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Could Streaming Change The 'Classic Film' Canon?
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Hello. I wonder how you're watching this lecture. On a laptop, or perhaps on a smaller, or a larger screen. Maybe even casting it to a television. What's certain however is that you're watching it on a screen, and streamed. Probably in a very similar situation to where I'm recording it. We may think this is something new, that's been made possible by our current digital technologies, and it's true that the quality has greatly improved. Yet however convenient, for many people it feels inferior to 'the real thing' – whether that's a live performance of some kind, or a proper film show, perhaps in a cinema. But in this lecture, I want to question such assumptions.

We could start by looking back to the era before cinema emerged, when the possibility of communicating over long distance in sound and vision seemed almost too good to be true, but distinctly likely – there was a wonderful cartoon in Punch in 1879, showing as a prediction for the following year, the 'Telephonoscope', which shows a Victorian father and mother communicating live with their daughter in distant Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon). What made this topical was the launch of the International Bell Telephone Company in that same year, even though the first international call was still several years away. A few years later, the French artist Albert Robida's *The Twentieth Century* would show another image of the 'telephonoscope', incorporating Edison's recent invention, the Phonograph. Home theatre networks started in Hungary, and spread to Paris, where Marcel Proust was an enthusiastic user and to other European capitals. Perhaps the most comprehensive vision of the audiovisual future appeared in H G Wells' novel *The Sleeper Awakes* in 1899, where his sleeping 19c hero wakens 200 years later to discover a world in which there are small portable devices that can show you moving images, and bedside consoles which contain a library of drama and opera (I've explored this in more detail in my work on Robert Paul and his relationship with Wells).

Most of these had to wait for the electronic age. What emerged in the interim was a network of 'cinema theatres', modelled on the existing dramatic or variety theatre, concentrating audiences in front of a screen. Some, of course, felt this was a poor substitute for live performance. But for millions, it proved a highly attractive alternative, and during the first 30 years of the 20c it became a majority entertainment.

But it's often forgotten that even during this period, the lure of 'home entertainment' never disappeared. Film has always been seen domestically, in a variety of systems. And soon there would be radio and television broadcasting, to realise that 1890s dream. By 1950, television networks were growing as an alternative to theatre-based systems, and soon eclipsed them, providing an alternative mode of consumption for the majority.

How was the rise of television seen, as an alternative to cinema? Of course, there's no single answer. For some, especially in the industry, it was a challenge to be resisted at all costs. For others, it marked the beginning of the 'death of cinema'. But for many, it was the start of an exciting new era, a long-delayed promise – and some of these enthusiasts were very much a part of cinema. For instance, Hitchcock launched a weekly television series in 1955, and ran it for seven years. His

near-contemporary Michael Powell also hoped in the early Fifties that television might offer him a chance to make varied 'tales' at different lengths. And before these, the veteran director Cecil B DeMille hosted a weekly radio show that featured condensed versions of current films… I think these, and many others, who saw the advantages of home listening and viewing need to be remembered when we think about relations between the media.

But how was cinema seen in the mid-20th century? People of my generation will have their own memories, but there's a classic account of the appeal of cinemagoing by the French theorist of 'semiology', Roland Barthes, published in 1975.

Barthes evokes the anonymous, populated darkness of the cinema as the main source of 'any film's' fascination. And he contrasts this with the lack of fascination to be found in watching films on television, with 'darkness erased, and anonymity repressed'. For Barthes – like many French intellectuals of his generation – there was a lack of what he calls the 'eroticisation' of the darkened cinema auditorium, not that he meant this literally, although it's undeniable that the anonymous darkness of the cinema did used to offer, shall we say, erotic opportunity. Television, he complains, 'doomed us to the Family'… which I suppose might be a reference to having shared his home with his mother throughout most of his life. But let's not go any further down that route.

There's something quite strange and contradictory in Barthes' attitude towards the cinema experience. He ends the essay by suggesting that it's possible to be 'doubly fascinated… by the image and the surroundings'; but also admitting that he enjoys leaving the cinema as much as entering it!

I suspect that it was during the next decade that 'nostalgia for cinema' really started to take hold among intelligentsias on both sides of the Atlantic. Its peak probably came in 1996, when Susan Sontag published her 'Decay of Cinema' essay, claiming that the onetime 'art of the 20th century' had become irreversibly decadent. What she was lamenting, if you read the essay carefully, was the end of a special relationship between her generation and the culture of movies. And I think there's no doubt that this was provoked by a conjunction between the 'centenary of cinema' – widely celebrated around 1995, and what was by then the well-established new culture of films viewed on video. Plus, maybe a dash of millenarian doom and gloom as the year 2000 approached… During the following decade, cinema would complete its technological revolution, with the release of AVATAR in digital 3D in 2009. Ironically, it was this new form of spectacle – not available domestically - that would actually draw audiences back to cinemagoing, albeit temporarily.

In 2012, the BFI's *Opening Our Eyes* report showed that alternative ways of viewing film were vastly more popular than cinema attendance, which accounted for only 6% of viewings. Yet the idea that social cinema viewing is more 'real' or authentic has persisted. We can obviously compare this with similar attitudes towards print and recorded music, with marked preferences often expressed for books on paper and vinyl discs, despite the statistical evidence of majorities opting for online reading and streamed music. So, is this another case of 'compensatory nostalgia', or of what psychologists would call 'cognitive dissonance', or just hypocrisy?

Whichever, it is an undeniable fact – reinforced by our current lockdown – that the bulk of all film watched is seen at home, increasingly via streaming rather than DVD or cassette, where we have considerable choice at our disposal… But also, no shortage of advice on what we should watch. Quite apart from the lists of best or greatest films that I talked about in the last lecture, we also have new forms of recommendation – urging us to try 'more of the same', or to 'discover' what has been 'hand-picked' for us. These are the contrasting strategies of two highly influential streaming platforms: Netflix and MUBI – and I want to consider briefly if, or how these may influence the canon of the future.

The Netflix model, which now has over 200 m subscribers around the world is based on a close analysis of 'audience taste', used as a basis for its acquisitions and, increasingly, its own productions created to satisfy aspects of that taste. Netflix, we are often reminded is not a film studio, or a television network: it is more accurately described as a technology or data company, which has embraced the power of analysing audience taste in microscopic detail. In one account of its operations, it's been claimed that Netflix 'reverse-engineered Hollywood', referring to Hollywood's methods for analysing responses to films, in order to offer its distinctive personalised menus of suggestions. Apparently, Netflix devised some 76,897 micro-genres, broke these down into their components, and used this to predict what the many segments of its audiences might like.

The result has, obviously, been enormously successful in capturing audience satisfaction, with a variety of dramatic series that ranges from *The Crown* to, for instance, *Dix pourcent*, known in English as *Call My Agent*, a series set - perhaps improbably - in a French talent agency, with subtitled dialogue in highly colloquial French.

But Netflix has also reached into the more traditional realms of feature-film production, backing such films as Cuaron's **Roma** and Scorsese's **The Irishman**. And here, the flexibility of a company ultimately committed to satisfying its home viewers has allowed these filmmakers to create at whatever length they wish – two and a quarter hour in Cuaron's case, but three and a half in Scorsese's case.

The offer from Netflix is 'unlimited TV programmes and films' – and the range is indeed vast. But the mechanism that generates this range and recommends or proposes which segments of it may interest you and me, is one that we are increasingly familiar with in other areas of our consumer lives. I have just bought 'x' online, so - the algorithm suggests - I may be interested in 'y'. Netflix is clearly aware of some canonic traditions, from its interest in backing films by famous filmmakers such as Scorsese and Cuaron, and even Michael Bay, and its courting of stars who have built up cultural capital through their careers (Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin in *Grace and Frankie*). But it's also highly democratic, geared to innovation, experiment – and ultimately spectator, or subscriber, appeal.

To get some perspective, let's compare this with another streaming service MUBI, which launched in 2007 with the aim of delivering 'classic and arthouse cinema'. Unlike Netflix, MUBI claims to offer 'discovery', through its 'hand-picked' approach to selection, which it would describe as 'curated'. Taking its cue from such film festivals as Cannes, Berlin, Venice and Rotterdam, where new reputations have traditionally been created, MUBI offers a range that's as remarkable as Netflix, although certainly smaller; but one that's geared to broadening its audiences' awareness and ultimately taste. And in recent developments, it has added a Notebook forum of writing about cinema, a podcast on the horizon, and a range of avant-garde and short films, in addition to features.

Under current conditions, MUBI seems to be prospering – although like Netflix it's reluctant to share detailed information about its subscriber base and levels of take-up. And of course, there are other streaming platforms also: Disney Plus is expected to eat into Netflix market share, while in the US, there's the Criterion Channel, developed from its parent company's established range of high-quality DVD and Blu-Ray releases.

Whatever happens to cinema attendance in the coming years, it seems unlikely that our reliance on streaming will substantially diminish. But will a new equilibrium emerge, with large-scale 'event' shows and smaller 'club-like' screenings - perhaps in 'ideal' cinemas, catering for a discriminating minority, while streaming remains a part of everyday life, like broadcasting, for the majority? Perhaps…. But what bearing does this have on the future of 'canons'? Traditionally canons have identified 'the best', the most highly regarded and rewarding work. Today, in film, as in so many areas of cultural life, we have become consumers, subject to pressures that are familiar elsewhere.

Pierre Bourdieu called his classic 1979 study in the sociology of taste 'Distinction', showing how having a sense of discrimination, and appreciation of quality was used by different social groups to proclaim their 'distinction', or in sociological terms, to maintain their 'cultural hegemony'. Knowing about films by the great directors was a part of the terrain that Bourdieu explored… and being in France, with its tradition of 'cinema d'auteur' his bourgeois subjects could indeed display their taste.

And are such concepts still applicable in the world of Netflix or MUBI? Well, clearly, they are. If I sign up to MUBI, I'm certainly proclaiming an interest in a wider, and potentially more challenging range of films than if I stick with Netflix, or Disney Plus. But of course, I'm free to pick and choose across these and other platforms, whatever advice or prompting they offer. And what will guide my choices…? Will it be a search for 'more of the same', or for 'something new and different'? Or – more likely - will it be a combination of these, depending on mood, circumstance, and social situation?

The BFI study *Opening Our Eyes*, mentioned earlier, is now nearly ten years old, carried out before streaming became a dominant force in shaping our film consumption. But already it painted a complex picture of what motivates our choices and determines our taste. Looking at what's now available to home-viewers, I think it may be time to make a distinction between at least two kinds of canon – which I'll call the 'prescriptive' and the 'prospective'. The first is about what canons have traditionally decided: what is 'core', 'fundamental', or simply 'greatest'. The great directors, such as Hitchcock, Welles… or Eisenstein, or Kubrick and a dozen or so others…

The <u>second</u> kind of canon may well have been created by the new availability that started with home-video in the 1980s. The ability to enlarge and deepen one's knowledge – which, for instance, Francois Truffaut recognised as an early champion of video, lending his support to an early range called 'les films de ma vie', named after his own book of collected criticism. I think Truffaut was pointing towards the idea that films help to construct us – they become part of who we are, which of course will change in some ways, but not in others. *Opening our Eyes* also explored this idea that films can and do help us define our characters, personality, values… which in turn goes back to the first major sociological study carried out in the US, by Herbert Blumer, *Movies and Conduct* (1933)

Blumer recognised that film had a massive influence in shaping children's understanding of the world and of themselves. As a result, he wrote, many people 'carry a movie world in their heads'. This kind of internalisation of film, and how its shapes other aspects of our lives and behaviour, is rather different from sitting back deciding on the ten or 20 or 100 'greatest films'. Or in MUBI's case, voting the 'top 1000'. It's more like how we interact with films in different ways at different stages of our lives; and indeed, how we can now discover, for ourselves, what's new *to us*. This is what I'm calling a 'prospective' canon, which has become possible thanks to the vast libraries of film now available to us. Checking out the 'prescriptive canon' is also certainly more possible than ever. But it's surely missing out on the opportunities that now exist to explore and discover – and indeed to enter into dialogue with films, thanks to the technologies we all have at our disposal, even making little personal films or video essays about them. But that's another subject, perhaps for a future lecture. For now, let me wish you happy browsing – and encourage you to go beyond the algorithm…

But at this particular moment in the history of film, with cinemas closed for nearly a year in many parts of the world, we also need to think about whether this institution is likely to survive the pandemic and its aftermath. I began by recalling how the 19c looked forward to a world of audio-visual spectacle very similar to what we have today. Does this mean that, with streaming, the era of 'going out to the cinema' has ended, except perhaps as a retro experience for a minority? Well, of course it may have been heading that already before the pandemic, except for one segment of the population, at least in America. Figures from there show that despite a continuing overall decline in cinema attendance, the 25-39 age group still constitutes over 10% of the total – and the older

segments collectively represent 25m, compared with just 13m for the under 24s… So, if any age-group is going to keep cinemas going, it'll be the over-30s and maybe even the over 50s.

And what kinds of cinema do they want? Two directions have been explored in recent cinema developments here in Britain. One is toward a club-like décor, modelled on private viewing theatres, often with tables for drinks and snacks – examples are the Everyman group, and a vintage survivor, the Electric on Portobello Road, London.

Another is towards even smaller, unadorned auditoria, like the extra screens at places like Watershed Bristol, or Bertha Dochouse screen at the Curzon Bloomsbury, showing only documentaries; or Deptford's community-run cinema; or my local in North London, the Arthouse. I find it significant that Lego offered a Palace cinema model, clearly modelled on some kind of ideal old-fashioned cinema – which I learn is now a 'retired model', and therefore one for collectors. However, one location in England, the Hyde Park cinema – first opened in 1914 represents a link between latter-day conversion and the first wave of cinema theatre buildings.

We might wonder if there's any appetite today for further innovation in the 'cinema experience', or in new ways of experiencing film? Science fiction cinema has long tried to offer visions of how viewing might be in the future, ever since the early days of the criminal masterminds Fantomas and Mabuse, both portrayed as making use of new technologies to further their dastardly ambitions. Here's an eerie moment from Fritz Lang's TESTAMENT OF DR MABUSE, made in 1933, which to our eyes might seem like an anticipation of holographic imagery.

Seventy years later, in 2002, Steven Spielberg took up a similar challenge in his *Minority Report*, based on a story by Philip K Dick, perhaps best known as the author of another futuristic classic, *Blade Runner*. In 2054 – a date that seems a lot closer now – crime has largely been eliminated by 'precognition', which allows a gifted minority to see into the future, and prevent it happening… And here is Tom Cruise operating this intriguing combination of the psychic and the technical, using only hand movements.

Aside from attempts to eliminate the screen and its framing from an imagined future cinema, we have also seen a revival of stereoscopy, - most impressively realised in Cuaron's GRAVITY, especially when seen in an Imax theatre - but which subsided after about ten years, in the face of consumer apathy, which I would argue was caused by a creative deficit among filmmakers. But meanwhile, what about perfecting the 'black box' of the theatre? The Samsung Onyx links digital technology with a traditional mini-cinema format, to create what are claimed as ideal viewing and listening conditions.

Whether or not this might catch on remains to be seen. But of course, many of us already have relatively low-tech versions of it in our homes… The wide availability of portable video projectors has allowed film to escape the theatre, into any space we might choose, indoors or outside – in a development which echoes what happened after World War 2, when plentiful 16 millimetre projectors made possible a dramatic expansion of the film society movement, and the introduction of film study in schools and colleges. Portable video projection may not seem like a watershed in screen media history, but perhaps it has been a quiet revolution – and one we may see in wider operation in the coming months?

I set myself the challenge in this last of my lectures, of posing the question: will streaming change canons of cinema? Which is of course impossible to answer, as we're still living through the current real-world experiment, in which cinemas are closed everywhere, and streaming reigns supreme as a new mode of distribution and consumption. But whether we're nudged by unseen algorithms, or encouraged to 'discover' by curated offerings, I think it's hard to believe that the audiovisual world, and its canons of excellence, will just return to some kind of pre-pandemic 'normal'. Who knows if

festivals will resume their crowded marketplaces, where word-of-mouth can launch a new discovery? Or whether fans will queue to be first to see the new James Bond or Christopher Nolan movie on a large screen? Or whether your, and my, local art-house or community cinema will be able to re-open? And whether we'll feel the impulse to support it? I'm tempted to invite viewers to write into Gresham College about your experience of lockdown viewing: what you've enjoyed, or discovered – and whether you long to return to the communal cinema experience. Do drop me a line if you're inclined. It won't be a rigorous study, but it might offer some useful pointers for the future of film…

Meanwhile, the age of streaming has raised interesting questions about 'how we view', especially concerning the importance of screen size. Does it matter that we might view a film on anything from a wall-sized projection down to a mobile phone screen? The French scholar Roger Odin has observed that, when you say you've read a novel, no-one usually asks you whether it was a paperback edition, or a full-size hardback - to which we might now add, or an electronic reader as a new option. But does the 'means of delivery' matter for the aesthetic experience? In the case of film, the issue has been confused by often failing to differentiate between a 'full-size' projection and this taking place in a cinema, with others present. Roland Barthes also mentioned as an aside how much he abhorred the 'private screening', presumably on the grounds of its 'preciousness', and the expectation of being asked to voice a response?

But let's recast the issue more objectively? Does screen size and image quality matter? And does the physical context matter - a room devoid of distraction, as in a typical modern cinema, versus the domestic clutter that might surround a home screen? There has been some research by experimental psychologists and vision scientists on how these factors might affect our response. But we have to remember that this is a constantly evolving situation, which does point to a correlation between screen size and distance with levels of 'immersion' or 'presence'. But equally someone who works in a streaming company admitted to me recently that he might well watch a short film, or part of a longer one, on a phone, since phone screens have reached a high standard of definition and contrast. Television screens notoriously differ vastly in their size, quality, and in how they're adjusted by individuals. And there's the matter of ambient light: do you have all the room lights off, or not...? Many, many variables, which should prevent us taking up a simple fixed position: that cinema viewing is always best.

The fact of the matter, surely, is that we live in a multi-platform screen world, and most of us have become familiar with using two or potentially more kinds of screen. We may well have experienced the same work on more than one scale. In my own experience, this doesn't mean one viewing is necessarily 'better' than another - indeed the differences may be instructive. I can recall first seeing Lars Von Trier's ANTICHRIST at the Cannes festival in 2009, when it shocked the entire audience in the gigantic Salle Lumiere at a morning screening. I next saw it on a laptop, wearing headphones, as preparation for writing about it for a DVD release. Not as terrifying as the first encounter, but allowing me to see more, and to reflect on the film's disturbing imagery and themes. Also allowing me to pause and watch passages again - as what my friend Laura Mulvey has called a 'pensive spectator'.

It seems clear that when we're watching a film on a personal device, we're effectively in control - able to stop, start and repeat, very much as we would when reading a written text – and indeed making it possible for me to 'quote' the film to you. Roger Odin has written about the advantages that this kind of viewing can have over being in a cinema, where there may be unwanted distractions - a point that Roland Barthes also made in his essay.

The issues at stake here, in thinking about how multi-platform viewing may affect film canons, are far-reaching. At one extreme, might the hallowed classics of the early canon now be subject to more critical scrutiny than when voted for by those who had only seen them once? Or, conversely, might

films once dismissed emerge in a new light, especially when seen in digitally restored new editions? Surely it must be significant that everyone who voted Hitchcock's VERTIGO the greatest film of all time, in *Sight & Sound*'s last poll in 2012, must have seen it most recently in a restored version. And indeed the 1996 restoration, with added sound effects and extensive work on the image, proved almost as controversial as the vivid restoration of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. In a very real sense, it could be argued that the VERTIGO we have today is a very different artifact from the one that appeared in 1958 and was met with decidedly mixed responses.

None of this should be surprising to scholars and critics concerned with other art forms, whether literary or pictorial. The processes of editing, cleaning and restoring have long been recognised as essential to maintaining canonic works in a modern condition - and they have often proved controversial, when they're felt to interfere too much with the basic fabric of the work. Is film any different? Perhaps not, although a streamed version of CITIZEN KANE or VERTIGO is very far removed in almost all material and experiential respects from the celluloid originals, projected on a screen in a smoky cinema.

There is one further aspect of what I might call the 'modern canon' of film, which has also benefited from cinema entering the digital world. This is the category traditionally known as 'short films', meaning anything other than the long-established feature of around 90 mins. The very term 'short' implies something lesser, compared with the feature film standard. And cinema canons have always been based on features, apart from some disruptive proposals in the 1970s, which you might remember from my last lecture. This has ensured that filmmakers who only worked in shorter formats have routinely been ignored; and that films which clearly aspire to being equivalent to poems or sketches - rather than to novels and large paintings - have failed to achieve canonic status. But what the digital era has allowed is a more equitable distribution and access for such works. And one of today's major platforms, MUBI, has started to acknowledge this by including short films in its repertoire – like the current LA Rebellion short films and British artist-filmmaker John Smith's CITADEL addressing the early stage of our Covid lockdown.

If streaming and sharing films digitally makes works like these more widely available - indeed perhaps favours them over lengthy features - might we see an erosion of the feature-film canon? Personally, I would like to hope for this. Many of the most innovative filmmakers in the history of cinema have long been denied the status they deserve. And I'd like to end this lecture with an extract from one such, Len Lye's RAINBOW DANCE - an animated short made as an advertisement for the Post Office Savings bank back in 1936. One of my own proudest achievements was getting this included as an exhibit in the Victoria and Albert Museum's great Modernism exhibition in 2008 - allowing it to take its rightful place among many of the icons of modernist art and design in other media...