriksson argues, the prevalence of piracy and filesharing across much of Europe and North America, along with the increasingly liberal attitudes of younger generations towards informal media exchange, serves to remind us that piracy is a Western phenomenon.[76] But what drives the Western practice of piracy?

Earlier, we saw how informal media consumers engage with piratical practices as a conscious form of cultural and political resistance. For those who see themselves as victims of corporate greed, piracy constitutes an active stand against the predatory tactics of the mainstream media – what Rojek describes as a symbol of social liberty and a 'source of anticorporatist identity'.[77] More important is the emphasis that primary studies on piracy in Western countries place on infrastructural issues of access and cost rather than purely political motivations. For instance, Harris and Dumas discovered that many of their respondents resorted to informal distribution because of the crippling costs of purchasing media content.[78] Brett Robert Caraway's survey on over three-hundred peer-to-peer users in developed countries also encountered the same finding with just over half citing reasons such as 'unemployment, financial hardship and the high cost of content.'[79] In the same survey, over 30 per cent of respondents also referred to the difficulty of accessing more specialised content through formal means.[80] This was also found in a similar study on copyright and piracy with many participants defending their right to use filesharing sites in cases where media products were not available through formal channels.[81] Harris and Dumas unearthed a similar motivation, with nearly half of the sample citing 'the value of discovery' as a motivating factor.[82] No longer restricted by what the mainstream media serve, consumers reported that this newfound freedom enabled them to discover new films and music, resulting in a broadening of cultural taste.

What becomes clear, then, throughout the range of relevant literature is how the issues that drive the Western practice of piracy are strikingly similar to those experienced throughout the rest of the world. In saying this, my intention is not to conflate the different national and regional differences that stimulate the growth of piracy. My point, however, is that problems of

access and affordability are universal factors which drive media consumers around the world towards informal networks of exchange. Again, by saying this, my intention is not to give the impression that social and cultural problems such as wage depression and levels of poverty are much the same in Britain or America as they are in less advanced parts of the world. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that the inflated costs of accessing media content through formal channels also hits the pockets of those residing in the wealthiest and most advanced nations in the world. The same is particularly true of access which, in formal Western markets, tends to be heavily weighted towards a model of scarcity. In light of these issues, Zachary Campbell when discussing the contemporary state of Western cinephilia makes a forceful appeal for the cinephile's right to stake a claim in the fight for piracy. Campbell claims that cinephiles are inherently curious, striving to explore the diverse terrain of international film.[83] With this in mind, he argues that cinephiles should not be forced to settle for the limited selection offered by the formal sector.[84] In response, Campbell proposes an active form of resistant cinephilia. He states, 'Our narrative must be one of bridgebuilding and smuggling, of collective networks whose decentralized autarchy becomes increasingly difficult to tame, bribe, control, instruct.'[85] He claims that whilst the classical cinephilia of the past 'was a struggle marked by jutting elbows in the lobbies of art museums and lecture halls', today's cinephilia fights for something altogether different.[86] Today's cinephilia, he says, 'fights for its autonomy, its right and capacity to use technologies', such as the internet and piracy, which are free from the burden of corporate control and liberated from the profit-driven companies that seek to limit cultural choice.[87] So, far from being a morally and legally dubious endeavour, Campbell exonerates the cinephile's right to engage with informal distribution as a means of empowerment – as a way of challenging the model of scarcity and widening the pathways of cultural access.

With this in mind, the rest of this chapter draws on a particular case study of an online filesharing site that specialises in rare and niche material. Like Campbell's proposal for a 'decentralized autarchy', this is a site that operates in the shadows and away from the influence of formal gatekeepers who put profits before choice. In discussing this site, one of my aims is to show how the burgeoning practice of filesharing culture is governed according to its own internal rules and logic, rather than being dictated to by the formal sector. As discussed, this culture draws on specific behavioural codes and forms of conduct which are not exclusive to the site discussed, but are part of a wider trend in peer-to-peer networks. Following this, we can see how one of the site's defining features provides an interesting counterpoint to the previous discussion of piracy. Indeed, up to now, informal distribution has been portrayed as a liberating force in the cultural landscape, democratising public access to a range of media content. As some of the literature has proved, this has been particularly influential when it comes to specialised film which has long occupied a position on the margins of the media landscape. However, what the following discussion shows is that online piracy is not without its own exclusionary politics which can hinder access and limit the wider circulation of specialised film. This not only contradicts the apparent principles of cultural freedom and democracy which

underpin the practice of piracy, but also goes against the internet's supposed capacity to break down social and cultural barriers.

The Black Crow Club and the Social Politics of Filesharing

Published in *Film Comment* in 2009, the article 'Black Crow Blues' details the experiences of an Argentinian film critic named Quintín who gains access to a secret and exclusive club for downloading and sharing specialised films. To preserve the anonymity of the site, Quintín refers to the service as 'Black Crow,' hence the title of the article. Like many of those on the margins of cultural access, Quintín's motivation to enter the Black Crow club stemmed from the same recurring issues which curtail the broader public access to a diverse range of content. For instance, he describes the local market for formal and informal DVDs as being entirely mainstream-dominated.[88] He also claims that buying imports is not only an expensive hobby but is also restricted by law.[89] In this respect, piracy is employed as an alternative means of accessing a broader spectrum of content. Indeed, as a number of studies have shown throughout this chapter, piracy functions as a form of intervention designed to circumvent the cultural, economic and political barriers which hinder public access at a local level.

Throughout the article, Quintín describes his initiation into this 'downloading paradise' where even the most obscure and specialised content can be found.[90] The work of John Ford, Ernst Lubitsch, Fassbinder, Chris Marker and Frederick Wiseman are some of those mentioned along with the description provided by the Black Crow member that invites Quintín to join, claiming that 'in Black Crow you will find everything: 1940s Hungarian cinema, biopics of African serial killers, *everything* by *all* of the masters Godard/Herzog/et al., the most obscure and inaccessible documentary by Farocki – all in respectable quality, with full credits, links to subtitles, etc.'[91] For this reason, Quintín aptly describes membership as granting access to 'the entire history of cinema.'[92] For a passionate but stifled cineaste like Quintín, the Black Crow club appears to reinforce the democratic principles of both piracy and online distribution – a boundless, cultural utopia overflowing with the diverse pleasures of international film. Such optimism, however, soon diminished. What appeared democratic and unburdened by cultural and political gatekeepers soon proved to be deeply hierarchical. Indeed, for much of this brief article, Quintín describes his encounters with the internal politics of the Black Crow club where reciprocal codes of behaviour govern the inner workings of this secret society. What emerges is a complex portrait of file-sharing culture.

Firstly, Quintín discovers that not everything is readily available. Instead, gaining access to many films is contingent on other members granting that access by sharing the film with the group. This is consistent with the mechanics of peer-to-peer sharing rather than being exclusive to the Black Crow club. Nevertheless, it reinforces how online piracy does not entirely diminish the influence that gatekeepers play in mediating access – even though peer-to-peer gatekeepers are less inclined to deprive downloaders of choice. Indeed, whilst this realisation somewhat undermines the initial promise made by the Black Crow member, Quintín never

indicates that the club is hampered by a lack of choice. The following revelation, however, does weaken this promise of a gateway to a more democratic form of cultural access. As Quintín notes,

> […] the main drawback is that in order to maintain your membership, the goddess of Black Crow demands that the faithful pay tribute: they must submit a certain numbers of bytes to the other members, in exchange for downloads from the archives. The exchange rate of this sacrifice is known as the "ratio" and is calculated as the quotient between the "uploaded" and the "downloaded."[93]

Within days of becoming a member, Quintín was reprimanded and warned with expulsion for failing to balance this ratio – a threat that was subsequently implemented only for Quintín to be re-invited back. Quintín recounts his subsequent efforts to play by the rules as an intricate, even moderately stressful process of stabilising this ratio between downloads and uploads,

> Torrent technology allows users to download a film not only from the user who first makes the file available (known to Torrentheads as a "seeder"), but from the other members who are also downloading it ("leechers"). In order to download a film without upsetting my ratio, other users had to be downloading from me too. Fleet-footed users begin downloading the moment a file is made available and in many cases will have already split before you can even begin.[94]

Because of these stipulations, Quintín further explains how the Black Crow club advises its members to download films which are more likely to appeal to a wider portion of the membership, rather than more obscure content. In this respect, we can safely assume that the more obscure material would be harder to come by than the classics or the mainstays of specialised film. Indeed, Quintín states that at one stage he had accumulated a 'treasure collection of Fords, Markers, Lubitschs, Argentos, and Wisemans among others'.[95] That being said, there is no strong reason to believe that more obscure specialised content is never made available, only that members are less likely to upload films with marginal appeal within the community.

As Quintín alludes to in the passage above, the practice of leeching is a prominent part of filesharing culture. Virginia Crisp states that despite the apparent emphasis on sharing and reciprocity, those who engage in the practice of filesharing can be leechers who download purely for their own opportunistic gain.[96] The cultural practice of filesharing has suppressed the distinction between distributor and consumer by enabling people to supply as well as consume media content. The practice of leeching, however, reminds us that not everyone who uses filesharing sites actively seeks to distribute material.[97] As already established, Black Crow not only frowns upon leeching, but also prevents its members from doing so by enforcing a strict ratio. Failure to comply can result in expulsion from the group – a threat made evidently real by Quintín's experience. Crisp encountered the same system when researching two online forums dedicated to the circulation and discussion of East Asian film. Crisp describes how one of the forums follows a strictly enforced process to ensure that members evenly spread the burden of filesharing. Like the system imposed by Black Crow, this involves a ratio between downloading

and sharing which members must adhere to in order to maintain their privileges.[98] File sharers are also expected to honour certain customs of good behaviour. For instance, Quintín makes reference to another filesharing club (he calls this site 'The Home of the Polite' to again preserve its anonymity) which not only enforces the same ratio driven rules as Black Crow and others, but also insists that its members obey certain forms of etiquette. For instance, once members download a film, they are obliged to extend their gratitude by directly thanking the member who uploaded the file.[99]

There are two important points to make here. Firstly, access to specialised film through membership clubs like Black Crow are dependent on the willingness of members (and to some extent their capacity) to abide by the rules. As Quintín writes, 'In this downloading paradise, cinephiles can obtain whatever they desire – provided they obey strictly enforced rules.'[100] Secondly, it is rather striking to see how filesharing sites like Black Crow operate according to their own internal logic. That is to say that they function like a sort of virtual community or society governed by their own rules and regulations, their own customs and behavioural habits, their own hierarchies of power and prestige and, importantly, their own forms of inclusion and exclusion. Like Caraway states, despite its reputation as a reclusive and antisocial form of behaviour, filesharing is rooted in deeply complex codes of social interaction – albeit in a virtual sense.[101] For instance, some have interpreted the reciprocal structure of filesharing as a modern form of 'gift economy,' an anthropological concept introduced by Bronisław Malinowski and explored, in particular, through the later work of Claude Levi-Strauss and the sociologist Marcel Mauss. Both looked at customs of exchange within primitive tribal communities and how the process of giving and receiving comes loaded with symbolic capital. In his influential study entitled *The Gift*, Mauss argued that gift giving in many archaic cultures was not simply performed as an altruistic practice. Instead, he claimed that the practice of giving gifts was coded with coercive forms of social pressure to return the gesture. 'In theory', he said, 'such gifts are voluntary but in fact they are given and repaid under obligation.'[102] In this respect, the exchange of goods is bound in an implicit social contract between the giver and the receiver, where reciprocity is less a symbol of benevolence and more a social necessity.

Importantly, this reciprocal process also relates to the social politics of power. Levi-Strauss particularly pursued this trend by drawing direct comparisons between modern and primitive rituals of gift giving. In particular, he drew an analogy between the exchange of gifts during Christmas and the indigenous ritual of potlatch, a gift-giving tradition practiced by Native American tribes to symbolise wealth and social standing. The excessive culture of gift giving at Christmas which is embraced 'with a sort of sacred ardour, is nothing other than a gigantic *potlatch*,' he proclaimed.[103] Levi-Strauss referred to this ritual of Christmas gift giving in Western capitalist economies as a 'destruction of wealth', a tradition which compels individuals to spend abundant sums of money on gifts which carry symbolic value for the giver and receiver.[104] 'Goods are not only economic commodities,' he said, 'but vehicles and instruments for realities of another order, such as power, influence, sympathy, status and emotion'.[105] Later scholars would largely reinforce this argument, arguing that goods assumed a new symbolic value under

the climate of Western consumer culture. This is perhaps most embodied by Jean Baudrillard who spoke of objects and their consumption not in relation to 'use value' but 's*ymbolic exchange* value'.[106] 'It is certain', Baudrillard said, 'that objects are the carriers of indexed social significations, of social and cultural hierarchy'.[107] Levi-Strauss's analogy between potlatch and the capitalist ritual of Christmas gift giving is not without its critics.[108] Nevertheless, the way that Levi-Strauss and others have emphasised the symbolic value and exchange of goods draws our attention to the hierarchical nature of giving and receiving – something which scholars have drawn on when discussing piracy and filesharing.

Bart Cammaerts, for instance, states that those who invest their time and energy into the laborious process of recording and uploading digital content are revered and elevated within that particular filesharing scene.[109] These informal distributors, he says, are bestowed with greater levels of symbolic capital where their enhanced status grants them with a renewed sense of authority.[110] Crisp reinforces this very argument when discussing how members of the specialist forums she was analysing attained greater prestige amongst their peers in a number of different ways. For one of the forums, Crisp notes how a member that boasts more uploads than downloads gains newfound respect within that community, acting as an indicator of symbolic capital.[111] Depending on the forum, Crisp notes how other factors such as length of membership and the amount of threads started or posts made can also elevate a member's in-group status. The fact that this information is recorded and made visible for other members to view implies that such data assumes particular importance when it comes to mapping the social hierarchy of member status. Whilst Quintín's article makes no direct reference to any sort of membership hierarchy on Black Crow, we can see how similar forms of capital would impact on the social experience of the group. Indeed, in keeping with the openness of the peer-to-peer format, we certainly know from the article that members actively download content from other members. This means that users like Quintín can see what films other members have uploaded and downloaded. We might assume, therefore, that members who provide access to rare and hard-to-find material – 'the most obscure and inaccessible documentary by Farocki' to repeat the words of Quintín's benefactor – would secure the esteem and veneration of their peers, elevating them in the hierarchy of peer-to-peer politics.

What seems particularly striking about the Black Crow club, however, especially in the context of this thesis, is the way the service is governed by its own imposed sense of exclusivity. Indeed, as Quintín's experience demonstrates, membership is secured as a social privilege with members being handpicked for their apparent suitability to the group. This conscious decision to actively prevent the access of 'outsiders' seems to counteract the democratic principles of piracy. Not only this, but the exclusivity of the Black Crow club appears to undermine the apparent utopianism of the internet – a digital realm freed from the clutches of the social and political elite where crippling social divisions are suppressed. The last part of this chapter draws on this tension between the apparent democracy of the internet and piracy and the evident restriction of access imposed by the Black Crow club. Whilst this chapter has already made clear how piracy serves to widen access to cultural material, it is worth briefly elaborating on the supposed

openness and unrestricted nature of the internet. Indeed, one of the most prevalent claims that emerged with the growth of the internet and digital culture was the 'end of geography' thesis advocated by digital optimists such as Nicholas Negroponte and Frances Cairncross. The general argument poses a new global order where the internet and advancements in information technology collapse the geographical and social barriers which have seemingly hindered human progress. The resulting scenario gives rise to new social, cultural and economic opportunities.

The Internet and the 'Collapse' of Social Division

As discussed in Chapter Three, much of the optimistic rhetoric that surrounds the advent of online distribution stems from the internet's 'ability to break the barriers of geographic tyranny'.[112] In the context of film circulation, this is based on the notion that online distribution is inherently liberating and democratic because the internet transcends the limitations of physical space. Indeed, no longer tethered to the theatrical market or restricted by the limited space on retailers' shelves, niche content is granted a newfound sense of freedom. The 'end of geography' thesis advances a similar libertarian argument but with a greater emphasis on transcending the physical limitations of distance. This argument has been practiced by a range of writers such as Frances Cairncross who Vincent Mosco refers to as 'one of the leading prophets of the end of geography' thesis.[113] In the aptly titled *The Death of Distance,* Cairncross strived to produce a compelling account of the revolutionary impact of the internet, touching on everything from its potential to liberate information to its promise to enrich commercial practice. The internet, she claimed, serves a multitude of functions, not only providing a new form of communication but also acting as a burgeoning marketplace, an archive and a global means of distribution.[114] She argued that the internet's capacity to transcend geographical restrictions means that barriers and borders will collapse and that information and resources will flow with unrestricted ease. For this reason, she argued that 'the communications revolution is profoundly democratic and liberating, levelling the imbalance between large and small, rich and poor.'[115]

In *Being Digital,* Nicholas Negroponte proposed the very same argument, claiming that digital culture would liberate human experience by abolishing the physical limitations of geography.[116] 'Digital living', he said, 'will include less and less dependence upon being in a specific place at a specific time, and the transmission of place itself will start to become possible.'[117] In the book's epilogue titled 'An Age of Optimism', Negroponte drew particular attention to the democratic and humanitarian promise of digital technology,

> Today, when 20 percent of the world consumes 80 percent of its resources, when a quarter of us have an acceptable standard of living and three-quarters don't, how can this divide possibly come together? While the politicians struggle with the baggage of history, a new generation is emerging from the digital landscape free of many of the old prejudices. These kids are released from the limitation of geographic proximity as the sole basis of friendship, collaboration, play, and neighborhood. Digital technology can be a natural force drawing people into greater world harmony.[118]

This unreservedly utopian perspective clearly echoes the point that Cairncross made about 'levelling the imbalance between large and small, rich and poor.'[119] Despite this optimism, Negroponte does concede that digital technology has a dark and sinister side, suggesting that the internet can facilitate aberrant and transgressive behaviour.[120] Even so, Negroponte emphasises his optimism and reinforces the internet's utopian potential to build a brighter future.

For the purposes of this chapter, the most important point to take from this 'end of geography' thesis is the emphasis that Cairncross and Negroponte place on the breakdown of social divisions. This rather romanticised assumption envisages a world devoid of crippling social conflict – a social order no longer governed by disparity or disharmony but one where universal access liberates and empowers the social collective. This apparent demise of social boundaries brought about by the internet and digital culture was interrogated by other writers during this period. Their approach, however, marked a slight departure from the optimistic rhetoric of Negroponte and Cairncross. Writers such as Joshua Meyrowitz and the late William J. Mitchell presented a less romanticised account of digital change. Here, attention was given to the way digital advancements are seen to disrupt the longstanding relationship between physical place, human experience and social identity. For instance, Meyrowitz in the provocatively titled *No Sense of Place* grappled with the impact that electronic media was having on social behaviour. In doing so, he anticipated the social repercussions of digital culture. His main argument was that forms of electronic media had subverted 'the traditional relationship between physical setting and social situation.'[121] For Meyrowitz, the perceived differences between separate social groups were 'supported by the division of people into very different experiential worlds.'[122] Such division was partly maintained 'by the isolation of different people in different places, which led to different social identities based on the specific and limited experiences available in given locations.'[123] The following passage expands on this deep-rooted relationship between place and identity,

> The relationship between group identity and group territory is tied to the traditional relationship between place and information access. To be "in" a group – to share its experience and information – one once had to be in the proper place. By being isolated together in the same or similar places, members of groups have generally lived in their own information worlds. The traditional information characteristics of physical places have insulated participants and created the type of shared but special information-systems that unite group members and separate them from "outsiders." Access to a group's territory was once the primary means of incorporation into the group.[124]

This longstanding relationship between place and group identity has its theoretical roots across a range of disciplines, such as the philosophical work of Martin Heidegger and Henri Lefebvre who both saw space as central to human experience; the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu who wrote about places sustaining social division by serving as 'landmarks and beacons' to the relevant social group;[125] and the human and cultural geography of scholars like Yi-Fi Tuan and Edward Relph who offered a humanistic and experiential perspective on space and place. Other influential writers such as Michel Foucault, Edward Soja and Doreen Massey have also made

their own distinctive contributions to this richly discursive terrain. Each of these writers, from Heidegger to Massey, have brought their own nuances to this relationship between space, place and identity. Scrutinising these variations is not necessary for our purposes here – neither is clarifying the distinctions between 'space' and 'place.'[126] But making note of these roots serves to reinforce the structural foundations of Meyrowitz's argument.

Whilst Meyrowitz emphasised the importance of this relationship between place and identity, he argued that electronic media subverts this relationship, giving rise to a 'change in the structure of situations'.[127] As already established, Meyrowitz reinforced the importance of the longstanding relationship between place and identity. Distinctions between social groups, he said, were 'supported by the isolation of different people in different places, which led to different social identities based on the specific and limited experiences available in given locations.'[128] He argued, however, that electronic media serves a democratic function by enabling people to access the type of information that was previously only available in certain social places or distinct 'experiential worlds.'[129] This, he suggested, means that 'electronic media – especially television – has led to the overlapping of many social spheres that were once distinct.'[130] 'By severing the traditional link between physical location and social situation,' Meyrowitz argued that electronic media blurred the placed-bound identities that upheld social distinction.[131] People's perception of 'them' and us' became less clearly defined because flows of information were no longer tethered to social, physical places.

Whilst Meyrowitz is guilty of replicating the type of technological determinism that has coloured other accounts of technological change – including online distribution of course – his argument is an important step towards the rhetoric of digital freedom and the lowering of social barriers. As we have seen with the work of Cairncross and Negroponte, the growing influence of the internet throughout the 1990s gave new depth to this argument, as further evidenced by the work of William J. Mitchell. Published in 1995, Mitchell's book *City of Bits* sought to explore how cyberspace was redefining the human experience. Like Negroponte (whose book *Being Digital* was published in the same year) and others, Mitchell perceived the internet as having a profound and transformative effect on society and human interaction. In particular, Mitchell devoted much of his attention to redefining the relationship between space, identity and human subjectivity. He argued that the internet 'negates geometry.'[132] Whilst he made reference to the internet's own topology of nodes and bits, he claimed that the internet is 'fundamentally and profoundly *antispatial*.'[133] Mitchell talked about cyberspace as a social canvas to be traversed and navigated but in a non-material and incorporeal sense. He said, for instance, that we travel 'from place to place in cyberspace by following logical links rather than paths.'[134] Unlike social and physical places, he argued that the internet lacks any discernible shape or physical features; its multiple destinations are not reducible to points on a map. Instead, he envisioned a spaceless geography, a virtual world devoid of physical properties. This was evident in Mitchell's striking vision of a new global and interconnected city – the eponymous 'city of bits',

> This will be a city unrooted to any definite spot on the surface of the earth, shaped by connectivity and bandwidth constraints rather than by accessibility and land values, largely

> asynchronous in its operation, and inhabited by disembodied and fragmented subjects who exist as collections of aliases and agents. Its places will be constructed virtually by software instead of physically from stones and timbers, and they will be connected by logical linkages rather than by doors, passageways, and streets.[135]

As mentioned earlier, one of the areas that Mitchell focused on was the way this new and incorporeal form of living disrupted the traditional relationship between space, identity and human subjectivity. Like Meyrowitz, Mitchell reinforced the way that public space informs and shapes human identity. With his background in urban design, Mitchell drew particular attention to the urban experience which he described as a sort of social and cultural code. He stated that in the standard spatial city, where you are largely reveals who you are.[136] 'Geography is destiny', he claimed, constructing 'representations of crisp and often brutal clarity.'[137] In this respect, Mitchell spoke of places like nodes on a social map, coded to convey certain connotations which everyone can read and deconstruct. In light of the internet, however, Mitchell proposed that cyberspace 'eliminates a traditional dimension of civil legibility.'[138] By relocating human interaction from social space to cyberspace, he argued that the internet disables the relationship between place and identity. Rooted in a virtual world of communication, people are no longer able to define themselves by being present in the 'right' place and in the 'right' company.[139]

In proposing this form of social retreat, Mitchell outlined the way in which the internet collapses social barriers by facilitating greater access and participation. For instance, he claimed that with the internet 'structures of access and exclusion are reconstrued in entirely nonarchitectural terms, […] and you enter and exit places not by physical travel, but by simply establishing and breaking logical linkages.'[140] This can result in a sort of digital trespassing, exposing groups to the intrusion of 'others' disguised under the cloak of anonymity. This was articulated by Meyrowitz in *No Sense of Place*,

> By severing the traditional link between physical location and social situation, for example, electronic media may begin to blur previously distinct group identities by allowing people to "escape" informationally from place-defined groups and by permitting outsiders to "invade" many groups' territories without ever entering them.[141]

It is worth briefly noting that this discussion regarding space, place and identity can sometimes stray into Bourdieusian territory. Indeed, passages of Mitchell's book evidently theorises space as a form of social control and a canvas for social demarcation. For instance, he referred to spatial cities as 'elaborate structures for organizing and controlling access.'[142] The issue with this approach, however, is the way in which access and social identity are sometimes interpreted in a deterministic way – as though space steers people towards some sort of predetermined path where places actively impede the access of social 'outsiders.' Leading back to the influential but problematic work of Bourdieu and Heidegger, space is perceived here as a geographical embodiment of distinct social division, an approach that Doreen Massey was particularly critical of. Arguing for a more dynamic and global treatment of space and place, she claimed that one of the main problems with Heidegger's approach is the way definitive

boundaries are constructed.[143] She argued that this reinforces an imaginary conception of 'them and us', one which ignores the way that identity (both human identity and the identity of places) in the modern world is a plural concept, something to be shaped and reshaped.[144] In truth, the broader debates around space, place and identity transcend the scope of this chapter. Instead, the important point to take from the likes of Meyrowitz, Mitchell and others is the way they emphasise the openness of the internet and its potential to make information, resources and 'places' more accessible than physical public space allows. Indeed, as the passage above from Meyrowitz suggests, the internet enables its users to infiltrate different 'worlds' of information where they can sample the virtues of different cultures and access the type of information that was otherwise rooted in certain cultural spaces. The Black Crow club, however, subverts this logic.

Earlier, we saw how the recent litigations against Napster and The Pirate Bay can effectively block access to certain sites online. Whilst online piracy remains a rampant practice, such legal efforts do remind us that some 'dark corners' of the internet can indeed be shut down and restricted. The case of Black Crow, however, presents a different account where wider public access is impeded. In Chapter Two, we saw how the interwar years witnessed the growth of what Joachim Lembach refers to as 'a highly polarised film culture.'[145] For Lembach, this division was rooted in 'the cultural and intellectual snobbery' which stood at the heart of a class-ridden British society.[146] In this respect, Lembach rightly points to the role that social distinction played in stratifying cultural consumption and pushing specialised film to the margins of British life. For instance, in the second chapter we saw how the Film Society imposed a costly membership fee which had the desired effect of hindering the wider participation of the public. We also saw how the Society cultivated an intellectual approach to the study and appreciation of film, something which Jamie Sexton claims was used 'as a cultural weapon drawing a qualitative difference between its members and the audience that attended commercial cinemas.'[147]

This sense of elitist distinction has certainly softened over the years. Indeed, Chapter Two briefly touched on the transitionary phase in the 1970s and 1980s as a new breed of exhibitor emerged. Spearheaded by the likes of Screen, this new breed of exhibitor sought to distance themselves from the archaic politics of highbrow distinction and social exclusion that characterised the Film Society and similar institutions. We have also seen how the exhibition sector in Britain has more recently moved towards a more commericial model of business. Nevertheless, what we can see with the Black Crow club are the residual effects of a culture driven by the need for distinction – a culture rooted in a sort of social demarcation that actively marks specialised film as the privilege of a certain 'type' of person, hence why Black Crow members only invite those they deem 'worthy' enough. Firstly, this appears to counteract the principles of empowerment and freedom of access which underpin the global practice of piracy. Secondly, given our discussion regarding the internet's apparent capacity to collapse social barriers, the Black Crow club serves to counter this promise of social utopianism whilst also undermining the structural openness of the internet. In this regard, the Black Crow club reminds us that issues of social exclusion and division are not simply abolished online. Instead, these

issues have the potential to migrate online where the barriers of exclusion and division are redrawn. Therefore, given our knowledge of the role that distinction and exclusion has played in shaping the culture of specialised film, we can apply Manuel Castells rather apt assessment that advances in technology and modern forms of 'electronic media do not depart from traditional cultures: they absorb them.'[148]

Conclusion

Like a number of scholars that have made their mark in the field of media piracy, this discussion of informal distribution has shifted the attention away from the criminal overtones that often dominates the piracy debate. Instead, the emphasis here has been on the concept of piracy as an alternative network of distribution and exhibition. Rather than perceiving piracy as a mindless form of criminality, this chapter has embraced the notion that informal distribution empowers the modern consumer, bypassing the restrictions imposed by the dominant media elite and serving a democratic function by widening cultural access to a newfound array of content. We saw in a range of developing nations how informal distribution, whether online or physical media, can overcome a range of local problems which serve to limit cultural access. Whether crippling social poverty or the overbearing dominance of mainstream culture, informal distribution serves to counter these prevalent issues at a local level. Piracy, therefore, enables people from across the world to participate in the global flow of culture, offering 'routes to knowledge, development, and citizenship.'[149] Some, such as Jasmine Nadua Trice, have even shown how informal distribution has helped to cultivate a nascent cinephile culture. The second part of this chapter, however, shifted the focus away from this portrait of cultural empowerment.

Focusing on an article about a secret filesharing site, the case of the Black Crow club provided a vehicle through which to explore the issue of informal online access. In theory, the Black Crow club provides a gateway to a richly diverse collection of content – a 'downloading paradise' for cinephiles. In practice, the club is governed by a complex array of rules and behavioural codes which partly undermine the site's initial promise to democratise access. Most striking is the way the Black Crow club actively excludes the wider participation of those deemed unsuitable for membership. As suggested, this type of highbrow distinction is consistent with the type of social elitism which has partly served to limit the wider appeal of specialised film, particularly in its primitive years of development under the stewardship of the Film Society. Quintín even raises his initial discomfort regarding the exclusive nature of the site, noting how 'this private club seemed to have little to do with the democratic ideals of filmgoing.'[150] Considering that this is only one of many thousands of informal and filesharing sites, my intention is not to imply that the Black Crow club is somehow indicative of the broader culture of online piracy. Nevertheless, Quintín's experience shows how the politics of distinction which have partly characterised the history of specialised film culture have not been entirely abolished with the move online. We might say, then, that despite the perceived freedom and

openness of the internet, ‘The virtual world has very definite geographies of inclusion and exclusion.’[151]

Chapter Seven
Conclusion: The Future for Specialised Film

The Future for Specialised Film

Earlier, this thesis considered the history of film distribution in Britain with a particular focus on the patterns and practices which have curtailed the wider circulation of specialised film. This discussion formed the basis for the rest of this thesis where the emphasis has been on the current state of play. In particular, this has been in response to the optimistic claims that the advent of online distribution functions as a powerful form of cultural democratisation. Considering this thesis has addressed a range of issues around access to specialised film in both a historical and contemporary sense, this conclusion completes this linearity by offering some thoughts on the future of specialised film. Again, my discussions with industry professionals prove their value, all of which were asked to comment on the same closing question: 'What role do you think online distribution will play in dictating the future for specialised film and is that future a bright and optimistic one?' In addressing the future of specialised film, these responses provide a platform with which to revisit some of the central themes and issues this thesis has considered. Some of the responses are worth reciting at length.

Following on from the optimism of Chapter Three, the contributions of industry professionals in Chapter Four helped to paint a more complex portrait of the digital landscape. Addressing a range of issues such as the continued importance of theatrical distribution and the enduring influence of placement and visibility in dictating consumer choice, this discussion demonstrated how a number of barriers of the past retain their presence online. In this respect, this was not an account of wholesale disruption. Instead, this was a more pragmatic analysis of online distribution, one rooted in the everyday realities of a competitive market where a range of issues and barriers have to be navigated before realising the theoretical potential of online distribution. Despite this, the general response regarding the future prospects of specialised film in a digital market were largely positive. For instance, take this response from Amy Basil of MUBI,

> [The future is] incredibly bright. There's so much great work out there that is so criminally under-represented in most markets and there is a huge opportunity for online, done in an intelligent way, that can provide a very meaningful platform for those films that by any other old commercial model wouldn't have a chance in hell. [Take] *Arabian Nights*, that film was the hot ticket in Cannes last year. Everyone wanted to see it and everyone loved it and it was really well reviewed and everyone was really excited about it […] and there's so much work out there that's like that – does really well on the festival circuit, gets really well reviewed, people really like it but because [of] the commercial realities of the business here or in any other territory [many of those films are not given the chance] […]. [So] I think [digital] does really represent an opportunity to take those films and show them to people that really care

> about them and that's exactly the audience we have. […] I think it's really important to champion that work and I think that work is out there waiting to be championed, but no one's really doing it, not in the traditional way at least. I think that's the real opportunity […] so I find that very exciting to be honest with you.[1]

Basil's optimism is hardly surprising given MUBI's recent success as a digital platform. What this statement reinforces, though, is that VoD when 'done in an intelligent way' as Basil states, can become a beacon of hope for the wider circulation of specialised content. Indeed, whilst the type of films that Basil discusses are often neglected and marginalised in physical markets, VoD represents a new opportunity to support such work and develop a more diverse film culture. This is not to suggest that VoD is immune to the commercial pressures and economic strains of physical distribution. Indeed, as Basil states, 'what it actually takes to release a film and even to release a film in a small way is very labour intensive and it costs a lot of money, even in the ways that we're doing it which is highly efficient. You have to put a good amount of risk – cash on the table – to get a film out there. It's not like digital has taken that risk away.'[2] Basil's emphasis on the need to approach VoD 'in an intelligent way' also reminds us that online distribution is not the immediate solution that many suggest. The likes of Peter Broderick, for instance, advance the fanciful claim that the internet empowers filmmakers to bypass the gatekeepers of the 'old world' and to reach a global audience online. Whilst this in theory is true, MUBI proves that audiences need content curated for them, particularly in a volume-heavy market. Basil's reference to *Arabian Nights* – released in cinemas by New Wave Films prior to its launch online – also serves to remind us that the theatrical market retains its influence online, creating the awareness and profile needed to stimulate audience demand.

Like Amy Basil, Philip Hoile of Bulldog Film Distribution also provides an optimistic response concerning the future for niche and specialised content,

> At the moment, it's still a very changing landscape and there's lots of different ways people can access [content] and so it's hard to tell what the marketplace and opportunities will be exactly like in, let's say, five years' time […]. But I think digital does offer a lot of great opportunities and it's exciting to try and use different platforms and find audiences and ultimately for a business […] and […] making money, those opportunities are there and we've had some success already and hopefully we'll keep having success. […] I feel positive about digital and what it can do for film and companies like us for sure.[3]

Hoile rightly acknowledges that the mutable state of the digital landscape could yet present new opportunities and barriers for content online. In this respect, he suggests that assessing the future with any great accuracy is difficult to gauge. Broadly speaking, however, Hoile does envisage a positive future for distributors like Bulldog and the content they represent. Like Basil, this optimism is partly predicated on the basis that distributors are both astute and proactive, developing strategies for distribution and engaging with new forms of technology to best exploit the opportunities afforded by VoD. This is reflected in Hoile's comment about employing different platforms and seeking out audiences – consistent with the recurring emphasis Hoile placed during our discussion on the need to stimulate audience interest. In this regard, Hoile

makes reference to the innovative ways that distributors and filmmakers can generate awareness of a film. For instance, Hoile gives a general example of a social issue documentary around a certain topic or controversy which perhaps has a small but passionate and vocal group of supporters.[4] In such a case, Hoile states that by engaging with such supporters, perhaps through social media, then this can foster word of mouth value, generating traffic to the film.[5] In this respect, Hoile states that in order to stimulate public interest and improve a film's visibility online, 'it is always about resource in one way shape or form, but that's not necessarily financial resource.'[6] Indeed, whilst niche distributors and filmmakers often lack the capital to launch extensive marketing campaigns, they might have their own time with which to commit to other, less traditional forms of publicity. Hoile's emphasis on human resource was also shared by Andrew Nerger of The Movie Partnership who makes references to the importance of social media,

> We've worked with people before where they've not had a lot of money in order to promote the film. However, they have had real impact with social media and have people that have had huge amounts of Snapchat or Twitter or Instagram or Facebook and they've just said 'this film is out now' and it doesn't even need to be someone who is involved in the cast of the film. Sometimes it's down to, say, a musician who has contributed to the soundtrack saying 'this film's out there, go watch it' and it's just led to a lot of people going out there to find the film.[7]

In many respects, this emphasis on human resource, rather than finance, particularly echoes Peter Broderick's argument regarding the internet and its capacity to empower niche filmmakers. As discussed in Chapter Three, this is based on Broderick's vision of a 'New World of Distribution' where filmmakers are granted 'the freedom to shape their own destiny' by 'exploring uncharted territory' and pursuing their own strategies tailored to the film's distinctive needs.[8]

Whilst advocating the same utopian belief in the democratic power of online film distribution, other optimists like Chris Anderson are often guilty of implying that on-demand distribution is an automatic leveller. Consider this following passage from Anderson where he outlines part of his vision from the perspective of a generic sixteen year old he calls Ben – a rhetorical device employed to drive home his point,

> From Ben's perspective, the cultural landscape is a seamless continuum from high to low, with commercial and amateur content competing equally for his attention. He simply doesn't distinguish between mainstream hits and underground niches – he picks what he likes from an infinite menu where Hollywood movies and player-created video-game stunt videos are listed side by side.[9]

The impression given is that distributors or rights owners can simply release their film online where it competes on an even basis with a range of other content. In presenting such an argument, Anderson fails to recognise the renewed importance that marketing and forms of publicity play in spreading awareness and driving demand in a crowded and competitive market.

Considering the emphasis that Hoile, Nerger and Broderick place on grassroots marketing and other inventive forms of promotion, the internet poses both a challenge and an opportunity for specialised distributors and niche filmmakers.

As their responses show, both Basil and Hoile are fervently optimistic about the future of online distribution. However, whilst not dampening their optimism, both are also alert to the challenges that distributors and platforms face in turning the promise of online distribution into a reality. Whilst Basil and Hoile are not alone in presenting an optimistic view, this subtle tone of caution is amplified in other responses. Edward Humphrey of the BFI, for instance, claims that the positivity for the future hinges on the success of distributors and platforms in building audience engagement through marketing efforts and a range of other methods and approaches.[10] Humphrey places particular emphasis on digital platforms and social media services where he claims an audience for specialised content can be developed over time.[11] So, like Hoile, Humphrey argues that being creative and committing the time and, where possible, the money to marketing efforts can lead niche filmmakers, producers and distributors to greater success in a burgeoning digital market.[12] Humphrey also claims that collaboration is crucial in building audience curiosity and creating a more receptive culture for specialised film.[13] As the second chapter suggested, the BFI has long sought to foster a more diverse national film culture, developing educational initatives to improve public engagement with film and address the longstanding issue of accessibility in both a cultural and logistical sense. In driving this broader cultural agenda, part of the organisation's long-term strategy has been collaboration with trusted media partners with the aim of bringing films to places where audiences might feel more comfortable to experiment.

This is largely based on brand recognition and loyalty, meaning audiences are more likely to trust established brands like the BBC than less recognised media platforms. In this respect, Humphrey suggests that working with the likes of the BBC to programme more specialised films might encourage regular BBC viewers to broaden their taste because they trust the BBC's role as cultural gatekeepers. Indeed, Humphrey claims that when 'watching a TV channel that you're comfortable with and they put a film on that you feel uncomfortable with, you're more likely to give it a chance because you feel like you trust the person that's brought it to you.'[14] Humphrey elaborates on this point further, stating that the programming of a Herzog film on a popular channel at prime time might yield somewhere between half a million and a million viewers.[15] Place that film on the home page of Curzon, or the BFI Player, however, and you are much less likely to generate those viewership figures.[16] Humphrey's point is actually supported by the multiplatform performance of *A Field in England* which averaged 367,000 viewers during its screening on Film4 at 10:45pm.[17] Compare this to the film's modest performance on VoD, which amassed 6,237 sales on rental and retail during its first three months on release,[18] and we might conclude that the film's superior performance on television can be partly attributed to the audience's trust in the Channel 4 and Film4 brand – not forgetting, of course, that the television screening was free to access. Interestingly, the longstanding importance of media brands and the trust that audiences place in them is more than habit and brand loyalty alone. In fact, what this discussion reveals is the continued importance of what

these brands deliver – that is linearity, structure, curated programming and quality control by trusted gatekeepers and tastemakers.

This was supported by Chapter Five's focus on MUBI which demonstrated that a number of longstanding practices associated with linear media delivery retain their influence in the digital landscape. In particular, MUBI is testament to Humphrey's emphasis on the importance of the cultural brand and environment where the film is shown. Indeed, Chapter Five showed how MUBI approach the culture and practice of on-demand access by creating an integrated environment of editorial context. As my discussion with Basil revealed, this notion of an integrated environment is deemed crucial to MUBI's broader efforts to foster greater public engagement with a wider range of films. For instance, rather than serving as a 'utility pipe of content', MUBI's creative approach to content delivery stresses the importance of curation.[19] This is evident in MUBI's approach to programming where films are often selected and arranged according to certain thematic or topical trends. This is also evident in the way MUBI curates context and builds an editorial story around each and every film. Through these and other methods of approach, MUBI embraces notions of community, curation and refined choice by mirroring practices of the past such as the repertory policy of specialised theatrical exhibition and the linearity and sense of citizenship nurtured by public service broadcasting. Rather than deviating from traditional and restrictive models of content delivery, MUBI consciously adopts and reworks them in a digital context. This particular commitment to curation is testament to the way digital culture and online distribution has not necessarily transformed the way consumers select or engage with media content. In fact, what we are witnessing is a marked revival of curation and its importance in guiding consumer choice in a crowded digital landscape. As discussed in relation to the paradox of choice, this is deemed particularly important at a time when the volume of content in the marketplace threatens to paralyse consumers, rather than empower them.

Whilst MUBI position the practice of curation at the centre of their efforts to widen engagement with a broader range of films, we must also remember that building a larger and more receptive audience for specialised film is a long term challenge. Indeed, changing the public perceptions of specialised content and creating a more receptive culture towards a wider range of films is, to borrow Humphrey's expression, 'more like glacial erosion', meaning that it 'happens over generations.'[20] In this respect, whilst the 'availability's a switch' actually 'creating an audience demand for a film or for a type of programming is a longer term game.'[21] Confronting the longstanding issue of encouraging wider public engagement with a broader range of films is a theme that Edward Fletcher of Soda Pictures also comes back to when addressing the future for specialised film,

> You'd love to be positive and think that by providing access you can finally overcome the lack of demand, or at least you can get to a point where access is truly a solved issue and then start to address demand. But, if you're looking at other forms of culture, it's kind of art-house cinema or documentary or even British drama, to what extent you're seeing in television or in theatre or in other art forms, mass democratisation or a mass growth in wider culture. Like any society, mass culture is mass culture because it's mass. So, all you can do in cinema is

> try and provide access, incentivise people to access and genuinely develop audiences and create demand and maybe when we've done the first two things in a digital world, you can then think about the second two things.[22]

For Fletcher, developing audiences and creating demand for a broader spectrum of films is a particular challenge in the British context. This is because British audiences lack what Fletcher describes as a 'tangible excitement' towards film and new British films in particular,

> It seems to me the biggest thing we haven't yet done as an industry is find a way to create that excitement in filmmaking and watching other people's films […] compared to what there is in music and all the different platforms there are in music and how excited younger people are about sharing music and discovering new music and none of that exists in film. So without that you can't really then build platforms that are about discovery, particularly for British films and so without that, then there isn't really anywhere for this content to go.[23]

This again reinforces that despite the utopian rhetoric of change and democratisation, online distribution does not solve such longstanding issues of demand and cultural receptiveness towards specialised film. In this respect, how can distributors, filmmakers and platforms take advantage of the opportunity that online access brings?

As discussed at some length in Chapter Five, there is the curatorial approach to content delivery which, in the case of MUBI, builds an editorial and integrated environment for film. From MUBI's perspective, this is seen to foster greater levels of engagement, encouraging its members to develop their understanding of film and broaden their appreciation of film history. From a marketing perspective, Fletcher emphasises the need to create something fashionable around contemporary British film. For instance, drawing further parallels between music and film, Fletcher contends that there is an opportunity with something like The British Independent Film Awards (BIFAs) to create a film equivalent of the Mercury Music Prize which bestows a certain level of prestige and cultural value,

> There's an opportunity to create like a Mercury Music Prize equivalent in film so that it can be marketed not just at young people, but forty-somethings […] reading [their] paper thinking 'I desperately want to keep in touch with the latest thing.' […]. You know they've never heard of X, Y or Z, […] [but] they're going to take a risk on that album because of its awards. So if you've got a film like *Under the Skin* that was nominated at the BIFAs, people should feel like 'I need to have seen this film' and I think the difficulty at the moment is that connection is not quite there.[24]

On the issue of fostering greater demand and engagement with specialised film, David Sin provides another perspective,

> There needs to be more cinemas that show these films. So that can partly be achieved by building new cinemas and Picturehouse, Everyman, the commercial independent companies that do show some specialised films have been incredibly expansionist in the last few years – a lot more Picturehouse sites, a lot more Everyman sites in London and elsewhere, more Curzon sites in London and elsewhere and there have been other new builds which are very

> specific, independent cinemas supported by local authorities or set up as community cinemas by local charities. So that's one way of doing it. The other way of doing is by expanding the reach of specialised programming, so taking specialised programming into existing cinemas that currently don't have that type of programming. So it's just expanding the physical reach.[25]

Sin's position is perhaps unsurprising considering the ICO's remit to encourage and support exhibitors to programme a wider variety of films. In this respect, 'expanding the physical reach' of specialised content is central to the ICO's efforts in developing a stronger and more diverse film culture. Sin's emphasis on theatrical exhibition, however, is entirely consistent with the emphasis that Chapter Four, in particular, placed on the renewed significance of the theatrical sector. Indeed, despite the growth of online distribution and the potential to circumvent the restrictive theatrical route, cinema distribution retains its importance as a means of building profile and awareness for a film. This is evident in Sin's response to the question about the future prospects of specialised film that frames this conclusion.

Looking forward, Sin shares a somewhat ambivalent, although mostly pessimistic view of the future for specialised film. On the one hand, Sin is largely optimistic about the role that digital platforms and the internet can play in preserving moving-image history and widening access to older, catalogue material. This, Sin claims, has the potential to stimulate a 'new wave of cinephilia' much like what 'happened with DVD and Blu-ray in that people will seek out rare films that are suddenly made available online.'[26] Whilst this echoes some of the more optimistic claims outlined in Chapter Three, Sin does refrain from painting this potential 'new wave' as a widespread or revolutionary change in audience taste. Despite this strain of optimism, Sin adopts a more pessimistic tone for the future of newer, specialised content,

> I think overall I'm quite pessimistic about its future in cinemas because I think it depends on a lot of political will to provide the right capital investment, especially in the public sector, to create new cinemas around the UK and I'm not really sure that's going to be forthcoming, especially at a time when we still seem to be in austerity measures. Also, I think in cinemas there's been a worrying trend, especially for commercial independents that previously would have shown a lot of specialised content, for them to become much more like commercial mainstream cinemas and so a lot of the Picturehouse sites no longer run specialised films to any degree.[27]

Significantly, whilst Sin addresses the potential benefits that online distribution can have in widening access to older content, part of his assessment of the future is guided by the current state of the theatrical sector. This serves to remind us that despite the growing prevalence of on-demand access, the theatrical window remains central to the future prospects of specialised film.

As discussed in Chapter Three, one of the more common arguments practiced by Anderson, Broderick and others is that online distribution enables distributors and rights owners to bypass the restricted and commercialised nature of the theatrical market. This would appear to solve the striking lack of support for specialised film in the British theatrical sector. What the

likes of Anderson and Broderick fail to recognise, however, is the continued importance that the theatrical sector has in determining how films perform online. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter Four, theatrical distribution serves a critical purpose in generating publicity and building a profile around a film. Whether critical reviews and media coverage or the prestige and cultural value that emanates from awards recognition, theatrical distribution retains its influence in creating public awareness and demand for films online. In this respect, the following statement from Archie Tait, writing in the 1980s around the rise of cable television and home video, takes on renewed significance: 'There is a real sense in which the electronic media rely heavily on the existence of the old distribution/exhibition infrastructure to create the audience for the films they transmit, sell and rent, and to create the market word-of-mouth values of those films.'[28] In fact, the congested nature of the online market, where an overwhelming breadth of content strives to compete for consumer attention, has intensified the significance of the theatrical sector. As Julia Knight and Peter Thomas state, 'although operating online offers a potential global reach, given the abundance of material on the internet, establishing a presence and identity is still crucial.'[29] So, at a time when online distribution would appear – according to optimistic accounts – to diminish the influence of theatrical distribution, securing some space in the theatrical market has, in fact, rarely been so important.

This is reflected in David Sin's belief that, despite the current state of the theatrical sector, neither 'the ICO nor me as an individual are going to give up. You have to continue to try to struggle to get these sorts of films programmed into as many cinemas as possible.'[30] This commitment to theatrical is also reinforced by Philip Hoile,

> We are committed to theatrical distribution here at Bulldog and we'll always want to be putting films into cinemas. We will always just have to also make commercial decisions based on the individual case of each film, its merits and what merits other people see in it and different partners we're working with including exhibitors and we'll have to make decisions on how big or small that theatrical part of it can be.[31]

So, rather than sounding the death knell of theatrical exhibition, both Sin and Hoile remind us that despite the growing prevalence of online delivery, the theatrical window remains central to the future landscape of film distribution and exhibition.

This thesis has considered a range of issues relating to online distribution and the widening of access to specialised film. In doing so, this thesis has strived to paint a complex portrait of the digital landscape, addressing the many ways in which market traditions, patterns and practices rooted in the physical world of media delivery retain their influence online. In providing some sort of assessment of how the future looks for specialised film, these responses have largely reinforced this sense of continuity, revisiting many of the issues this thesis has already addressed. This is not to deny that the internet, in the words of Edward Fletcher, has 'fundamentally changed access.'[32] What online delivery does not necessarily do, however, is broaden the public receptiveness towards specialised content. Indeed, whilst online distribution partly widens the reach of specialised films, access alone does nothing to stimulate public awareness or foster wider cultural engagement with more diverse forms of content. This is one

of the reasons why the theatrical window remains so important – as a platform to build awareness and positive publicity – even though the theoretical option is there to bypass the limited theatrical sector altogether. Without the media attention and public exposure that can come with a theatrical release, content struggles to attain a presence in a crowded digital market.

Future Areas of Research

Whilst this thesis has addressed a range of issues relating to online distribution, there remain a number of areas for discussion which, due to scope, have either been briefly touched on, or which have been omitted altogether in order to focus on different spheres of activity. Moving forward, these are areas of focus that would greatly benefit the research field of online distribution and digital media consumption. For instance, in keeping with my emphasis on past practices and traditions, researchers might benefit from exploring how the growth of digital technology has coincided with the persistence and, in some cases, the revival of residual media formats. For instance, Chuck Tryon states that the debates around online distribution 'often ignore the continued importance of residual media forms.'[33] Not exclusive to the domain of film, the rise of digital modes of delivery and practice has, in fact, coincided with a broader cultural shift towards the revival of older, analogue formats. Indeed, despite advancements in digital technology, the media landscape has been witness to a sort of retro renaissance as the return of vinyl and other residual formats suggest a form of resistance in the face of sweeping digitisation. In this respect, we are rightly reminded by Maurice N. Richter that newer, upgraded technologies do not necessarily eliminate or completely displace older ones,

> Radio did not eliminate newspapers; television did not eliminate radio; automobiles did not eliminate bicycle riding or horseback riding; and such old-fashioned technological items as hand shovels, wheelbarrows, canoes, sailboats, and hammers remain commonly used even in the most advanced societies, despite the advent of much more spectacularly powerful technologies.[34]

In light of digital advancements, the coexistence of old and new technologies deserves further analytical attention. This is particularly the case with film, where the increasing prevalence of digital forms and practices serve to highlight an existing, albeit marginal passion for residual, analogue formats such as VHS and 35mm film. Such a study would inevitably address notions of nostalgia, capital and authenticity. This is evident in the work of Matt Hills and Jamie Sexton who both consider the contemporary practice of cult fandom within a digital landscape of immediate access. In doing so, they address the ways in which residual formats intersect with issues of cultural capital whilst serving as social and cultural displays of distinction. For instance, Hills talks about the way residual formats function as a form of 'resistant subcultural capital', opposing the disposable and convenient nature of modern media delivery.[35] In similar fashion, Sexton considers the symbolic value of residual formats and practices,

suggesting that whilst digital technologies are valued for their functionality, analogue formats are 'prized for their almost sacred nature.'[36]

Future research might also benefit from further exploring the issues around media literacy. Towards the end of Chapter Four, we considered the ways in which the developing digital market might be causing uncertainty amongst consumers towards the navigation of the digital landscape, whilst also fostering confusion towards the unsettled nature of on-demand terminology. Faced with a range of media devices and a plethora of on-demand platforms, the digital landscape can be a promising yet daunting prospect for consumers. This might particularly be the case for older audiences, leading to the possibility of digital exclusion and audience stratification. When engaging with these issues, however, an absence of primary research can often lead us to make some rather sweeping generalisations about the broader public and their relationship with on-demand media. In this respect, both academia and the industry would greatly benefit from a primary study that engaged with consumers across a range of demographics, addressing their perceptions and their usage, or non-usage, of on-demand platforms. Doing so would enable us to better evaluate the ways in which modern consumers are either engaging or not engaging with the VoD format and to what extent audiences are able to navigate the complex and fragmented terrain of the digital landscape. This would undoubtedly open up new pathways of knowledge, enabling us to detect more conclusive patterns of behaviour and potential divisions between audience demographics. Such a study would certainly benefit from the collaboration of academics and industry professionals which would pose a considerable logistical challenge. There is also no avoiding the fact that this would be a sizeable and potentially costly undertaking. Even so, confronting these challenges as a route to such research would be a worthwhile venture. Certainly, from my time with industry professionals, the potential benefits of such research were raised on more than one occasion.

The interaction between global film festivals and digital practices such as social media and online distribution might also prove a worthwhile venture for future research. For instance, in recent years we have seen a number of high-profile festivals that support 'independent' filmmakers, such as Sundance and Tribeca, move into the online space. This is something that constitutes some of Chuck Tryon's focus in *On-Demand Culture*. Indeed, as the following passage suggests, Tryon considers the ways in which 'virtual' festivals redefine the practice of distribution and exhibition, whilst also fostering a sort of global cosmopolitanism by transcending the distinct boundaries of each festivals' location,

> In particular, festivals such as Sundance, Slamdance, Tribeca, and South by Southwest, which once served primarily as sites where new filmmaking talent could be discovered, have now become distributors, making selected films available online or on-demand through services such as YouTube or the Independent Film Channel (IFC) or platforms such as the XBox 360. As a result, these festivals have become involved in the process of redefining independent film and have begun to imagine new modes of distribution and exhibition. At the same time, they have changed the definition of festivals, transforming them from exclusive events grounded in a specific location into globalized social media phenomena.[37]

Given our focus throughout this thesis, it would be worthwhile considering to what extent these and other festivals engage with digital practices such as social media and online distribution. Do the likes of Sundance and Tribeca manage to broaden public engagement towards a more cinephilic brand of film culture? Or, like the relationship between Curzon Cinemas and the company's on-demand platform, Curzon Home Cinema, are these 'virtual' festivals simply catering to festival-goers and those already 'in the know?'

Moving forward, future research must also be mindful of the ways in which VoD intersects with longstanding traditions of local and international film culture. Despite existing tensions, the inexorable growth of on-demand technology will certainly force industry professionals to re-evaluate the current state of the market and implement strategies to better integrate VoD into the landscape of film culture. Given the current pace of the on-demand expansion, both tracing and analysing these developments can pose a considerable challenge for researchers. Indeed, since the earliest stages of researching and writing this thesis, we have seen an inevitable growth of activity across the on-demand market with the arrival of new platforms and players, along with the introduction of new policies and initiatives designed to foster and stimulate the growth of VoD. For instance, since my discussions with industry professionals and the subsequent writing of Chapter Four, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (more commonly known as Bafta) have announced that digital-only releases which have not received any theatrical release are now eligible to compete for the British Academy Film Awards. In promoting such a positive step towards the future of on-demand technology, a Bafta representative cited that films would be considered on a 'case by case' basis where the emphasis is on the perceived quality of the work, rather than penalising films on the grounds of distribution.[38] Of course, this is but one small change in a much larger ecosystem of interdependent players. Without the same industry-wide commitment to VoD, then Bafta's shift in policy is not going to cause any widespread disruption to the way films accrue cultural and economic value in the market.

As this apparent revision from Bafta suggests, future researchers are bound to encounter some form of structural change as the digital landscape evolves over time. For instance, as online platforms such as Netflix, Amazon and MUBI venture further into the burgeoning arena of new premium content (either commission and purchasing the rights during the pre-production stage or acquiring the rights at festivals such as Cannes and Sundance), the exclusivity of the theatrical window is certainly going to come under even greater pressure, creating further tension between large exhibition chains and distributors. Online distribution also delivers a new sense of immediacy and connectivity. Consider Edward Fletcher's example of a 'young professional couple, maybe with a child' who are 'time-poor but wanting to still be part of the conversation'.[39] Services like Curzon Home Cinema which widen access to new releases and which enable consumers to remain connected and part of the conversation, albeit in a digital sense through social platforms like Twitter. These changes are real and very much part of the future landscape of media content delivery.

However, whilst accepting these changes, we must not be misled into thinking these and other such changes are causing the profound and revolutionary disruption that many

propose. Indeed, as this thesis has made clear, the likes of Chris Anderson, Peter Broderick and others have embraced online distribution as an inherently democratic and disruptive technology. According to this utopian narrative, online distribution represents a profound departure from patterns and practices of the past which have suppressed consumer autonomy and worked to actively limit cultural choice. This, they claim, is the dawning of a new and democratic cultural order where the structural limitations of the past, which have long pushed specialised content to the fringes of the market, are overcome and abolished.

Rather than causing wholesale disruption, however, this thesis has shown that online distribution does, in fact, provide a strong sense of continuity. From the renewed influence of placement and visibility, to the continued importance of the theatrical window, these are issues rooted in the physical world of media distribution, issues which have long contributed towards the marginalisation of specialised film in Britain and which have now relocated online. When entering the informal space of media circulation, we have also seen how parts of the internet can indeed be blocked despite the apparent freedom and democracy of the digital realm. In the case study considered in Chapter Six of a peer-to-peer members-only club for rare and specialised content, this sense of exclusivity was rooted in the residual effects of cultural distinction – a form of distinction which, as Chapter Two showed, dates back many years to the pioneering days of the Film Society. Whilst this interwar culture of social elitism and cultural snobbery has certainly dwindled over the years, the 'Black Crow' club shows that cultural consumption can still be a powerful marker of distinction. In effect, by retaining their influence online, these barriers to access and engagement weaken such claims of digital democracy. So, rather than embracing this notion of disruption, we must be alert to the ways that past patterns and practices intersect with the current changes in content delivery. In doing so, we can see how the past is often present in one form or another.

Appendix 1: Professional Profiles

Amy Basil
Co-Head of Marketing and Brand at MUBI

Amy Basil is currently the Co-Head of Marketing and Brand at the online platform MUBI. Launched in 2007, MUBI provides a curated online service, bringing what the company see as the best of international film to a global audience. As the Co-head of Marketing and Brand, Basil has been at the forefront of developing the platform's international brand by focusing on the releasing of content both theatrically and to a global online audience. Recently, Basil was at the forefront of MUBI's release of Miguel Gomes's ambitious three-part drama, *Arabian Nights* (2015), working with the distribution company New Wave Films on the theatrical release whilst playing an integral part in the film's digital release on MUBI. In the past, Basil has also programmed events and film festivals and also boasts a diverse portfolio of production work, producing feature films, documentaries and shorts.

Edward Fletcher
Managing Director at Soda Pictures

Edward Fletcher has over twenty years of experience working at the forefront of the specialised film sector in Britain. In the 1990s, Fletcher worked in the exhibition sector before moving to distribution at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. Whilst there, Fletcher worked alongside David Sin to bring a range of distinctive films and filmmakers to British shores. In 2002, Fletcher co-founded the distribution company Soda Pictures which has amassed a diverse repertoire of films. With a library of over 250 titles, Soda has brought the works of celebrated filmmakers such as Jim Jarmusch, Ulrich Seidl and Kelly Reichardt to British audiences. Fletcher's experience in bringing specialised content to British screens has also seen him serve as a member of Film London's Audience Development Sub-Committee whilst also working with the Film Hub London Advisory Panel with the aim of achieving a more diverse exhibition sector in London.

Philip Hoile
Head of Film Marketing at Bulldog Film Distribution

Philip Hoile has a number of years of experience working within film distribution and marketing. Hoile has worked at both Icon Film Distribution and Tartan Video, the home video division of the now defunct Tartan Films. Hoile has also worked at Organic, a communications agency that handles the publicity and marketing for film and media clients. Hoile's current role is the Head of Film Marketing at Bulldog Film Distribution, a Brighton-based company that distributes a range of content across theatrical, home video and digital platforms. The company has represented a broad spectrum of films including J. C. Chandor's *Margin Call* (2011) and Helen Walsh's *The*

Violators (2015). Bulldog gained particular success with their recent, multi-platform release of Stephen Fingleton's acclaimed low-budget debut, *The Survivalist* (2015), which gained recognition at the British Independent Film Awards and the British Academy Film Awards.

Edward Humphrey
Digital Director at the British Film Institute (BFI)

Edward Humphrey has amassed a wealth of experience working on the vanguard of digital media entertainment and implementing digital strategies across the film industry and the broadcast television sector. During his career, Humphrey has served as the Interactive Commissioner for ITV, Director of Digital Media Distribution at Disney, Head of Digital at Virgin Media Television whilst also working at Telescope and serving as Senior Vice President at Zodiak Active. Humphrey's current position as the Director of Digital at the BFI involves the development and delivery of a range of initiatives that drive and implement the BFI's digital strategy. This involves widening the reach of the BFI's cultural content through the digitisation of films, establishing commercial partnerships with media brands and developing the BFI's own video-on-demand (VoD) platform, BFI Player. In addition, Humphrey also helps to shape and inform policy around digital content and audiences, whilst also helping the industry to navigate the evolving digital landscape.

Andrew Nerger
Head of Sales at The Movie Partnership

Andrew Nerger has worked in the film industry for ten years across a range of fields. Nerger worked at the now defunct distribution company Metrodome which, during its twelve or so years in operation, had emerged as one of Britain's more active distributors of foreign-language and specialised film. Following Metrodome, Nerger worked at FilmFlex, an on-demand rental services provider for film content. The company have partnered with Virgin Media, Channel 4, media retailer HMV and telecommunications company EE, to deliver distinct on-demand platforms. Started as a joint venture between Disney and Sony Pictures Television, FilmFlex has since been acquired by the multiplatform video services provider Vubiquity. Nerger's current position is Head of Sales at The Movie Partnership, a digital aggregation company that intermediates between rights owners of content and digital platforms such as Google, Netflix and Amazon.

David Sin
Head of Cinemas at the Independent Cinema Office (ICO)

David Sin has worked with specialised film for over twenty-five years. In the past, Sin has developed a range of innovative initiatives for rural cinema provision, served as the Head of Content at the British Film Institute (BFI) and worked as Director of Cinema at the Institute of Contemporary Arts where he helped launch the work of acclaimed filmmakers such as Jia

Zhangke and Roy Andersson in the British market. Today, Sin works as the Head of Cinemas at the Independent Cinema Office (ICO) – a national support agency for film exhibition in the UK concerned with developing a stronger independent exhibition sector so that a broader range of films are made accessible across the country. This largely involves programming and film booking support for exhibitors whilst also providing professional standard training courses for independent exhibitors. As Head of Cinemas, Sin leads the team that provides programming support for exhibitors whilst also handling the consultancy work of the ICO.

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

Listed below are the core group of questions asked when conducting interviews with six industry professionals. Whilst the questions were used to loosely structure the discourse, participants were encouraged to engage in free-flowing discussion. This was achieved through the use of broad and open-ended questions, enabling participants to steer the discussion towards the issues and talking points they felt were most important. This helped to achieve a more organic set of responses, freed from any sort of negative influence that can result from leading questions. From the responses given by interview participants, further questions were asked to clarify certain statements and to probe for further information. These further questions were unplanned and differed greatly from to interview to interview, depending on the course of discussion. Whilst these additional questions are not provided here, many of the responses to those questions found their way into the thesis. The list of questions below slightly differs from participant to participant, depending on their background and area of expertise. That being said, each participant was asked the same opening and closing questions, aside from Andrew Nerger of The Movie Partnership who was not asked the closing question due to time constraints. Along with the group of core questions, contextual details of the interviews are also included, such as time of day, place and length of interviews.

Amy Basil

This interview took place in person during the evening of June 20, 2016 in a restaurant in London. The interview lasted around ninety minutes.

Q1: Given my area of research, I am particularly interested in this prevalent and optimistic argument that online distribution widens consumer access to specialised film in a new and revolutionary way. Of course, this is an argument you will be familiar with and I am interested in hearing your thoughts on this. As a sort of immediate response, what is your general response to this claim that online distribution serves to widen access to specialised film?

Q2: Could you expand a little on why the curatorial approach that MUBI takes is significant and how it fits into this broader landscape of on-demand distribution because it seems to be at odds with the democratic ideals of digital distribution?

Q3: As you know, the specialised sector has been curating content for decades. Even so, there does seem to be a marked resurgence or revival of curation in a digital context and I was wondering what you think the driving force behind such a resurgence is. From the outside, it appears to be a simple means of filtering out the ‘rubbish’ online and helping to steer the consumer through the labyrinth of the on-demand market. Is that the case?

Q4: Again, looking at MUBI's curatorial approach to on-demand content and the thirty films in thirty days model that you abide by, this whole philosophy and approach seems to work against the so-called democratic principles of online distribution – this idea that you can watch whatever you want, when you want. In fact, I would argue that MUBI is closer to the linear model of scheduled broadcasting. To borrow a quote from your boss, Efe Cakarel, he wants the phrase 'what's on MUBI tonight?' to become a habitual and universal phrase amongst media consumers around the world and I was thinking about the wording of this phrase and the use of 'tonight' in particular and it seems to echo the way that people for years have uttered 'what's on BBC One tonight?' or 'what's on Channel Four tonight?' The idea of consumers saying 'what's on Netflix tonight?' does not chime with the apparent freedom and autonomy of on-demand viewing. What are your thoughts on this apparent relationship between MUBI and the linear model of scheduled broadcasting?

Q5: Could you tell me a little about the branding of MUBI? It seems clear that MUBI is trying to create a friendly, hospitable and non-elitist environment for film and film lovers from around the world and I am wondering how you achieve that from a branding perspective. How do you brand MUBI in such a way that preserves the platform's commitment to fostering a serious and passionate film culture, but without scaring potential members away for the sake of being 'too serious?'

Q6: Could you tell be a little more about the balance of MUBI's programming moving forward because you have largely handled catalogue programming, but you are more increasingly moving into the arena of new and premium programming. Is that going to continue moving forward, this balance of premium and catalogue programming?

Q7: To finish with, I am interested in hearing your thoughts about the future for specialised film given the burgeoning market and consumer appetite for digital delivery. What role do you think online distribution will play in dictating the future for specialised film and is that future a bright and optimistic one?

Edward Fletcher

This interview took place in person at the Soda Pictures office in London on June 20, 2016. The interview was conducted in the late afternoon and lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour.

Q1: Given my area of research, I am particularly interested in this prevalent and optimistic argument that online distribution widens consumer access to specialised film in a new and revolutionary way. Of course, this is an argument you will be familiar with and I am interested in

hearing your thoughts on this. As a sort of immediate response, what is your general response to this claim that online distribution serves to widen access to specialised film?

Q2: Is there a sense that online distribution is either cannibalising theatrical sales, or spreading the sales across different platforms, as opposed to actually broadening the range of people that are watching specialised films?

Q3: Could you elaborate on the current role of theatrical distribution and its relationship with the burgeoning on-demand market? You would think that the advent and growth of online distribution would lessen the importance of the theatrical window – this is certainly what many argue given that the digital market offers a direct route to consumers – but this does not seem to be the case. So could you elaborate on the current role of theatrical in today's digital market?

Q4: What are the costs involved for a distributor such as yourself in releasing a film online? We know that the route to theatrical distribution is a costly one and that this comes with various economic pressures, but it seems as though online distribution alleviates many of those pressures because it is a much cheaper route to market. Is that the case from your experience?

Q5: From your experience, are the likes of Netflix and Amazon, who are both important players given their dominance of the SVoD market, receptive to the types of specialised films that Soda and other such distributors handle?

Q6: Last week at this distribution event in London ['UK Distribution: What's Changing?'], you spoke about the pricing of tickets in the theatrical market and I am interested in hearing your thoughts on the pricing structure of the VoD market. In particular, I am wondering what you think about the fluctuation of pricing across different platforms and different pieces of content, which can range from £1 to £10 and more. As a result, is there something to be said for the success of SVoD platforms like Netflix and the fact that they offer a single, monthly fee for the consumer?

Q7: Given the popularity of SVoD platforms like Netflix and Amazon and the fact that such platforms charge a simple and inexpensive monthly membership fee, does this make the likes of Netflix and Amazon important players in fostering this growth in interest towards specialised films because people are more likely to experiment when they are not faced with that single transaction?

Q8: To finish with, I am interested in hearing your thoughts about the future for specialised film given the burgeoning market and consumer appetite for digital delivery. What role do you think online distribution will play in dictating the future for specialised film and is that future a bright and optimistic one?

Philip Hoile

This interview took place on the afternoon of August 23, 2016 over the phone and lasted approximately one hour.

Q1: Given my area of research, I am particularly interested in this prevalent and optimistic argument that online distribution widens consumer access to specialised film in a new and revolutionary way. Of course, this is an argument you will be familiar with and I am interested in hearing your thoughts on this. As a sort of immediate response, what is your general response to this claim that online distribution serves to widen access to specialised film?

Q2: Could you elaborate on the current role of theatrical distribution and its relationship with the burgeoning on-demand market? You would think that the advent and growth of online distribution would lessen the importance of the theatrical window – this is certainly what many argue given that the digital market offers a direct route to consumers – but this does not seem to be the case. So could you elaborate on the current role of theatrical in today's digital market?

Q3: What are the costs involved for a distributor such as yourself in releasing a film online? We know that the route to theatrical distribution is a costly one and that this comes with various economic pressures, but it seems as though online distribution alleviates many of those pressures because it is a much cheaper route to market. Is that the case from your experience?

Q4: From your experience, are the likes of Netflix and Amazon, who are both important players given their dominance of the SVoD market, receptive to the types of specialised films that Bulldog and other such distributors handle?

Q5: I am interested in hearing your thoughts on the issue of visibility online. Given the volume of content online, the placement and positioning of content on platforms like iTunes seems particularly important. Could you offer some thoughts on the issue of visibility and could you clarify how the process of gaining premium on-store placement works? As a distributor, are you able to negotiate placement with platforms like iTunes or are you ultimately powerless in terms of getting your content seen on platforms like iTunes and Amazon?

Q6: In terms of visibility, another important component seems to be the role of aggregators? Does Bulldog work with an aggregator and could you perhaps elaborate a little on how that relationship works and what aggregators offer to smaller distributors such as yourself?

Q7: To finish with, I am interested in hearing your thoughts about the future for specialised film given the burgeoning market and consumer appetite for digital delivery. What role do you think online distribution will play in dictating the future for specialised film and is that future a bright and optimistic one?

Edward Humphrey

This interview took place in person on the afternoon of June 20, 2016 at the BFI offices on Stephen Street in London. The interview lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour.

Q1: Given my area of research, I am particularly interested in this prevalent and optimistic argument that online distribution widens consumer access to specialised film in a new and revolutionary way. Of course, this is an argument you will be familiar with and I am interested in hearing your thoughts on this. As a sort of immediate response, what is your general response to this claim that online distribution serves to widen access to specialised film?

Q2: Can you identify some of the main problems that distributors might face when releasing content online and any of the significant issues which are hindering their efforts to reach new audiences?

Q3: Given the volume of content online and the competitive nature of the on-demand landscape, the issue of visibility on these platforms and the practice of building awareness through marketing seems to be particularly important now. Do you think that is the case and could you perhaps elaborate a little on the issues of visibility and awareness?

Q4: You made some interesting points at the distribution event last week at the Regents Street Cinema [‘UK Distribution: What’s Changing?’] with regards to the diversity of content online, particularly some of the SVoD services like Netflix and Amazon. Could you elaborate on the idea of content diversity online and perhaps talk a little about the role that algorithmic recommendations play on platforms like Netflix in terms of broadening audience taste?

Q5: The role of content aggregators like Under the Milky Way seem to play an increasingly important role in helping distributors and platforms navigate the digital terrain. Could you expand on the role they play?

Q6: To finish with, I am interested in hearing your thoughts about the future for specialised film given the burgeoning market and consumer appetite for digital delivery. What role do you think online distribution will play in dictating the future for specialised film and is that future a bright and optimistic one?

Andrew Nerger

This interview was conducted over the phone on the afternoon of August 23, 2016. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

Q1: Given my area of research, I am particularly interested in this prevalent and optimistic argument that online distribution widens consumer access to specialised film in a new and revolutionary way. Of course, this is an argument you will be familiar with and I am interested in hearing your thoughts on this. As a sort of immediate response, what is your general response to this claim that online distribution serves to widen access to specialised film?

Q2: Could you briefly summarise the role that aggregators, such as The Movie Partnership, play in the current digital market?

Q3: I understand that each platform has their own demands with regards to content meeting the right technical specification. Do aggregators handle that part of the process, or is the technical encoding and so on outsourced to certain companies? Or, is it the responsibility of the distributor or rights owner to deliver the content to the right technical specification?

Q4: Does The Movie Partnership have any demands or stipulations that have to be met before the company can represent certain content? Does the content you represent need to have been released theatrically, for example? Any such rules or stipulations such as this?

Q5: From the perspective of an aggregator, what role does theatrical distribution play when you are assessing the value of a piece of content and its potential appeal to platforms? And I ask this because whilst online distribution has the potential to bypass the theatrical route, the fact that a film has received a cinema release, albeit a small one in many cases, remains important when assessing the value of content online. Is that something you would agree with and could you elaborate a little on the current role that theatrical distribution plays in determining the value of content online?

Q6: Given the volume of content online, there seems to be this concern that content, without the right network of support, can be cut adrift in this seemingly endless sea of content. For this reason, the issue of visibility and positioning seems to be particularly important. In response, something that aggregators supposedly support, to my understanding at least, is this notion of the long tail by not only facilitating access to specialised and niche content online, but also by pushing content higher up on the digital shelves, so to speak. Could you elaborate on how aggregators such as The Movie Partnership actually achieve this? What is the process behind achieving this?

David Sin

This interview was conducted in person at the Independent Cinema Office in London. The interview took place on the morning of July 21, 2016 and lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour.

Q1: Given my area of research, I am particularly interested in this prevalent and optimistic argument that online distribution widens consumer access to specialised film in a new and revolutionary way. Of course, this is an argument you will be familiar with and I am interested in hearing your thoughts on this. As a sort of immediate response, what is your general response to this claim that online distribution serves to widen access to specialised film?

Q2: Given your current role in the theatrical exhibition sector, could you elaborate on the importance of a theatrical release, particularly for a specialised film? What relevance does theatrical distribution have in today's on-demand market?

Q3: At the ICO, you obviously believe in the value of a diverse exhibition landscape and part of your remit at the ICO is fostering a broader and more receptive audience for specialised film. Looking at this issue on a broader scale, I am wondering how you broaden engagement with specialised film. What strategies or steps can you take to diversify the film culture here in Britain and create a more receptive culture for specialised film?

Q4: The advent and growth of online distribution has reinforced some of the inherent flaws of theatrical distribution, one of which is the cost of releasing films theatrically. Is theatrical distribution still a costly venture for distributors, particularly specialised distributors given that they tend to work from modest budgets?

Q5: Given your background across the industry over the last twenty-five years or so, do you think you could comment on the state of cinephilia over that period of time because it seems as though there has been a marked decline in interest towards specialised film over the last thirty years or so. Is this apparent decline something you have noticed?

Q6: To finish with, I am interested in hearing your thoughts about the future for specialised film given the burgeoning market and consumer appetite for digital delivery. What role do you think online distribution will play in dictating the future for specialised film and is that future a bright and optimistic one?

Notes

Chapter One
Introduction: Online Distribution and the Relocation of Specialised Film

[1] Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson, 'Introduction: Making of a Revolution' in Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson (eds), *Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 1-17 (1).
[2] ibid., p. 2.
[3] Sean Cubitt, 'Distribution and Media Flows', *Cultural Politics,* 1(2) (2005), pp. 193-214 (197).
[4] Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (London: Palgrave Macmillan/British Film Institute, 2012), p. 2.
[5] Janet Wasko, *How Hollywood Works* (London: Sage, 2003), p. 84.
[6] Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (Bristol and Chicago, IL: Intellect, 2011), p. 13.
[7] ibid.
[8] ibid.
[9] Cubitt, 'Distribution and Media Flows', p. 197.
[10] Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, 'Paths of Economic and Political Development' in Barry R. Weingast and Donald A. Wittman (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Economy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 673-92 (678).
[11] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, translated by Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993; first published 1939), p. 89.
[12] Sean Creaven, *Emergentist Marxism: Dialectical Philosophy and Social Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 319.
[13] Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution*, p. 10.
[14] Nicholas Garnham, 'Concepts of Culture: Public Policy and the Cultural Industries' in Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan (eds), *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader*, Second Edition (London and New York: Arnold, 1997), pp. 54-61 (58); first published in *Cultural Studies*, 1(1) (1987), pp. 23-37 (original emphasis).
[15] ibid., p. 57.
[16] Cubitt, 'Distribution and Media Flows', p. 195.
[17] ibid., p. 194.
[18] ibid., p. 200.
[19] Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution,* p. 2.
[20] Ramon Lobato, 'Subcinema: Theorizing Marginal Film Distribution', *Limina: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies,* 13 (2007), pp. 113-20 (116).
[21] Cubitt, 'Distribution and Media Flows', p. 206; Garnham, 'Concepts of Culture: Public Policy and the Cultural Industries', p. 58.
[22] Joshua Braun, 'Transparent Intermediaries: Building the Infrastructures of Connected Viewing' in Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson (eds), *Connected Viewing: Selling, Streaming, and Sharing Digital Media in the Digital Era* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 124-43 (127).
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[31] ibid., p. 245.
[32] ibid., p. 251.
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[34] Ramon Lobato, 'The Politics of Digital Distribution: Exclusionary Structures in Online Cinema', *Studies in Australasian Cinema,* 3(2) (2009), pp. 167-78 (167).
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[41] Anderson, *The Long Tail, Revised and Updated Edition: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More,* p. 5.
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[45] Tim League and Ruth Vitale 'Guest Post: Here's How Piracy Hurts Indie Film', *Indiewire*, July 11, 2014, http://www.indiewire.com/article/guest-post-heres-how-piracy-hurts-indie-film-20140711 [accessed: 10.04.2016].
[46] Chuck Tryon, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2013), p. 1.
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[48] Francesco Casetti and Sara Sampietro, 'With Eyes, With Hands: The Relocation of Cinema Into the iPhone' in Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (eds), *Moving Data: The iPhone and the Future of Media* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 19-32.
[49] Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image*, p. 16.
[50] Lobato, 'The Politics of Digital Distribution: Exclusionary Structures in Online Cinema', p. 169.
[51] Tryon, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies*, p. 8.
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[54] Lobato, 'The Politics of Digital Distribution: Exclusionary Structures in Online Cinema', p. 169.
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[56] Knight and Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image*, p. 18.
[57] ibid.
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[59] ibid.
[60] Virginia Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age: Pirates and Professionals* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 57.
[61] ibid.
[62] Lobato, 'The Politics of Digital Distribution: Exclusionary Structures in Online Cinema', p. 176.
[63] ibid.
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[65] ibid.
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[67] ibid., p. 167.
[68] Knight and Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image*, p. 18.
[69] Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age: Pirates and Professionals*, p. 56.
[70] Lobato, 'The Politics of Digital Distribution: Exclusionary Structures in Online Cinema', p. 176.
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[73] Tryon, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies,* p. 21.
[74] Knight and Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image*, p. 15.
[75] Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2004), p. 8.
[76] ibid., p. 2.
[77] ibid.
[78] ibid., p. 8.
[79] Tim Wu, *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), p. 9-10.
[80] Ibid., p. 10.
[81] ibid., p. 256.
[82] Author's interview with Edward Humphrey, June 20, 2016.
[83] In Ramon Lobato's book, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution,* he refers to the terms 'informal film distribution' and 'shadow economies of cinema' as designators for piratical practices. In addition to piracy, Lobato also employs these terms to describe a range of informal practices which operate on the fringes of the formal industry and the approved channels of distribution. Practices such as lending and exchange networks between friends and direct-to-video companies that cater to a small diasporic population are the types of activities which slip through the cracks of formal regulation and which, in some cases, challenge the dichotomy between legal and illegal media circulation.

[84] During my discussion with David Sin of the Independent Cinema Office (ICO), he responded to my use of the phrase 'specialised film' by claiming that the term 'specialised' has been the standard industry term in recent years for those films which exist on the fringes of the market.
[85] UK Film Council, *Specialised Distribution and Exhibition Strategy for the UK* (London: UK Film Council, 2002), pp. 8-9.
[86] David Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice' *Film Criticism* 4(1) (1979), pp. 56-64; Robert Self, 'Systems of Ambiguity in the Art Cinema', *Film Criticism* 4(1) (1979), pp. 74-80.
[87] Jeffrey Sconce, ''Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style', *Screen* 36(4) (1995), pp. 371-93.
[88] Mark Betz, 'Art, Exploitation, Underground' in Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lazaro Reboll, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis (eds), *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 202-22.
[89] Shyon Baumann, *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 13; Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, 'Introduction: The Impurity of Art Cinema' in Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (eds), *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 3-27 (7); Jill Forbes and Sarah Street, *European Cinema: An Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 40; V. F. Perkins, 'The Atlantic Divide' in Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (eds), *Popular European Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 194-205 (196).

Chapter Two
The Marginalisation of Specialised Film

[1] Most historical accounts of film distribution and exhibition take their starting point at the end of the nineteenth century with the presentation of the Lumières' Cinématographe on Regent Street in February 1986. Whilst this signalled the birth of the commercial film business in Britain, a number of subsequent developments contributed to the growing maturity of the industry. These include the passing of the 1909 Cinematograph Act which sought to better regulate the safety of film exhibition in the wake of some high-profile fires, instigating the demise of the notorious 'penny gaffs' and the rise of the more elaborate, purpose-built 'picture house'; the emergence of the rental system for distributors; and the creation of the Kinematograph Renters' Society in 1915. A trade body designed to protect and promote the interests of the rental sector. These and other developments helped to transform a disorderly industry into one that stood on the cusp of a thriving global business.
[2] Rachael Low. *The History of the British Film 1914-1918*, Volume Three (London and New York: Routledge, 1997; first published in 1950), p. 48.
[3] Roberta Pearson, 'Transitional Cinema' in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (ed), *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 23-42 (23).
[4] Thomas H. Guback, 'Hollywood's International Market' in Tino Balio (ed), *The American Film Industry,* Revised Edition (London and Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 463-86 (465).
[5] John Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain: a Choice of Pleasures* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), p. 48.
[6] Lez Cooke, 'British Cinema: From Cottage Industry to Mass Entertainment' in Clive Bloom (ed), *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, Volume One: 1900-1929* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), pp. 167-88 (177).
[7] Guback, 'Hollywood's International Market', p. 466.
[8] ibid.
[9] Modris Eksteins, 'The Cultural Impact of the Great War' in Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp (eds), *Film and the First World War* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), pp. 201-12 (210).
[10] Joachim Lembach, *The Standing of the German Cinema in Great Britain after 1945* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), p. 49.
[11] ibid., p. 50.
[12] Lucy Mazdon and Catherine Wheatley, *French Film in Britain: Sex, Art and Cinephilia* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2013), p. 20.
[13] Peter Lev, The Euro-American Cinema (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993), p. 5.
[14] Mazdon and Wheatley, *French Film in Britain: Sex, Art and Cinephilia,* p. 28.
[15] Gerry Turvey, 'Towards a Critical Practice: Ivor Montagu and British Film Culture in the 1920s' in Andrew Higson (ed), *Young and Innocent?: The Cinema in Britain, 1896-1930* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), pp. 306-20 (307-8).
[16] ibid., p. 295.
[17] Jen Samson, 'The Film Society, 1925-1939' in Charles Barr (ed), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), pp. 306-13 (311).
[18] Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2005), p. 39. It should be noted here that Wasson was discussing the Little Theatre exhibitors in America and their tendency to include social spaces, such as bars and card rooms. The Little Theatre Movement of the 1920s in America, much like the film society movement in

Europe, was designed to offer patrons the chance to view foreign-language and specialised films in a hospitable and sociable environment away from the patterns of mainstream culture and the patronage of the commercial circuits.
[19] Ewan Montagu cited in David Robinson, *The Life and Career of the Film Society* (Unpublished Manuscript, BFI Film Society Special Collection, c. 1963), page number unknown.
[20] Jamie Sexton, *Alternative Film Culture in Inter-War Britain* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008), p. 26.
[21] Adrian Brunel cited in C. A. Oakley, *Where We Came In: Seventy Years of the British Film Industry* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014; first published in 1964), p. 96.
[22] Mazdon and Wheatley, *French Film in Britain: Sex, Art and Cinephilia*, p. 31.
[23] Jamie Sexton, 'The Film Society and the Creation of an Alternative Film Culture in Britain in the 1920s' in Andrew Higson (ed), *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain, 1896-1930* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), pp. 291-305 (293).
[24] Mazdon and Wheatley, *French Film in Britain: Sex, Art and Cinephilia*, pp. 21-2.
[25] Samson, 'The Film Society, 1925-1939', p. 306.
[26] Whilst these regional societies were managed by local film enthusiasts, the Film Society did offer support in areas such as programming, ensuring that this network of regional societies retained the Film Society's underlying philosophy and, importantly, its sense of taste.
[27] Mazdon and Wheatley, *French Film in Britain: Sex, Art and Cinephilia,* p. 38.
[28] With the outbreak of the Second World War, the Film Society placed a number of prints in the BFI's protection. When the Society ceased operations after the war, those prints greatly contributed to the Institute's much cherished National Film Library which sought to preserve films of historical importance for future generations.
[29] Richard Roud cited in Christophe Dupin, 'The BFI and Film Exhibition, 1933-1970' in Christophe Dupin and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (eds), *The British Film Institute, the Government and Film Culture, 1933-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 69-86 (75).
[30] ibid., pp. 75-6.
[31] 'The Front Page', *Sight and Sound,* 33(3) (1964), p. 107.
[32] Charles and Kitty Cooper, 'Other and Essential: A Survey of Independent Distributors/Exhibitors' *Sight and Sound*, 45(4) (1976), pp. 207-11 (209-10).
[33] G. M. Hoellering and I. R. Jarosy, 'Other and Essential: A Survey of Independent Distributors/Exhibitors', p. 210.
[34] Charles and Kitty Cooper, 'Other and Essential: A Survey of Independent Distributors/Exhibitors', p. 210.
[35] ibid.
[36] Derek Hill, 'Other and Essential: A Survey of Independent Distributors/Exhibitors', p. 209.
[37] ibid.
[38] Hoellering and Jarosy, 'Other and Essential: A Survey of Independent Distributors/Exhibitors', p. 211.
[39] John Ellis, 'Art, Culture and Quality Terms for a Cinema in the Forties and Seventies', *Screen*, 19(3) (1978), pp. 9-50 (15).
[40] Charles and Kitty Cooper, 'Other and Essential: A Survey of Independent Distributors/Exhibitors', p. 210.
[41] Stuart Hanson, *From Silent Screen to Multi-Screen: A History of Cinema Exhibition in Britain Since 1896* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) p. 1.
[42] Janet Thumin, 'The "Popular", Cash and Culture in the Postwar British Cinema Industry', *Screen*, 32(1) (1991), pp. 245-71 (248).
[43] John Spraos, *The Decline of the Cinema: An Economist's Report* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1962), p. 89.
[44] Margaret Dickinson, 'The State and the Consolidation of Monopoly' in James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds), *British Cinema History* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicholson Ltd., 1983), pp. 74-95 (74).
[45] Spraos, *The Decline of the Cinema: An Economist's Report*, p. 24.
[46] Thumin, 'The "Popular", Cash and Culture in the Postwar British Cinema Industry', p. 267.
[47] Hanson, *From Silent Screen to Multi-Screen: A History of Cinema Exhibition in Britain Since 1896*, p. 127.
[48] Geoffrey Romney, untitled letter to *Films and Filming*, 10(2) (1963), p. 5.
[49] Susan Holmes, *British TV and Film Culture of the 1950s: Coming to a TV Near You* (Bristol and Portland, OR: Intellect, 2005), p. 258.
[50] Ibid., p. 257.
[51] James Quinn, *Film and Television as an Aspect of European Culture* (London: Leydon, 1968), p. 68.
[52] Hill, 'Other and Essential: A Survey of Independent Distributors/Exhibitors', p. 209.
[53] Joe d'Morais cited in Julian Petley, 'Where Have All the Foreign Films Gone?', *Sight and Sound,* 58(4) (1989), pp. 224-28 (228).
[54] Barry Edson, 'Commercial Film Distribution and Exhibition in the UK', *Screen*, 21(3) (1980), pp. 36-44 (43).
[55] Frederick Wasser, 'Ancillary Markets – Video and DVD: Hollywood Retools' in Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (eds), *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 120-31 (120).
[56] Harlan Kennedy, 'Invasion of the Movie Snatchers', *Film Comment,* 21(6) (1985), pp. 78-9 (78).

[57] Hanson, *From Silent Screen to Multi-Screen: A History of Cinema Exhibition in Britain Since 1896*, p. 130.
[58] ibid.
[59] Author's interview with Amy Basil, June 20, 2016.
[60] Daniel Herbert, *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press, 2014), p. 3.
[61] Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), p. 12.
[62] Douglas Gomery, 'Hollywood's Hold on the New Television Technologies', *Screen*, 29(2) (1988), pp. 82-9 (83).
[63] Archie Tait, 'Distributing the Product' in Martin Auty and Nick Roddick (eds), *British Cinema Now* (London: British Film Institute, 1985), pp. 71-82 (72).
[64] Wasser. *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR*, p. 12.
[65] Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age: Pirates and Professionals*, pp. 57-8.
[66] Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR*, p. 11.
[67] ibid.
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Chapter Four
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Chapter Five
'Your Online Cinema, Anytime, Anywhere': MUBI and the Online Culture of Specialised Film

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Chapter Seven
The Future for Specialised Film

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