Stream of Rivals: Licensing Coalitions and Arthouse Film Streaming Platforms

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Abstract

In this journal, Ramon Lobato and Amanda D. Lotz recently pushed against the prevailing, zero-sum tendency to place [streaming] services into a singular competitive field, proposing instead a more multifaceted conceptualization of competition among video services.[i] This article seeks to further develop this line of thinking, by examining the dynamics of cooperation that structure corners of the streaming economy. Art house streaming platforms, such as MUBI, The Criterion Channel, and OVID, provide a case study to specifically illustrate how independent film distributors, rather than directly competing with one another, form mutually beneficial arrangements when founding and operating their own over-the-top (OTT) services. I argue that these dynamics of cooperation fundamentally sustain those streaming services with marginal market share, the platforms often classified as specialist or niche. These cooperative dynamics furthermore call attention to the analytical distinction between streaming services and content providers, and more consequently, to streaming's power to extend and transform long-standing relationships between distributors of various sizes. That veterans of art house film distribution have begun operating their own streaming platforms, and creating new licensing infrastructures in the process, calls attention to their very agency, not to mention their codependence. Being profit-driven, art house distributors selected for analysis enter the streaming economy as resistive forces against prevailing trends determined by media conglomerates and Silicon Valley disruptors such as Disney and Netflix. In addition to launching their own art house film streaming platforms, these independent distributors sustain these services by forming licensing coalitions, which monetize a historical film canon while simultaneously seeking to expand and diversify it.

Keywords: *subscription video-on-demand, boutique distribution, competition, art cinema, Netflix, Criterion Collection, MUBI, OVID.*

The more one reads contemporary business and trade press, the more likely one is to encounter the narrative that streaming video services are all locked in an arena of cutthroat competition. In this journal, Ramon Lobato and Amanda D. Lotz recently pushed against the prevailing, "zero-sum" tendency "to place these services into a singular competitive field," proposing instead a more "multifaceted conceptualization of competition among video services."[2] This article seeks to further develop this line of thinking by examining the dynamics of cooperation that structure corners of the streaming economy. "Arthouse" streaming platforms, such as MUBI, The Criterion Channel, and OVID, provide a case study to specifically illustrate how independent, "boutique" film distributors, rather than directly competing with one another, form mutually beneficial arrangements when founding and operating their own over-the-top (OTT) services.[3] I argue that these dynamics of cooperation fundamentally sustain those streaming services with marginal market share, the platforms often classified as "specialist" or "niche." These cooperative dynamics furthermore call attention to the analytical distinction between streaming services and content providers (here, synonymous with film distributors or licensors), and more consequently, to streaming's power to extend and transform long-standing relationships between distributors of various sizes.

The "streaming wars" narrative not only reduces "all streaming services . . . [into direct competition] with one another," as Lobato and Lotz argue, but also hinges on the pervasive and often myopic trope of the underdog.[4] Trade press accounts tend to cast the most highly capitalized players in the streaming sector as Davids or Goliaths, with the casting subject to change based on the latest stock price or quarterly earnings report. One need only consider how headlines have alternately framed Netflix, since it launched its video-on-demand (VOD) service in 2007, as nearly omnipotent during bull markets or as dramatically imperiled during periods of financial stress.[5] The underdog trope is so persistent that executives at Fortune 500 companies like Netflix and the Walt Disney Company have embraced it in interviews, referring to themselves as underdogs as a means to telegraph confidence to investors.[6] These fickle shifts in use, as well as its near-exclusive application to the largest members of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, signal how the underdog trope reflects intra-Hollywood discourse and market vicissitudes, rather than meaningful disparities in competitive advantage, industry hierarchy, or market share. This pillar of "streaming wars" discourse furthermore masks how smaller intermediaries have convened their own alternative platforms and distribution formations.

Numerous niche platforms, many of them financially independent, vie for their own audiences in the streaming world Netflix helped create. Some subscription-video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms are brands within larger corporations, like the AMC Networks-owned Shudder, which specializes in horror films, or Bounce Media's Brown Sugar, which offers blaxploitation films from the 1970s. SVOD service OpenTV is singular as a wholly independent, "intersectional" television production and distribution platform, focused on the research and development of rising talent from underrepresented communities.[7] On a level of content, funding, and ownership, a platform like Shudder represents a corporate model of the niche-targeted streaming video platform, whereas OpenTV provides a paradigm of the independent, nonprofit, niche-targeted platform. In between these two poles lie "arthouse" streaming platforms, those for-profit services hosting international, documentary, and classic films. MUBI, The Criterion Channel, and OVID each represent different models of the arthouse SVOD

service, on account of their histories, funding sources, audiences, and–most importantly for this articlelicensing arrangements with distributors.

While it may be obvious to note that these services do not compete toe-to-toe with market-dominant platforms like Netflix, it is also reductive to argue that niche services, even those targeting similar genres and tastes, directly compete with each other. The complication here arrives in the distinction between a streaming service and a content licensor, which, in the field of niche SVOD services, are usually separate entities. For instance, a niche SVOD service may license from both major film studio libraries *and* independent distributors (e.g., The Criterion Channel) or exclusively from independent distributors (e.g., OVID). At the same time, a boutique distributor may enter into licensing agreements with several streaming services. For instance, Kino Lorber has licensed its film titles to SVOD platforms of massive scale, such as Netflix and Amazon; to independent "arthouse" SVOD services like MUBI, OVID, and The Criterion Channel; and to its own transactional video-on-demand (TVOD) storefronts, namely, Kino Cult and Kino Now.[8] Because content exclusivity is rarely secured on niche streaming services, a boutique distributor may furthermore feasibly license the same film to more than one platform at a time. All these separate revenue streams and intersecting content trajectories thwart any model of direct interfirm competition between either streaming services or film distributors.

In its place, mutually beneficial partnerships have emerged to sustain independent distributors and niche streaming services alike. *Licensing coalitions* are one such arrangement, wherein independent distributors of various sizes solicit licensing arrangements with one another in order to amass a larger, more enticing SVOD library. Naturally, independent distributors form licensing coalitions for capitalistic reasons, motivated to monetize their libraries and protect their copyrighted acquisitions against piracy. Yet, as enmeshed these distributors are in profit-driven logics, they enter into licensing coalitions with fellow boutique distributors for a range of cultural, social, and aesthetic reasons, as well.

Ultimately, how are arthouse film streaming services asserting the value of their films, and with it a certain idea of film, in the age of Netflix? How are distribution companies collaborating to offer digital film libraries notable for their aesthetic quality, historical breadth, and representational diversity? Given the proliferation of services run by independent distribution companies, this article adopts a *distributor-centered* method of analysis. Taking cues from Alisa Perren, this historical analysis adopts a "comparative" methodology attuned to continuity and change: This article pays attention, on the one hand, to how "historical content is presently being . . . circulated by a blend of for-profit, nonprofit, and governmental institutions for a variety of different reasons" and, on the other, to how "new layers of distribution infrastructures have developed in relation to–and often in tension with–legacy infrastructures and intermediaries."[9]

This article offers a historicized perspective on the digital circulation of historical content today, arguing that boutique distributors have extended long-standing collaborative relationships with one another to the streaming sector, crafting novel licensing infrastructures in the process. In addition to documenting the agency of these small, independent firms, this analysis furthermore underscores their codependence. The boutique distributors selected for analysis offer alternative, profit-driven models, in libraries and licensing arrangements,

to prevailing trends determined by media conglomerates like Disney and Silicon Valley disruptors such as Netflix. In addition to launching their own arthouse film streaming platforms, these boutique distributors sustain these services by forming licensing coalitions, with OVID being the paragon example. Arthouse film streaming platforms today all demonstrate the logistics and challenges of monetizing a historical film canon while simultaneously seeking to expand and diversify it.

"Licensing Coalitions," in Context

Before turning to its case studies, this article will contextualize its "licensing coalition" intervention by situating the concept within scholarly and industrial precedents. First, this section will clarify the meaning and import of the term "arthouse film," as it structures the identities of certain boutique distributors and independent streaming services today. Second, this section draws out relevant strains of media industry studies scholarship concerning the contemporary distribution of arthouse films in ancillary markets, such as home media and streaming. This section concludes by examining how independent "licensing coalitions" both extend and differentiate from existing traditions in film distribution.

While the concept of licensing coalitions applies to independent digital distribution and niche streaming platforms more broadly, this article specifically narrows its analysis to the digital distribution of *arthouse films*. "Arthouse film" is not synonymous with "art cinema," although the former is inclusive of the latter. "Art cinema" itself is a long-contested term, with disagreements over defining it usually hinging on whether the formal properties or the reception context of those films is the privileged object of analysis. As a pioneer of the formal approach, David Bordwell has defined "art cinema" as a "mode of film practice." Drawing from a large corpus of mainly postwar European and Japanese films, Bordwell notes how these films diverge from the formal norms of classical Hollywood cinema through their emphasis on realism, authorial expressivity, and ambiguity.[10] More recently, Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover have articulated an avowedly "impure" model for "global art cinema" without strict formal parameters. Their model privileges transnational, institutional, and reception contexts, with the understanding that art cinema possesses an ambivalent relationship to popular genre, the star system, and other foundations of Hollywood film culture.[11] This ambivalence notwithstanding, Galt and Schoonover, like Bordwell before them, propose art cinema as a set of films mutually exclusive from Hollywood output.

By contrast, "arthouse films" invoke a specific *distribution* and *exhibition* context that permits older Hollywood films, American independent cinema, and documentaries to become part of the conversation, for this kind of fare regularly screens in "arthouse" theatrical venues. In the United States, Hollywood films ("select," "sophisticated" ones, especially) have regularly screened alongside foreign films at arthouse cinemas since the postwar era.[12] In recent decades, boutique distributors such as Kino International, Milestone Films, and Cohen Media Group have amassed libraries intermingling all these modes.[13] For instance, Milestone has theatrically released modernist art films like *Fireworks* (1997, Takeshi Kitano), documentaries like *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969, Marcel Ophuls), rediscovered American independent

cinema like *Killer of Sheep* (1977, Charles Burnett), and silent Hollywood classics such as *Beyond the Rocks* (1922, Sam Wood) and the films of Mary Pickford. Virtually any independent distributor that releases global art cinema today also specializes in one or more other modes, making this analytical distinction especially pertinent. "Arthouse films" are thus a more capacious and even impure set of films than Galt and Schoonover's "art cinema," in that what screens in "arthouse" contexts depends as much as, if not more, on economic realities like attracting audiences than on an alternate industrial infrastructure altogether.

Naturally, then, arthouse streaming services also offer classical Hollywood, American independent, avant-garde, and documentary films. "Art cinema," as it is formally defined by Bordwell, is not necessarily the sole or primary draw on arthouse film streaming services. In The Criterion Channel's case, art cinema occupies a significant plurality of the platform's available content at any given time, while on a more documentary-focused service like OVID, art cinema constitutes just a minority of its offered content. Furthermore, this range of films follows the diversified programming strategies of most contemporary arthouse cinemas in the United States and other countries. Just as these theatrical venues establish relationships with American studios or Turner Classic Movies (TCM) to secure independent, documentary, or repertory selections, so too do arthouse film streaming services program films from a vast range of distributors, from major studios to boutiques.[14]

Lastly, the range of stakeholders in arthouse film streaming services complicates the gatekeeping power often ascribed to tastemaking distributors like The Criterion Collection. On the one hand, The Criterion Channel extends the salience of the canonical Janus Films library to the SVOD realm, through a platform under the company's full control. Shortly after Sight & Sound announced the results of its 2022 "Greatest Films of All Time" critics' poll, The Criterion Channel premiered a series promoting over fifty titles included on the final tally, including the newly crowned number-one, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975, Chantal Akerman).[15] As of December 2022, Janus Films held distribution rights to forty-eight of the poll's top hundred titles, while The Criterion Collection offered in-print DVD and Blu-ray editions to sixty-two of the top hundred titles.[16] These numbers attest to these companies' commanding influence over cinephile taste cultures and repertory distribution, most concretely. Yet, at the same time, Criterion and Janus possess scant gatekeeping power if compared to any larger firm in the contemporary film industry. Without control over what Virginia Crisp describes as gatekeeping "nodes," such as IP ownership, finance, or production, an independent service like The Criterion Channel must calibrate its business strategy around its audience niche.[17] Ultimately, independent streaming platforms of this kind sustain their finances and avoid subscriber churn by generating enough programming surprise and interest on a month-by-month basis.

For its part, The Criterion Channel licenses a large share of its rotating library from other distributors, some much bigger or smaller than The Criterion Collection itself, to attract audiences and expand the curatorial image established by its previous theatrical and home media efforts. Several scholars have written about these efforts, exploring The Criterion Collection's image of quality (i.e., Daniel Herbert and Paul McDonald), its transnational reframing of non-English films (i.e., Kate Egan), and its comingling of high- and lowbrow acquisitions (i.e., James Kendrick).[18] The Criterion Channel's expanded programming opportunities allow the

streaming service to extend what Kendrick argued, in 2001, to be The Criterion Collection's discursive contribution: "to function as a heuristic that offers a way of expanding conventional notions of film as art and insisting on film as culture—not a single, monolithic culture, but one of great diversity, contradiction, and openness."[19] Whether through programming *Daughters of the Dust* (1991, Julie Dash) or *Freddy Got Fingered* (2001, Tom Green), The Criterion Channel continues the Collection's tradition of provoking discourse, by licensing films from other distributors (in this case, respectively, Cohen Media Group and Disney).[20]

In this sense, arthouse film streaming services represent only the latest development in the conversion and commodification of cinema for the purposes of home viewing, a decades-long process that has seen the rise and fall of multiple formats and transactional modes. Between the late 1970s to late 2000s, consumers primarily relied on physical media to fulfill their home viewing needs. In his study of US video stores, Herbert argued that independent video stores created *social* spaces where a viewer would, in the process of paying to rent a film, move through a library with unique curatorial emphases and categorial systems and interact with video clerks who could volunteer their own tastes.[21] Arthouse film streaming services similarly pride themselves in curation, expert recommendations, and researched categories with explanatory context, as the case studies will show. In so doing, these services exemplify a now relatively quaint "editorial logic," which according to Tarleton Gillespie was the prevailing structure for cultural intermediaries before Netflix, social media, and networked databases spurred the rise of "algorithmic logic."[22] Further distinguishing the era of streaming from previous viewing regimes, Chuck Tryon has problematized "the persistent online availability" of films in the streaming age, as a psychic diminishment to paying to see a movie in theaters, on DVD/Blu-ray, or at any other point of transaction.[23] Streaming's ostensible plentitude has removed much of the urgency that arthouse distributors rely on, through favorable reviews, word-of-mouth, and street-level ballyhoo, to move a viewer to see, let alone pay for, one of their films.[24]

Moreover, this analysis seeks to nuance current media studies scholarship on price and format by discussing how arthouse film SVOD services renegotiate conceptions of value. Ramon Lobato has argued that price is "elastic: it expands and contracts depending on distribution channel"; in other words, prices bend not only across all the possible formats a film can take but also over time.[25] For this reason, Lobato calls on scholars to hold a dual synchronic (i.e., "How much does it cost?") and diachronic ("What is the history of the price?") perspective, which presents price as a key variable between different formats and modes of viewing.[26] This perspective accords with the Hollywood film industry as it conducted itself from the 1980s to the early 2010s, when a film's trajectory from theatrical to home media to television was, more or less, certain.

Yet, the ascendency of VOD services has complicated this industrial paradigm and, with it, aspects of Lobato's argument. For one, SVOD services are goods in themselves, competing with one another. Furthermore, many films no longer obey theatrical first release windows in the United States, nor can they be expected to find release across myriad formats. Lower-budget titles like arthouse films often play in film festivals and never find a weeklong theatrical release, especially outside of New York or Los Angeles. TVOD platforms may host these films, in which case the lifelong format options for a small arthouse film may be TVOD

or, barring that, an illegal BitTorrent. Format options are, essentially, dwindling for the vast majority of film titles. Thus, the temporal trajectories of individual films have to be reimagined with the rise of SVOD services, specifically whose lives are just beginning. SVOD services collapse the synchronic and diachronic into a recurring but relatively static billing relationship, one that can unfold over an indefinite period of time. The ability to provide the kinds of films a consumer would otherwise track down individually, whether through official or illicit channels, is key to a SVOD service's value. It is this ability, more so than a SVOD service's price, that is subject to change over time. For viewers with sufficient disposable income, a subscription to MUBI or The Criterion Channel can function as a reminder to engage with more "artistic" or "intellectual" fare than one finds on other streaming platforms. For viewers seeking value, MUBI, OVID, and The Criterion Channel all offer subscriptions at discounted annual rates, unlike Netflix which offers no yearly or discounted payment plan.[27] Through multiple strategies, arthouse film SVOD services promote competing meanings of value in order to reduce subscriber churn.

This section will conclude by once again addressing the supply-side, to consider how licensing coalitions relate to existing interfirm arrangements. Boutique distributors have long collaborated with one another, and the licensing coalitions they form on streaming platforms naturally extend from these industrial–social relationships. For two representative examples, Kino International partnered with Janus Films to theatrically distribute the latter's repertory catalog between the late 1970s and 1980s, while Milestone Films forged similar arrangements with Audie Bock's East–West Collection to distribute postwar Japanese classics like *Pigs and Battleships* (1961, Shōhei Imamura) in its early years.[28] Partnerships such as these can elevate the brand profile of whichever distributor reaches the widest possible audience. Among genre cinema enthusiasts, Wizard Video gained a reputation in the 1980s for alluring VHS releases of horror films, some of them produced by its parent studio, Empire Pictures, and others acquired from fellow independent distributors, as was the case with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974, Tobe Hooper), acquired by New Line Cinema at the time. These interfirm partnerships can often end in acrimony, as seen in Wizard Video and New Line Cinema's subsequent legal action.[29] But often they can also prove to be relatively stable and symbiotic, as Kino Lorber demonstrates through its current distribution arrangements with other boutiques, the most prominent labels as of 2024 being Milestone Films, Zeitgeist Films, Cohen Media Group, and Metrograph Pictures. Through these arrangements, Kino Lorber distributes and in some cases co-produces the home media titles of these fellow boutique companies.[30] Moreover, this form of boutique quasi-consolidation is only made possible through Kino Lorber's distribution agreements with major studios. Founded in 2014, Kino Lorber Studio Classics produces a high-volume output of studio-produced catalog titles on Blu-ray and DVD.[31] In a sign of how interconnected these distributors are, Kino Lorber's Hollywood-supplied home media infrastructure has facilitated the company's relationships with other boutique firms.[32]

Licensing coalitions emerge through a network of such relationships, formed through interfirm arrangements that aspire to be fair, recurring, and possibly reciprocal. When founding their own streaming platforms, boutique distributors inevitably partner with firms they have collaborated with previously. OVID Director Jonathan Miller attests to the social circumstances that led his distribution company Icarus Films to create OVID with

seven other boutique firms: "We all knew each other, some of us had worked together in the past, and we all saw the same issues/terrain, and so took the simplest most straightforward approach to trying to do something."[33] OVID's compensation structure for its content partners, as detailed in the next section, exemplifies licensing coalitions' goals of equity and sustenance. By contrast, expansionary platforms like Netflix spurn these same goals in their pursuit of vertical integration and outsize market share. While Netflix grew its DVD rental and streaming business through deals with distributors, both major and boutique, these arrangements have decreased–and for boutiques, have nearly vanished–as Netflix prioritized acquiring the global rights for most of its titles.[34] With their avowed niche focus, arthouse streaming services aim for sustainability, and licensing coalitions form a supply-side infrastructure enabling this goal. For its part, MUBI has recently embarked on ambitious growth initiatives, by financing and acquiring a growing number of films and by acquiring the sales agency The Match Factory.[35] While MUBI so far continues to license from fellow boutique distributors, The Criterion Channel's greater variety of licensors and OVID's more transparent finances render these latter two services the most illuminating for the subsequent case studies.

Licensing Coalitions behind The Criterion Channel and OVID

Unlike MUBI, The Criterion Channel and OVID possess no database functionality, no production or sales offices, no international availability, nor any venture capital investment.[36] That is not to preclude the possibility of these services expanding in the future but to note that such functionality diverts from the core mission of distributor-run SVOD services: to monetize their film library. In the case of both Criterion and OVID, however, these services understand that the film library of one independent distribution company will not attract and retain a profitable subscription-paying user base. In response, both services generate their libraries through licensing coalitions, wherein independent distributors of various sizes enter into licensing arrangements with one another to amass a larger, more enticing library. As practiced by Criterion and OVID, licensing coalitions can also facilitate more diverse programming, paper over individual distributors' blind spots, and expand the canon of quality cinema.

Launched on April 8, 2019, The Criterion Channel represents the first independent streaming venture operated by the home media distribution company The Criterion Collection and its theatrical distribution partner Janus Films.[37] But The Criterion Channel is, in fact, the fourth streaming platform with exclusive rights to the full Janus Films catalog.[38] Prior to 2019, The Criterion Collection licensed its large library of Janus-owned titles to three SVOD services, across nonoverlapping tenures. From 2008 to 2011, the Janus Films catalog lived on MUBI's original service, The Auteurs, before migrating to Hulu between 2011 and 2016.[39] Beginning on November 1, 2016, SVOD service FilmStruck hosted Criterion's Janus library in a partnership with TCM. After AT&T's acquisition of TCM parent company Time Warner Inc. in June 2018, AT&T shut down many "niche-oriented" streaming services including FilmStruck, which ceased operations on November 29, 2018.[40] As of December

2023, Criterion and Janus also continue to license a smaller portion of its titles to SVOD platforms Max (formerly HBO Max) and Kanopy, although the number of films available on the latter varies according to a user's associated library or educational institution.[41] Both in content and curation, The Criterion Channel resembles the defunct FilmStruck, with the full Janus Films library on a dedicated SVOD platform supported by Vimeo OTT's technical infrastructure.[42] Unlike its predecessors The Auteurs, Hulu, or FilmStruck, The Criterion Channel hosts the Janus Films catalog under the full operational control of Criterion itself, making it one of the most formidable, distributor-run SVOD platforms within the arthouse niche.

With the Janus Films catalog as its foundation, The Criterion Channel perpetuates a classic, Bordwellian notion of art cinema through its core programming. A themed program like "Memory on Film," for instance, champions art cinema's capacity to explore realistic psychology and the ambiguities of reality. On the dedicated sub-page for "Memory on Film," the following sentence encapsulates the program: "These master filmmakers distort conventional chronology and manipulate our perception of time—and of truth."[43] With the exception of *Hiroshima mon Amour* (1959, Alain Resnais), which was distributed by Rialto Pictures, Janus Films holds the US distribution rights for the remaining six series titles in this series: *Rashomon* (1950, Akira Kurosawa), *Wild Strawberries* (1957, Ingmar Bergman), *Mirror* (1974, Andrei Tarkovsky), *Sans Soleil* (1983, Chris Marker), *Three Colors: Blue* (1993, Krzysztof Kieslowski), and *In the Mood for Love* (2000, Wong Kar-wai). In this case, the relationship between the streaming platform (Criterion Channel) and film licensor (Janus Films) is already well-established and close-at-hand. The overlap between the "Memory on Film" series and the corpus of art films analyzed in Bordwell's 1979 article testifies to the enduring value of and ease of access to the art cinema canon for services like The Criterion Channel.

Yet, as synonymous the Janus Films library is with classic art cinema, The Criterion Channel has pursued a more comprehensive and diverse streaming video library by soliciting films from Hollywood studio libraries and smaller boutique labels. In licensing from both studios (e.g., Warner Bros., Sony Pictures, and Paramount Pictures) and boutique distributors (e.g., Cinema Guild, Grasshopper Film, and Film Movement), The Criterion Channel functions as an influential intermediary between the conglomerate and independent poles of the industry.[44] As an indication of its more populist programming, The Criterion Channel launched in April 2019 a "Columbia Noir" series, featuring 11 film noirs produced by Columbia Pictures between 1945 and 1962.[45] This well-received series showcases The Criterion Channel's ability to insert classical Hollywood cinema into popular conversations around streaming. Describing "Columbia Noir" as "counter-programming," *Vanity Fair*'s film critic K. Austin Collins found the titles in the series to be "as urgent, as delightful and suspenseful to watch today as they ever were."[46] Often, The Criterion Channel attempts to frame its classical Hollywood cinema programming by foregrounding its representational politics. This can come, quite simply, in a paratextual emphasis on the stylish femme fatale over the laconic male lead, as with the "Columbia Noir" banner image featuring Gloria Grahame. This political valence can also be detected in programs dedicated to female directors working in the classical Hollywood studio system, such as Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino.[47] Assuming that fans of arthouse cinema will find value in old Hollywood films and vice versa, The Criterion Channel approaches

classical Hollywood cinema as a cultural touchstone accessible to many and always primed for reevaluation.

In addition to licensing from major studios, The Criterion Channel programs a more inclusive streaming library by licensing from boutique distributors such as Cohen Media, Kino Lorber, and Milestone Film and Video. Although Criterion and Janus are arguably the distributors most synonymous with "art cinema," they cannot claim to hold the rights to the full breadth of quality cinema. In particular, The Criterion Collection was publicly criticized in the pages of *The New York Times* for releasing, as of August 20, 2020, just four films directed by Black Americans. The article specifically laid blame on the company's president Peter Becker, who apologized and promised change.[48] *The New York Times* article prompted heated discussion on social media and among cinephiles in general, although it was not the first article to mention Criterion's lack of attention toward non-white male filmmakers.[49] What should be emphasized, however, is that no single distribution company attends to the many tributaries of global cinema. The attention paid to The Criterion Collection stems from its outsize reputation in the field of arthouse distribution and home media retail, a field where other, smaller companies have posted consistent track records of releasing films by and about marginalized peoples. In the time since the 2020 *New York Times* article, The Criterion Collection has notably diversified its library, adding over twenty-five films by Black American directors such as Gordon Parks, Cauleen Smith, and Cheryl Dunye.[50] But regardless of The Criterion Collection's pace of change, The Criterion Channel affords the company a digital platform to curate a more inclusive image of quality cinema that the economics of brick-and-mortar retail may not be able to necessarily sustain.

Thus, The Criterion Channel corrects for the blind spots of Janus and The Criterion Collection by licensing films by women, queer, and BIPOC artists from boutique distributors. In exchange for an upfront fee from the Channel, Milestone Films licenses titles from its diverse catalog, which includes the work of Shirley Clarke, Charles Burnett, and Kathleen Collins.[51] Apart from the Milestone company logo that greets the viewer who has pressed play, The Criterion Channel page for *Losing Ground* (1982, Kathleen Collins) does not mention its distributor Milestone Films.[52] Boutique distributors like Milestone thus benefit from this licensing arrangement through payment and access to a relatively large cinephile audience, at the cost of conflating their brand with that of Criterion. The Criterion Channel routinely commingles films from major studios, boutiques, and its own Janus library through its spotlighted programs. For the initial nine-film package in Michael Koresky's recurring series *Queersighted: The Ache of Desire*, The Criterion Channel secured Janus Films titles such as *Happy Together* (1997, Wong Kar-wai), the United Artists production *Yentl* (1983, Barbra Streisand), and boutique acquisitions like TLA Releasing's *Raging Sun, Raging Sky* (Julián Hernandez, 2009).[53] By programming a wide variety of films and highlighting marginalized identities in the process, The Criterion Channel has established mutually beneficial licensing arrangements with other boutique distributors such as Strand Releasing, Icarus Films, and Oscilloscope Laboratories.[54]

In sum, these specialized distributors gain from The Criterion Channel's recurring payments for content, which can amount to significant sources of income as theatrical and home media revenues have declined.[55] These licensing arrangements are often nonexclusive, leaving

these distributors free to secure additional streams of TVOD, SVOD, or AVOD (advertising-based video-on-demand) revenue while working with Criterion. The Criterion Channel affords a Milestone release like *The Exiles* (1961, Kent MacKenzie) or a Grasshopper Film title like *Dry Ground Burning* (2022, Joana Pimenta and Adirley Queirós) a relatively wide viewership, compared to their reach through limited theatrical and home media runs, or through Milestone or Grasshopper's bespoke TVOD platforms.[56] Ultimately, The Criterion Channel hosts a more multifaceted, ever-changing selection of global cinema than Janus Films could solely support through the licensing coalition it forms with other boutique distributors.

Beyond The Criterion Channel, OVID exemplifies the ideals behind a coalitional licensing strategy. The SVOD platform OVID (also referred by its URL, OVID.tv) emerged in response to a gap in the streaming market, specifically the lack of interest Netflix and Hulu showed toward independent documentary titles. This retrenchment from major platforms, combined with the recent shuttering of alternative services FilmStruck and Fandor, led a collection of independent distributors to convene and discuss paths forward. "So as there was no (longer) a market for our films," according to OVID Director Jonathan Miller, "we wanted to create our own, or one, anyway."[57] As stated on the platform's "Who we are" page, Docuseek, LLC (which also runs the education-market SVOD service Docuseek) launched OVID in March 2019 "with the help of an unprecedented collaborative effort by eight of the most noteworthy, independent film distribution companies in the U.S."[58] These founding content partners include Bullfrog Films, dGenerate Films, Distrib Films US, First Run Features, Grasshopper Film, KimStim Films, Women Make Movies, and Icarus Films, whose president is also Miller. As of November 2023, OVID has expanded from eight to fifty-seven content partners, including Music Box Films, GKIDS, and the National Film Board of Canada.[59] Rather than paying fees upfront to licensors, à la The Criterion Channel, OVID pays all content partners, according to Miller, "on the same basis":

> 50% of [OVID's] income from subscribers is paid out to the content partners based on the usage of each film, i.e. prorated by running time and minutes viewed amongst all the films on the service in the given accounting period." Put plainly, "the more popular a film is the more [OVID pays] out for that film.[60]

The usage data determining such compensation are visible not only to content providers but also, unusually, to the general public, through OVID's "metafilm" blog.[61] According to Miller, "We want our partners (and filmmakers, critics, the world etc.) to know the reality of what we do and how we do it. How hard it is, how much we might spend on it, what the returns are (if any) etc."[62] On a level of vision, compensation, and transparency, OVID represents an alternative, nearly egalitarian SVOD model through its licensing coalition strategy.

OVID's distributors have pooled their resources to form a diverse and unique streaming library. According to OVID, this library can be divided into "roughly three categories: a) powerful films addressing urgent political and social issues, such as climate change, and economic justice; b) in-depth selections of creative documentaries by world-famous directors; and c) cutting-edge arthouse feature and genre films by contemporary directors as well as established masters."[63] Representative titles from category "a" include the Palestinian documentary 5 *Broken Cameras* (2011, Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi) and American archival

documentary *Let the Fire Burn* (2013, Jason Osder), while ten films by Chilean documentarian Patricio Guzmàn indicate the priorities of category "b." Although OVID's programming emphasizes nonfiction over fiction filmmaking, category "c" appeals explicitly to the kind of narrative cinema associated with auteurism and "arthouse" fare, through such films as *A New Old Play* (2022, Qiu Jiongjiong) and *I Do Not Care if We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (2019, Radu Jude).

OVID displays how, in response to formal trends and industry pressures, the boundaries between different modes of cinema are being redrawn. The alliance between an auteur-focused distributor like Grasshopper Film and an environmental documentary label like Bullfrog Films demonstrates the permeability of and overlap between categories many still see as fixed. The "art cinema" outfit today often views its work as political, while the distributor releasing documentaries about social issues can better win the attention of aesthete cinephiles interested in cultural, political, and environmental exigencies. OVID demonstrates the contemporary hybridity of an arthouse film, as it is exhibited, discussed, and categorized. It accomplishes this through a novel SVOD content provider structure, where fifty-plus independent distribution companies, each with its own acquisition niche, form a licensing coalition. In the process, they rebrand their shared film library under a dual aesthetic-political lens.

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Examining the arthouse film distribution system as it migrates onto streaming video platforms both incumbent and of its own making reveals newfound modes of cooperation as well as ever-greater dangers. Pragmatism, above all, informs the licensing coalitions as practiced by The Criterion Channel and OVID. The resulting coalitions demonstrate how competing distribution companies are coming together, however virtually and impermanently, and altering established ideas about arthouse films–their histories, priorities, and audiences–in the process. Accompanying this expansion in coalitions is the increasingly broad purview of boutique distributors and arthouse streaming platforms alike. Alongside *L'Avventura* (1960, Michelangelo Antonioni) and *Taste of Cherry* (1997, Abbas Kiarostami), The Criterion Channel offers action films by Michael Mann and Jackie Chan, Asian American documentaries, and the Milestone Films restoration *Alma's Rainbow* (1994, Ayoka Chenzira). Arthouse theaters across the United States have long practiced similar intermingling, between genres, nations, eras, and modes of production. But the proliferation of arthouse film streaming services intensifies these hybridizing forces and, most importantly, renders them visible to a larger number of people than ever before.

Arthouse film streaming services ultimately lean on two forms of value–the incalculable value of "great cinema" and the budget-conscious value of a good deal–to attract and retain paying customers over a long-term basis.[64] These boutique distributors, then, appear to be vital agents within this new industrial paradigm. While their experience in a notoriously low-profit sector of the film industry makes them well-suited to adapt, the licensing coalitions emerging between many of these companies indicate an unusual degree of cooperation between nominal competitors. In assessing the relationships between boutique distributors and clarifying the specific niches their streaming services serve, this article has hoped to paint a clearer portrait of a global film culture in transition.

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