

The Distribution of Arthouse Films in a Constantly Changing Industry: The Era of New Digital Protocols, Virtual Reality and Other Video on Demand

Katia Andrea Morales Gaitán / Ph.D. Thesis Project¹
Université de Montréal

With the goal of reaching wider audiences, a new ‘media chronology’² has arisen: these days movie theaters are no longer the exclusive place to premiere a feature film. In many cases the gap between the first public screening and the film’s availability on online platforms can take less than 6 months, instead of 36 months as it happened in the past. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more and more films were even released directly on online platforms. Given this changing scenario and with the growth of other agents in the film distribution industry, the central issue of this project is understanding the challenges and new practices for the distribution of arthouse films.

This doctoral research under the direction of André Gaudreault will examine the innovations of the economic, political and creative aspects involved in the distribution of this type of cinema. The study will focus on platforms based on Blockchain (disintermediation and transparency) and Virtual Reality technologies, as well other kinds of Video on Demand. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this project will bring insights from Film Studies, Sociology of Art and Economics of Creative Industries.

Although the French theory of auteur cinema developed in the 1960s is a classic reference, I consider practical to use the term *cinéma d’art et essai* (arthouse films), a contemporary classification of the French-language film industry. This concept corresponds notably to the films that have received public funding and are often co-productions between several countries. In more radical cases, there are films resulting from collective work — produced by cooperatives or small companies — motivated only by artistic creation, without the interest in making profits. Consequently, their aim is creative freedom, formal experimentation, questioning the establishment,³ and emancipation from studios or any other intermediary.

¹ Ph.D. dissertation supervised by Professor André Gaudreault. For information: katia.andrea.morales.gaitan@umontreal.ca

² This concept claims specially in France a juridical frame about the order and the time that a film should take to transit between different media: from movie theaters to Blu-ray then to TV and finally at online platforms.

³ One of my favorite forerunners is Pasolini. About his narratives, Magny says the following: ‘Pasolini contests the dominant culture, but he tries to get from what he calls the culture before pre-

After 72 editions, in 2020 an institution such as the Cannes Film Festival has begun to gradually move into the virtual world⁴ with the realization of the first completely online Marché du Film.⁵ From the field of Film Festival Studies, Narváez's⁶ contribution reveals the characterization of Latin American films included in competition at the Cannes Film Festival and its audiences, a category for which Mexicans have received top awards and recognition.⁷ His work highlights the fact that arthouse and commercial cinema do coexist within this institution. If for some viewers arthouse cinema is synonymous with boring films, for others it is an opportunity to enjoy a piece of art that puts the creative production of a director or a collective on display. These audience members know that they will find an original and personal story, without editorial guidelines or prefabricated production codes.

Gaudreault and Marion's⁸ recent research on Netflix is a key piece of scholarship for investigating the commercial policy of this platform. According to the authors, Netflix's strategies and operations are very similar to those of drug traffickers. They claim that the Los Gatos, California-based company not only acquired various films and series for its catalogue, but also is buying off as many filmmakers as possible to produce their own productions. Faced with this monopolistic trend, it is the aim of my research to amplify the alternative sources in arthouse film for the French and Spanish speaking market.

I have provisionally selected two titles to serve as case studies for this thesis. First, *I am No Longer Here* (*Ya no estoy aquí*, Fernando Farías de la Parra, 2019); second, *La flor* (2017), officially directed by Mariano Llinas, but created collectively by the cooperative *El Pampero Cine*. *La flor* is a 14-hour film with a

capitalism or paleo-capitalism [...] what is necessary to found a new civilization' (my translation), Joël Magny, 'Pier Paolo Pasolini, « Et Dieu dans tout ça? », *Cahiers du cinéma* (special issue *Cinéma* 68), 1998, 93.

⁴ Etienne Sorin, 'Thierry Frémaux: « On peut imaginer un label "Cannes2020" pour valoriser les films », *Le Figaro* [online], 15 April 2020 <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/cinema/thierry-fremaux-on-peut-imaginer-un-label-cannes2020-pour-valoriser-les-films-20200415>> [accessed 16 April 2020].

⁵ 'Day 4 here we go! You are now 10,000 registered industry professionals at the Marché du Film Online, THANK YOU! We're proud to experience this with all of you! Still 2 days to enjoy our virtual market!' #mdf20 #mdfonline #cannes2020 #filmmarket #filmindustry» (@mdf_cannes, 25 June 2020).

⁶ Geovanny Narváez, 'El cine latinoamericano contemporáneo y la estética de festival. El caso de Cannes (2000–2015)', *Archivos de la Filmoteca*, 77 (2019), 21–46.

⁷ Carlos Reygadas, director of titles such as *Luz silenciosa* (2007), *Post Tenebras Lux* (2012), is the one with the most work catalogued as 'Festival Art Cinema' that is to say, narratives that are complex, difficult to interpret, and intended for intellectual audiences. On the other hand, the title *Biutiful* (2012) by Gonzales Iñárritu falls into the category of 'Medium Art Cinema'. The films by Guillermo del Toro and Alfonso Cuarón would be in the category of 'Art Cinema and Commercial film', whose main audiences are those of an average culture.

⁸ André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, 'Les intervalles sériels à l'aune des « séries culturelles »', forthcoming in the online journal *Sens public* (article derived from the opening lecture given at the international conference *Intervalles sériels: littérature, cinéma, télévision, médias* held in Montréal in April 2019).

The Distribution of Arthouse Films in a Constantly Changing Industry

non-linear structure, made over 10 years in complete freedom — without co-productions, public funds, pitching, or bureaucracy. Eventually, I will include in my thesis a film shot in Virtual Reality from Quebec.

This project will encompass both qualitative and quantitative tools. First, I plan to conduct interviews with directors, producers, distributors, exhibitors, aggregators, and representatives of digital platforms that have a decisive role in the distribution of this content. These semi-structured interviews will focus on 1) distribution strategies, 2) promotion, 3) economic aspects, 4) audiences, and 5) challenges of implementation. Secondly, I will conduct two focus groups with experts — one with agents from the French-speaking world, the other with representatives from Spanish language cinema. Finally, I will also gather quantitative data from other sources such as Comscore, institutional reports from the National Film Board of Canada, the *Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée* and the *Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía*.