Research Paper

Maintaining Traditional Film in the Streaming Era

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I.   Introduction

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the American domestic film industry has been in an evolving state, one that has been becoming increasingly noticeable even to the untrained eye. Most evidently, attendance at movie theaters has been on an endless decline, while the number of subscriptions for streaming services has accelerated; in 2020, Amazon Prime Video was a staple in 50% of American households, Netflix had a total of 2.3 million subscribers in the United States and Canada, and Disney+ garnered 50 million members in five months (Broe, 2020, p. 204). Meanwhile, the numbers on the side of the film industry have not been as lucrative. During 2020, it was estimated that they were facing a $5 billion loss due to production halts and practically non-existent box office attendance (Rossow et al., 2020, p. 4). This indirectly proportional relationship highlights the main debate plaguing critics and cinephiles today: traditional moviegoing versus streaming services.

In the wake of the pandemic, many people harbor mixed emotions when reminiscing on the history of film: some look back with hopeless nostalgia on a seemingly bygone era, while others are eager to pursue the promises of the future. A conflict soon arose between the two parties, split primarily on the decision of where cinema will be permanently housed. Nevertheless, it is imperative to analyze these two perspectives in order to devise a solution that is best suited for both people and the rapidly expanding world, but at the heart of this discussion remains the core purpose of cinema, the outlet that it grants passionate filmmakers, and the power it wields to stick in the public consciousness. The question this essay poses is as follows: how can Hollywood and the traditional filming industry compromise with rising streaming service conglomerates in order to preserve the artistry and personality of cinema?

Reflecting on ideas presented by heads of major studios, the average viewer as well as the cult fanatic, and venerable filmmakers, there are ways to primarily maintain the essence and memory of what makes films such a social and meaningful experience while also appreciating the advances that streaming has brought. As such, this essay will explore various perspectives from stakeholders in this debate and present the implications and limitations of a compromise that coalesces the art of movie-going and the power of streaming services in a modern context.

Going to the Movies

In the midst of such drastic changes to film and the film industry, many stakeholders, especially traditional directors and filmmakers, long for a return to the olden days of cinema. Esteemed director Steven Spielberg once stated: "I want to see the survival of movie theaters. I want the theatrical experience to remain relevant in our culture" (Hadida et al., 2021, p. 219). These concerns are not only shared by major figures in the industry, but also by impassioned fans of cinema in general. Daniel Broe, a film critic and reporter, draws attention to the fact that, in 2020, the Academy Awards allowed films without theatrical releases to be eligible for nomination, a precedent he deems "might be difficult to overturn" (Broe, 2020, p. 204). Such a drastic change from long-established history is no doubt a jarring change, and it exemplifies how the art of traditional cinema is, at the very least, being brought to the level of streaming in the eyes of the most prestigious members of the industry. As such, it can be argued that traditional film is undermined by the existence of streaming, as what made a film special was the theatrical release, the box office records, and other aspects of moviegoing exclusive to that experience. With the transition away from it, the experience and the sense of community it brought may soon be lost and instead be reserved for only close family and friends who can simply join a person on the couch within the facile comfort of their home. Photojournalist Seph Lawless captures this

phenomenon perfectly, presenting the eerily empty image of an abandoned theater in his photograph fittingly titled, "Abandoned Theaters" (see Figure 1). While not a movie theater per se, the sentiment is still there: an art and memory of casual social gathering is being lost as less and less people attend theatrical showings of film. Specifically in this case, more and more of them are staying at home to enjoy the movie. What many have experienced in the past is now in attrition, slowly fading away from the public consciousness as they are willing to conform to the many conveniences that they perceive streaming services to have.

Figure 1
The Variety Theater
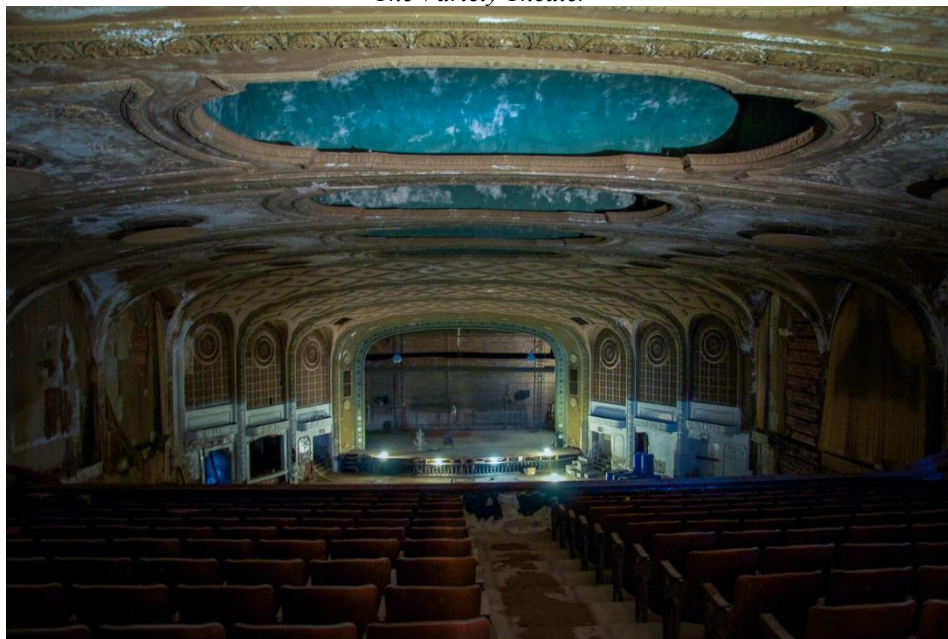
While many have indeed leaned on streaming services as their quick and easy way to consume content, that is not always the case. Senior Vice President of Theatrical Catalog Marketing at Warner Bros George Felstein explains, "These services cannot and do not provide the width and breadth of content selections that are available to consumers …" (Brody et al., 2017, p. 32). With the faults of streaming services, including the availability of content at a given point, it is nearly impossible to permanently instill a sense of memory and preservation when they are constantly being rotated in and out. *The New Yorker* editor Richard Brody concurs with Felstein, stating that "the biggest 'con'" of streaming is calculated unavailability, the planned vanishing of films in order to keep viewers attentive and hungry" (Brody et al., 2017, p. 31). With this so-called "calculated unavailability", lovers of cinema who believe they are getting a better deal may simply be purchasing multiple streaming services to watch the movie they want, spending more money in total. However, this point is slightly complicated: there are only a few movies running at a time in theaters, and it is just as complicated to find one nearby that is screening a particular film.

Not only is a film's presence on a streaming service a temporary endeavor, many have criticized the active selections they do have at any given time as "subpar". Writing for the magazine *The Baffler*, Judy Berman calls out the death of cult film, described as "scruffy, desperately original, and intermittently brilliant", in relation to streaming services, described as a "bottomless pit so stuffed with worthless content" that many cult films disappear into (Berman, 2018, p. 95-99). While this statement originates from an evidently biased and strictly leftist source, meaning it is certainly not an objective representation of the situation, it does exemplify the complaints that many arthouse film appreciators have towards the constant stream of streaming service content that may not have an analogous amount of care or meaning that films may have because not enough time and effort was spent on them. That lack of careful attention has a subsequent effect on a film's ability to stay in the public consciousness: how could something without any real substance become something worthy of being remembered?

Supporters of accelerated growth for streaming services posit that a search for filmmakers and crew will turn locally with their level of global reach That reach will therefore go to good use in representing smaller demographics and minorities around the world who wish to create and shoot on location (Rossow et al., 2020, p. 5). While there is a degree of verisimilitude to the concept of streaming services using their global outreach in order to produce films in all sorts of different countries, this fails to acknowledge the innate desire for homogenization that has become more and more prevalent in streaming services' tactics and business decisions.

By working with these countries, they may inadvertently be "Westernized" as a result, losing a sense of cultural individuality that is at the heart of what these independent films wish to achieve.

Streaming advancements

While the survival of theatrical movies should remain the primary goal, it is possible to include the new technology that streaming services have introduced into the equation. *The Daily's* David Hudson states that large streaming services have "taken the risks that have led to what we're calling "peak TV", offering new opportunities for filmmakers whose work can no longer find backing from studios" (Brody et al., 2017, p. 34). There are aspects that are lacking from the Hollywood that streaming services have made up for, which is why it is possible and indeed necessary to assimilate the two of them to maximize storytelling opportunity. Hollywood has always been a cutthroat and traditional world, for better or for worse, and it is possible to embrace a sense of flexibility from the rigid old values. Johan Norberg from *Reason Magazine* uses an allusion to Victorian history to emphasize this point, writing that "[t]he Victorian middle classes handled the transitions of the era by becoming the first generation to value the old as such; they started to care about antiques and covered their walls with portraits of ancestors" (Norberg, 2022, p. 11). While this article refers to buildings, the idea is still consistent: some people are too willing to be strictly contained with all the rules of the past and dwell on those ideas without considering how to evolve beyond them to improve their work. Streaming services do have some value in streamlining and developing a process for making memorable media without the bureaucracy of Hollywood. Professor of Film Studies at Philipps-Universität Marburg Malte Hagener refers to Netflix's goals of globalization as "smooth and homogenous", allowing "'content'... [to] flow unhindered" (Hagener, 2020, p. 186). Netflix's effort to globalize, while a concerning effort on the perspective of homogenization, is all part of an initiative to streamline films and facilitate the creation of memorable and meaningful movies.

Although maintaining the beauty of traditional cinema is critical, it is also necessary to acknowledge and incorporate the appreciation for independent film that has arisen with streaming services. According to Associate Professor of Film Studies and Production at Oakland University Brendan Kredell, Disney's Fox Searchlight and Miramax produced a total of forty-five independent films in 1999; by 2019, that number had gone down to nine (Kredell, 2025, p. 255). There is a clear loss of appreciation for independent films and their existence within mainstream Hollywood studios, which could improve with the streaming services cutting deals with independent movie distributors. Founder of streaming platform Filmatique Lorenzo Fiuzzi emphasizes that new services will likely be "industry players of the future of independent and art-house cinema: the new distributors and the new producers" (Brody et al., 2017, p. 33). Streaming services emerge as helpful allies to independent film, aiding in preserving their memory by getting them in the public eye. Not only can streaming services get independent films out to viewers, they also allow more freedom for the filmmakers. Hadida et al. point out that streaming services allow filmmakers more creative freedom, including lack of restrictions on run time and narrative structure, than if they were aiming for a theatrical release (Hadida et al., 2021, p. 221). This creative freedom is essential for allowing filmmakers to truly tell the story they want to tell; abandoning the traditional format, no matter how important it is, could be essential for allowing that artistry to thrive and create memorable pieces.

There is considerable pushback from critics questioning the validity of streaming service content. Professor of Media and Cinema Studies at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Anna Stenport specifically looks at the issue of movie remakes, stating that "[creating remakes] simultaneously implies that the original instance was a failure and constitutes an erasure of the previous iteration, thus setting the stage for an infinitely repeatable function" (Stenport et al. 2015, p. 77). Looking through the context of the constant content inundation that streaming services provide, many of which are remakes or reboots to keep up with demand, it is possible that the original is deemed as inferior in the eyes of those who are willing to embrace a shiny new version of a nostalgic classic. While it is true that streaming services offer an easy outlet for unnecessary reboots and remakes, it would be naive to say that everyone enjoys this type of content. A simple solution would be to release these films into cinemas; not a step towards more artistry and meaningful films, but still a step back into traditional movies.

II.   Conclusion

Movie theaters should be prioritized over streaming services when it comes to the preservation of artistry; however, the technology that streaming brings serves as a welcome addition that should be embraced. With Covid throwing the film industry into disarray, it is important to remember its roots as a stabilizing force, no matter how much of an illusion it may be. As streaming services continue to churn out films that are met with subpar reviews and quickly forgotten about, it would be pleasant to return to the days of films with real inspiration behind them—ones that have something to say beyond a paycheck.

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