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World Cinema On-Demand: Film Distribution and Education in the Streaming Media Era
Queen's University Belfast, 15–16 June 2012; 26 June 2013; 19 September 2013

A Report by Alexandra Kapka, Queen's University Belfast

"Distribution lends itself to critical/cultural critique as well as industrial analysis because it ultimately functions to regulate access to texts" (Lobato 168).

World Cinema On-Demand: Film Distribution and Education in the Streaming Media Era (WCOD) is a research network funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The project is directed by principal investigator Dr Stefano Baschiera (Queen's University Belfast) and coinvestigator Dr Alexander Fisher (Queen's University Belfast). The primary objective of the network is to bring together educators, industry professionals and leading academics with diverse research interests to investigate the impact of streaming media services upon the distribution, consumption and teaching of world cinema. The project took the form of a series of workshops held at Queen's University Belfast in 2012 and 2013.

The emergent popularity of streaming media services has opened up the global cinematic landscape, altering the way we access, and engage with, world cinema. Services such as LoveFilm, Netflix and their various counterparts have increased the digital availability of an unprecedented range of international films, many of which were previously either difficult to obtain or completely inaccessible beyond their country of origin. World cinema is an ideal area in which to research streaming media. In the introduction to *Mapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film*, Stephanie Dennison and Song Hwee Lim note that world cinema is defined by its "situatedness: it is ... the world as viewed from the West" (1). With that in mind, world cinema is conceptualised here as any film that is produced outside of Hollywood. As theatrical exhibition becomes an increasingly narrow market, which is dominated by resource-rich film studios, streaming services are being forced to expand their offer in order to compete with one another. Niche cinemas and independent films allow them to do this with minimal expenditure. Despite the fact that revenue streams from such long-tail distribution can be small or nonexistent, these distribution circuits are often seen as "providing an outlet for many films that would not previously have been distributed in any meaningful sense" (Lobato and Ryan 194), therefore contributing to a growth in the number of films made commercially available each year. As Ramon Lobato observes, "digital distribution as an object of analysis sits at the intersection of culture, technology, law and commerce" (168); it is therefore imperative that this is used to inform the development of film studies in the face of constantly advancing technologies. Studies concerned with streaming media have typically addressed the social and cultural ramifications of its development, but have yet to consider the effect of increased online availability on the study of world cinema in higher education. The WCOD network was

established to explore this issue from an intradisciplinary perspective. Due to the extensive number of panels offered as part of the workshops, this report will aim to summarise the main themes and draw upon what were, for this author, particular highlights.

The first workshop spanned two days in June 2012, and included the launch of Dina Iordanova and Stuart Cunningham's edited collection, *Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves On-line*. The papers presented in Workshop One provided a general overview of online distribution methods and theorised their relationship to higher education. One of the main themes that the workshop explored was the perceived variety and abundance of material now available for online consumption. Paul McDonald (University of Nottingham) discussed this subject in relation to bottlenecking within traditional methods of theatrical exhibition and distribution. He argued that, whilst digital availability is still subject to elements of control, it widens the existing bottleneck, allowing a greater variety of films to be commercially distributed. Accepting the definition of world cinema as "non-Hollywood", Malte Hagener (Philipps University of Marburg) discussed the different ways in which world cinema was traditionally bestowed with cultural value through criticism, festivals and prizes, and the projected evolution of this system as new distribution networks and digital technologies emerge. Dina Iordanova (St. Andrews University) presented a paper that examined the effects of new technologies and increased digital dissemination on the cinema of the periphery. Her paper questioned who might benefit from the wider exposure of niche cinemas, and raised the problematic issue of intellectual property rights in the face of increased availability. The movement of niche cinemas into the mainstream also featured in Karl Schoonover's (University of Warwick) paper, "Where in the World is Queer Cinema?". Schoonover suggested that increased digital distribution has resulted in a "virtual festival circuit", facilitated by video on demand, bootlegging and streaming. His work suggested that niche cinemas can no longer be constrained and defined by national frameworks or by outmoded definitions of the term "film".

The subject of increased variety and availability through digital access also evoked anxieties regarding the archiving and curation of film online. Julia Knight (University of Sunderland) touched upon this in her paper, "Three Issues for Experimental Moving Image in the Era of Digital Distribution". Knight foregrounded the blurring of boundaries between archiving and distribution in the digital environment. The paper questioned whether the Internet can preserve film in the traditional sense, or ever guarantee long-term availability.

Despite increased access to world cinema via online databases, archives and collections, as illustrated in papers from Alejandro Pardo (University of Navarra), Laura Rascaroli (University College Cork), Niamh Thornton (University of Ulster), and demonstrated by Philippe Brodeur (Director, Aertv.ie) and Liam Wylie (RTÉ Archives), the workshop concluded that the use of such material in higher education remains heavily restricted. This concern was echoed in Workshop Two when Ciara Chambers (University of Ulster) addressed the fact that availability of material can inform method and content of teaching in higher education. This panel was opened by Sergio Angelini from the British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC), who discussed changes to scholarly access to world cinema and the implications of pending legislative changes to copyright and access in the U.K. Following Angelini, John Knowles (Faculty Librarian, Queen's University Belfast) gave a presentation on the impact of streaming media services in a higher education library, focusing primarily on the financial implications of legally providing film and television to the student body via streaming.

The second workshop, held on 26 June 2013, also focused on the problematic definition of world cinema. Lúcia Nagib (University of Reading) presented a paper that aimed to steer away from discourses of difference in regard to world cinema, and to celebrate instead common cinematic tropes occurring across geography and history. By reflecting on the relationship between these tropes and cinephilia, Nagib went on to question whether they had become more widespread due to digital distribution. Finola Kerrigan (King's College London) addressed this question when she analysed the cataloguing systems of on-demand services such as Netflix and LoveFilm. She voiced concern over the use of genre-defined categories and choice-based prediction algorithms, suggesting that little attention has been paid to the impact of inaccurate classifications of preference. Her paper also demonstrated that these systems do not necessarily mean wider exposure for niche cinemas that do not easily fit into mainstream categorisation, forcing audiences to continue to seek them out.

The phenomenon of "Nollywood" and the significant role played by streaming in the distribution of African cinema proved popular and interesting topics throughout the WCOD Research Network workshops. Nollywood provides an interesting case study, as it does not exist within a theatrical structure. Instead, films are streamed directly to a variety of platforms or sold as VHS copies in villages. The case of Nollywood perhaps exemplifies the global position of modern digital film dissemination. In the first workshop, Sheila Petty's (University of Regina) paper, "Nollywood Streaming: How the Nigerian Digital Video Phenomenon is Challenging African Cinema", explored the impact of this industry and its widespread influence on conventional African cinema. Revisiting the topic in the final workshop, Lizelle Bisschoff (University of Glasgow) discussed in detail the impact that digital technologies have had on the consumption of African-generated audiovisual content within Africa itself and internationally. The innovative ways in which the African diaspora can gain access to film and television have steadily increased in diversity. Alexander Fisher (Queen's University Belfast) examined the politics of researching this cinema at an international level, through the medium of online distribution. His paper questioned issues that may arise as researchers become beholden to both formal and informal content providers and archives for access to material, and the consequences should the material be withdrawn.

It is impossible to comprehensively examine the proliferation of online film availability in the context of higher education without seriously engaging with the subject of digital piracy, which was addressed in the second and third workshops. Iain Robert Smith (University of Roehampton) presented a paper entitled "Bootleg Archives: Alternative Channels of Film Preservation in the Internet Age", in which he discussed the development of private, invite-only BitTorrent sites, and the role these communities play in preserving and reclaiming lost films. Paracinematic BitTorrent communities, such as Karagarga and Cinemageddon, were the specific focus of Smith's work as he questioned how modern concepts, such as "fan-subbing", alter the way we are able to interact with the history of cinemas ordinarily relegated to the periphery, some without even a domestic market in which to operate. This theme was explored further at Workshop Three, held in September 2013. In the panel "Torrent Distribution and Online Piracy", Angela Meili (Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul) opened the discussion with her paper "Private Torrent Groups and the Online Circulation of Movies: A Case Study of Makingoff.org", which explored the proposition that a private torrent community can perform as an efficient channel of distribution for specialised cinematography. Her case study revealed interesting cinephile activities taking place in a self-regulated file-sharing environment. This file-sharing community places restrictions on the availability of commercially successful films and features a complete ban on modern Hollywood cinema. Meili illustrated the ways in which

piracy competes with official distribution channels whilst simultaneously relying on the film production industry. Progressing this argument with a paper entitled "New Gatekeepers?: Power and Influence in Online Filesharing Communities", Virginia Crisp (Middlesex University) also made use of case studies to discuss the role of the "pirate" in online file-sharing communities. Crisp's ethnographic work focused on two BitTorrent communities specialising in East Asian cinema and exposed a hierarchical organisation within the informal environment. Crisp exhibited an understanding of pirates and torrent community leaders as gatekeepers. The paper hypothesised that piracy simply transfers the distributive power over availability from formal to informal gatekeepers, who inevitably have to rely on formal distribution systems to acquire films at the outset. Valentina Re (Ca' Foscari University of Venice) mapped Ramon Lobato's categories of formal and informal distribution over her own categories of paid versus free content. This demonstrated that formal and informal sites of distribution do not always coincide with the legal and illegal dissemination of moving-image content. Re used this map to illustrate which areas of digital distribution in Italy will be affected by the government's proposed new copyright law, but this study has resonance on a global scale as other countries also seek to implement or improve intellectual property rights legislation. Piracy should remain a fundamental consideration when analysing the study of world cinema in higher education. As a growing number of films are made available online at no cost, the temptation to access world cinema through torrenting for educational purposes may grow. This should be considered from both an educator's and a student's perspective. As new gatekeepers are increasingly offering access to films that cannot easily and economically be sourced elsewhere, it is important to question the roles informal communities may play in formal institutions.

Overall, the WCOD Research Network facilitated an exploration of the diverse challenges faced by students, educators and industry professionals when defining and engaging with world cinema within the context of higher education. In summary, three key points arose in the workshops: firstly, the need to consider the impact of digital piracy within higher education and the way it can shape film industries and online distribution networks; secondly, the ongoing development of streaming services, specifically, the need to promote world film in a more comprehensive manner and to develop integrated services for feasible and cost-effective use in higher-education institutes; and thirdly, the need for a more systematised organisation of online content in order to realise the full potential of increased availability. This last point was consistently reiterated throughout the workshops.

The research network raised some thought-provoking questions and provided a range of possible answers. I left the workshops with the impression that the multifaceted issues presented by the WCOD Research Network regarding the proliferation of digital film consumption are only the surface of a much deeper reservoir of research. Further investigation in this area, which is at the cutting edge of film studies in the twenty-first century, is vital.

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