OTT platforms as heterotopic media environments.
Cultural implications of the disempowerment of audiences

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Abstract

Questo studio si propone di indagare il progressivo deterioramento della natura *bottom-up* di Internet e le sue conseguenze culturali e politiche, affrontando il tema delle piattaforme OTT attraverso la nozione di eterotopia. Questo approccio si fonda sull'idea foucaultiana di uno spazio connesso a tutti gli altri spazi in modo tale da sospendere, neutralizzare o invertire le relazioni che essi definiscono. Inoltre, incorpora l'applicazione di Burgin di questo concetto agli studi sui media, descrivendo come film o frammenti cinematografici spostati e circolanti in diversi spazi mediatici portino con sé la loro specifica temporalità. Da questa prospettiva, le piattaforme OTT possono essere analizzate in quanto ambienti mediali eterotopici per due ragioni principali. In primo luogo, esse incorporano contenuti provenienti dal cinema e dalla televisione, creando uno spazio in cui anche gli artefatti "nativi" della piattaforma – gli Originals – sono comunque derivati da contesti mediali. In secondo luogo, le OTT riproducono dinamiche tipiche dei media tradizionali all'interno del web, reintegrando abitudini di fruizione legate al contesto del broadcasting e impedendo un'interazione esplicita sia con i contenuti sia tra gli utenti. Se si confronta questo scenario con modelli alternativi, in particolare le architetture p2p, emergono chiare conseguenze per il ruolo culturale del pubblico. Infatti, all'interno di queste eterotopie, gli utenti sono relegati al ruolo di consumatori passivi, esclusi dai processi che contribuiscono alla costruzione della cultura, in quanto non fanno parte di una struttura che consente loro di determinare cosa meriti di essere diffuso e conservato.

This study aims to investigate the gradual erosion of the bottom-up nature of the Internet and its cultural and political outcomes by addressing OTT platforms through the notion of heterotopia. This approach is rooted in Foucault's idea of a space connected to all other spaces in such a way as to suspend, neutralise, or invert the relationships they define. Moreover, it incorporates Burgin's application of this concept to media studies, describing how displaced films or film fragments circulating within different media spaces bring their specific temporality therein. From this perspective, OTT platforms can be understood as heterotopic media environments for two main reasons. Firstly, they incorporate items from cinema and television, creating a space in which even platform-specific artefacts – the originals – are nonetheless derived from these media. Additionally, they reproduce dynamics typical of traditional media within the web, reinstating broadcasting habits and precluding explicit interaction with content and among users. When contrasted with alternative models, namely P2P architectures, this scenario reveals clear consequences for the audience's cultural role. Indeed, within these heterotopias, users are relegated to passive consumers, excluded from processes that contribute to the construction of culture, as they are not part of a structure that allows them to determine what is worth spreading and preserving as cultural heritage.

Introduction: web architectures as power structures

As Francesca Musiani posits, online architectures are «the very fabric of user behaviour», as they regulate and shape the possibilities for interaction, exploration, and sharing within an online space (Musiani, 2021, p.1). This perspective shows how these architectures function as Foucauldian apparatus, as they can influence, guide, and constrain the behaviour of the subjects operating within them. Similar to the dispositifs articulated by Michel Foucault, network architectures have a dominant strategic function, possess the capacity to modify power dynamics, and emerge from intentional and coordinated actions designed to steer these dynamics toward a specific direction. With this in mind, this study aims to highlight the cultural implications of these processes, focusing in particular on how they can alter the interactions between the dominant and hegemonic cultural framework and the audience, with significant consequences for the processes of empowerment and disempowerment affecting the subject.

To understand the broader cultural implications of these phenomena, this paper draws on Stuart Hall's perspective, according to which culture constitutes a domain of symbolic conflict, in which meanings, identities, and power relations are articulated and negotiated through the media (Hall, 1980a; 1980b; 1997; Procter, 2004). If, as Hall suggests, culture constitutes society and is shaped by the various media forms that contribute to its establishment (Hall 1980a, 1982, 1983), then this influence is in turn mediated by the ways in which network architectures shape the relationship between the culture industry and its audience. Therefore, in the contemporary mediascape, these architectures play a crucial role in defining how media articulate and foster «cultural power» (Hall, Segal and Osborne, 1997). In this sense, the power dynamics between the hegemonic cultural framework and the audience are conditioned by the degree of user agency within a system and the resulting capacity to collectively shape a shared cultural context.

Within this framework, participatory, horizontal, and non-hierarchical systems, such as peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing, can be understood as means through which individuals partially emancipate themselves from the top-down shaping of subjectivity described by Adorno and Horkheimer (1947/2002), countering — or at least mitigating — the Culture industry's colonising influence on individual subjectification. This emancipatory potential becomes more apparent considering Victor Burgin's concept of the «possessed spectator», a figure

haunted by fragments of the culture industry and exemplified by characters in Resnais' Same Old Song (1997), who express themselves solely through excerpts from popular songs (Burgin, 2005). Specifically, the theoretical roots of Burgin's idea — namely, the influence of culture on the definition of the subject (Stiegler, 2014/2004) — highlight the interplay between online architectures and processes of individualisation. In this context, the opportunity to actively contribute to a shared media database or archive enables individuals to participate in the selection of content to which they and their peers are exposed.

Thus, the participatory element of P2P architecture enables audiences to exercise agency over which cultural fragments shape their subjectification, thus facilitating the shift from an impersonal «one» — a homogeneous, depersonalised mass sharing a uniform collective memory — to a collective «we» formed through the collaboration of individual consciousnesses (Stiegler, 2014/2004).

This perspective on the political potential of P2P file sharing aligns with Jenkins' account of a redistribution of power through and within media (Jenkins, 2006), situating it in the broader field of studies that address the political outcomes of participatory culture. However, this position does not entail an uncritical acceptance of the anarcho-capitalist narrative that accompanied the rise of Web 2.0, which framed the internet as a domain of radical discontinuity from traditional power structures and as a definitive break from the passivity of consumers and audiences. The prosumeristic revolution remains, in fact, far from being realised, as participation itself appears to be a phenomenon requiring recontextualisation and re-evaluation. In this respect, although the contemporary digital landscape diverges significantly from the «1% rule» — which posited a 90-9-1 ratio among creators, commenters, and lurkers on the internet (Horowitz 2006; Nielsen 2006) — more recent analyses indicate that content creators still account for no more than 10% (McNair, 2020) or, at most, 20% (McEnroe, 2016) of web users.

Moreover, it is essential to consider how the participatory context remains partly subordinated to the traditional culture industry. Notably, since the creation of user-generated content is often prompted by the appropriation of, or a response to, content originating from broadcasting dynamics (Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2013; 2014; Wiggins, Bower, 2015), such influence remains decisive in shaping participatory culture. In this regard, Manovich (2010), highlights that a significant portion of user-generated content follows the conventions established

by the traditional cultural industry. Building on this, he questions whether the participatory sphere might reinforce, or even expand, the power dynamics identified by Adorno and Horkheimer. This phenomenon can be further appreciated by observing the volume of broadcast content that populates participatory spaces such as YouTube. Notably, the most-viewed content on the platform consists either of productions targeted at children (developed by traditional production companies) or music videos produced by major record labels.

With this in mind, the participatory space cannot, in itself, be regarded as a complete alternative to the traditional culture industry or a revolutionary path to complete audience emancipation. In fact, this utopian vision was actively promoted within a neoliberal framework that marketed and commodified ideals of horizontality and openness. At the same time, it obscured a media environment structurally defined by the centralisation of resources and power, shaped by the socio-economic conditions in which it developed. Notably, the same industry actors who advanced this anarcho-capitalist rhetoric of decentralisation also routed the web toward structures and asymmetries consistent with neoliberal logics. This context aligns closely with the scenario outlined by Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, who note that the platformisation of culture and entertainment coincides with the concentration of economic resources and centralisation of power (Poell et al., 2021). Nevertheless, as Bonini and Treré (2024) argue, user agency and the possibility of generating autonomous communities within digital platforms provide a foundation for resistance phenomena, which, although still highly limited, create essential conditions for a redistribution of power.

Within this framework, the decision to focus solely on P2P file sharing, while excluding the study of social media, stems from the recognition of the peculiar relationship that each participatory model maintains with the traditional, non-participatory culture industry. Indeed, as Jenkins (2006), Shifman (2013), and Milner (2016), among others, have argued, social media expand the cultural offerings of the traditional industry through a prosumeristic model, while simultaneously reshaping its products through memetic processes. In this sense, social media are positioned in relation to the traditional cultural industry as either an expansion or a critical response. Accordingly, Cunningham and Craig (2019) observe continuity between social media entertainment and the traditional Hollywood industry noting that although the former initially emerged from grassroots, non-institutional movements, it has gradually become professionalised and incorporated into industrial and commercial para-

digms (Cunningham, Craig, 2019). This phenomenon is further evidenced by data collected by Bartl (2018) in his ten-year study, which show that — on average across annual observations — 3% of YouTube channels accounted for 85% of total views on the platform.

By contrast, the dissemination of files through P2P networks may represent a structural reconfiguration of the relationship between media and power, as discussed by Hall. Indeed, when the audience assumes the role of co-curator of its cultural environment by directly selecting, distributing, and enhancing the visibility of traditional broadcasting media, it is no longer merely reacting to a stimulus originating "from above". Rather, it can potentially shape the collective visibility and impact of that very stimulus. In this sense, social media and the traditional cultural industry can be seen as complementary elements (Mittell, 2015; Cunningham, Craig, 2019; Ren et al., 2022), whereas P2P file sharing may represent a structural reconfiguration of the latter. Consequently, while social media has progressively incorporated much of the participatory potential into a neoliberal framework (Roberts, 2014; Poell et al., 2021; Ivanyi 2023) and has thereby penetrated the media market, P2P has been consistently marginalised within the media system.

Nevertheless, P2P file sharing, although distinct from, and less aligned with, traditional industry practices, may be susceptible to the same assimilation dynamics that have affected social media. In fact, this model of consumption and content distribution does not inherently guarantee increased accessibility or an adjustment of content visibility *tout court*. On the contrary, it is highly probable that content with significant reach will continue to originate from mainstream cultural domains, as it benefits from greater promotion and higher exposure.

Consistent with this scenario, a 2011 report by TorrentFreak identified *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008), and *Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007) as the three most pirated films of all time up to that date (Van der Sar, 2011). Moreover, this trend is consistently confirmed by more recent weekly observations conducted by the same news outlet (Van der Sar, 2025). Similarly, the 2020 report by the European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO) shows that between January and September 2018, the most pirated films in Europe were *Justice League* (Zack Snyder, 2017), *Thor: Ragnarok* (Taika Waititi, 2017), and *Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins, 2017) (EUIPO, 2020). Given this context, as with social media, P2P practices risk perpetuating traditional cultural dynamics, with the potential to be reintegrated into the neoliberal framework they ideally oppose. This suggests

that, despite their emancipatory potential, there is currently insufficient evidence to support the claim that P2P file sharing is immune to the processes of subsumption (Marx 1867/1992), understood as the strategies through which capital absorbs, reorganises, and neutralises social structures, practices, and ways of life that do not originate as capitalist and may even oppose capitalism.

Consequently, P2P architectures alone do not constitute a complete and definitive transformation of market dynamics and content accessibility. This is partly due to the absence of substantial data on the broader audience's widespread and genuine interest in works outside the mainstream domain. The phenomenon relies, in fact, upon the spectators' awareness and knowledge of lesser-known and more obscure content. Thus, P2P structures do not inherently ensure greater visibility for content that is excluded from the mainstream. However, they guarantee increased availability of such content to those already familiar with them, facilitating their circulation. This, in turn, could potentially lead to greater discoverability of niche content that is currently on the periphery of the cultural context.

Analogous to the resistance spaces identified by Bonini and Treré (2024) in digital platforms, P2P file sharing does not constitute a definitive alternative to the traditional cultural framework, but it ultimately sets the conditions for a progressive reconfiguration of the power dynamics that characterise it, laying the foundation for a countertrend in cultural consumption, albeit limited and peripheral.

Toward a materialist-ecological perspective

The marginalisation of the socio-technological potential of P2P architecture is rooted in its criminalisation, or rather, its failure to be regularised. Indeed, P2P file sharing has historically been associated with copyright infringement and illegal file circulation, which has led to its strong association with online piracy. Nevertheless, in the early 2000s, Germany and France each introduced legislative proposals that approached piracy by considering the legalisation of file-sharing platforms, rather than opposing them. The German proposal, known as Kulturflatrate, was formulated in the early 2000s by the Die Grünen and SPD parties and drew inspiration from collective compensation models already in effect for private copying.

This tax was analogous to the Canadian copying levy (applied since the 1990s), which consisted of a fee applied to blank media such as CD-Rs, DVD-Rs, cassettes, external hard

drives, and MP3 players, and was often perceived as a kind of indirect compensation for private copying. However, the German proposal aimed to directly tackle the issue of file sharing. Specifically, under the Kulturflatrate, Internet users would pay a modest monthly fee — estimated between five and ten euros — that would grant them the legal right to share and download creative works for non-commercial purposes. The funds collected through this flat-rate system would have been administered by a collective management organisation, which was responsible for redistributing revenues to rights holders. The compensation for artists, musicians, and producers would then have been determined proportionally to the popularity and circulation of their works within P2P networks. Understandably, the primary challenges in implementation concerned the complexities involved in assessing the popularity of artists and the profound reform of copyright law required at the European level, since the market governed by the regulatory framework extended beyond national boundaries.

Five years later, a similar proposal was presented in France as part of the DADVSI (Droit d'Auteur et Droits Voisins dans la Société de l'Information) reforms. The issue was raised again during the discussion of the bill "in favour of the dissemination and protection of creation on the Internet" in April 2009, although under a different title. Two years later, a study by the European Parliament reignited the debate, examining the political, economic, and legal implications of the potential implementation of such a regulatory framework (Direction générale des politiques internes – European Parliament, 2011). The Licence Globale, like the Kuturflatarate, envisaged a mandatory monthly fee for all Internet users, the collection of these funds by collective management organisations, and the redistribution of the proceeds according to the principle of popularity. In addition to the aforementioned implementation issues, the major obstacle in this case was the opposition from record labels and market operators. This reluctance drew on the same principles and concerns that informed the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 and its subsequent reaffirmations in the PRO-IP and Anti-Piracy Acts of 2011 (Prosperi, 2024). Specifically, these industry actors expressed concerns regarding the possibility that this system would hinder fruition through legal distribution channels (UFPI, 2013; Lausson, 2011; Beky, 2006), including emerging online stores.

Among these platforms, iTunes, launched in France two years earlier, is particularly relevant, as it rapidly became the focus of local legal disputes over the management of online music copyright. Indeed, during the same period, iTunes opposed two additional

normative reforms: one aimed at ensuring interoperability between files downloaded from its proprietary platform and playback devices, and the other seeking to reduce fines for piracy from over 3,000 euros to a range between 38 and 180 euros. In both cases, the legal compromise favoured the American media colossus.

These legal cases illustrate how different models of consumption and circulation coexist within the same regulatory and media space, exerting mutual influence and thus highlighting the necessity of addressing online architectures from an ecological and materialist perspective. More specifically, it is essential to adopt an approach that addresses media circulation platforms following the theoretical framework established by Postman. Indeed, expanding his arguments concerning media, platforms can be understood as «environments – like language itself, symbolic environments – within which we discover, fashion, and express our humanity in particular ways» (Postman, 1979, p.179)

Additionally, it is essential to consider these spaces as part of a larger ecosystem, where each inevitably influences the other not only on economic and legislative levels, but also culturally and politically. From this perspective, the link between the rejection of the Licence Global and the rise of iTunes illustrates how the P2P space and the mainstream cultural consumption platforms are in fact two competing environments within the broader ecological context of the media ecosystem. This perspective is intrinsically linked to a materialist approach that evaluates how media economic dynamics — manifested through platform business models, pricing policies, and Intellectual Property Management — shape cultural practices and power structures (Mosco, 2009; Fuchs, 2014; Snricek, 2017; Jin, 2024). In this sense, it is evident that the introduction of an affordable alternative to piracy played a central role in undermining the relevance of the P2P model by redirecting its community to a different online space.

This interplay emerges clearly when examining the parallel history of the rise and fall of P2P file-sharing platforms and legal online services. In this context, it becomes evident that the significant shift occurred with the introduction of subscription-based services — where the perceived cost of individual songs became negligible — or free, ad-supported alternatives. Notably, while the initial downturn in P2P activity coincided with Spotify's launch in 2008, the broader and more definitive decline accelerated in the mid-2010s with the proliferation of video streaming services. This trend is reflected in the shutdown or discontinuation of updates for popular P2P platforms, along with the decreasing relevance and declining interest in file sharing and online piracy.

Within this broader context, the case of eMule provides a particularly illustrative example. Unlike platforms such as LimeWire or Megaupload, which were shut down following legal actions initiated by organizations such as the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), eMule underwent a more gradual, organic decline. The gradual downsizing of the eMule community since 2010 led to the cessation of official updates by the developers from that year onwards, thereby transferring the responsibility for project development entirely to the community.

This erosion can be observed by analysing download statistics from the SourceForge website (fig. 1). The data show a peak in downloads in September 2006 with over 16 million downloads. In contrast, by February 2010, approximately two years after Spotify's launch, the number of downloads had decreased to just one million. Following this trend, since 2014, downloads have never exceeded 600,000, reaching only 124,000 downloads in January 2024. It is certainly worth noting that SourceForce is not the only portal available for software downloads and that eMule has faced competition not only from legal websites but also from other platforms, such as μTorrent. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the first significant decline occurred just one year after the launch of Spotify, with downloads falling below one million from mid-2010 onwards, in parallel with the emergence of OTT platforms.
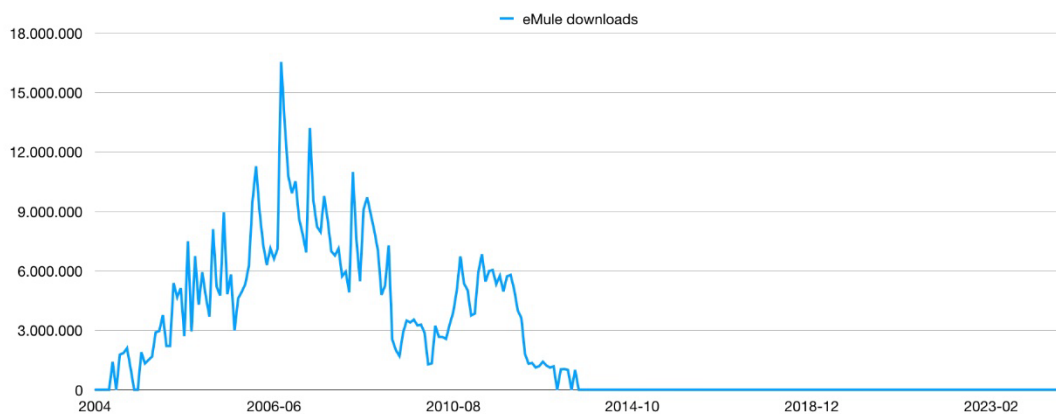

Fig. 1. Downloads of eMule software from SourceForge 2004-2023.
Source: SourceForge

This phenomenon can be observed more comprehensively by analysing trends in search terms related to these platforms and online piracy in general, using Google Trends.

Specifically, queries for the terms «torrent» and «μtorrent» (fig. 2, 3) confirm the trend observed for eMule downloads, showing a peak towards the end of the 2000s and a steady decline since the mid-2010s. Similarly, the terms «watch free» and «watch free online» (fig. 4, 5) show a comparable trend, although the peak is slightly shifted to the beginning of 2010. In contrast, the term «free streaming» shows a surprising pattern, especially in light of its significant rise in recent years (fig. 6).
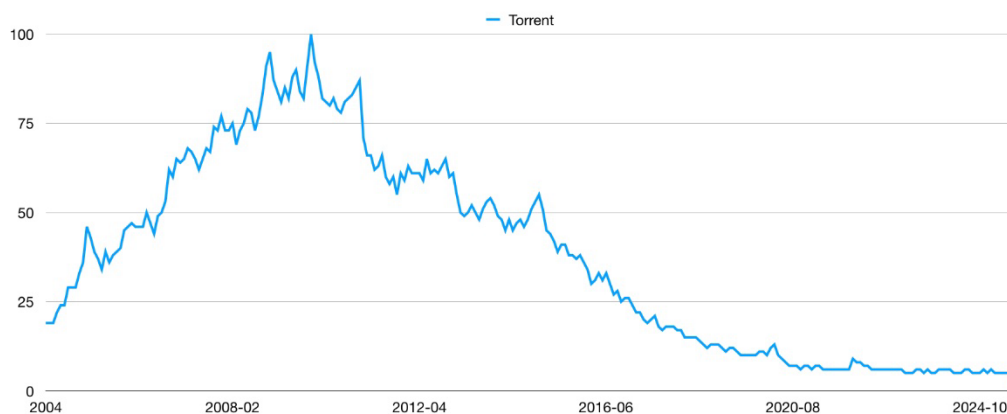

Fig. 2. Google search trend for the query «torrent» 2004-present.
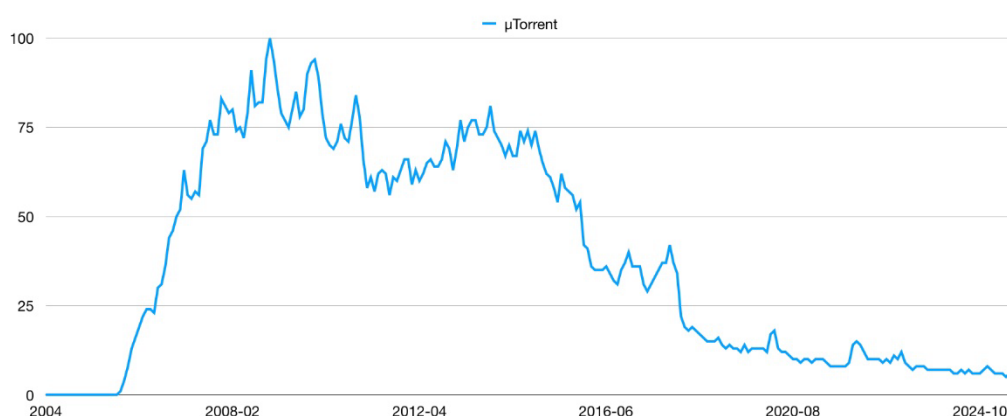Source: Google Trend

Fig. 3. Google search trend for the query «μtorrent» 2004-present.
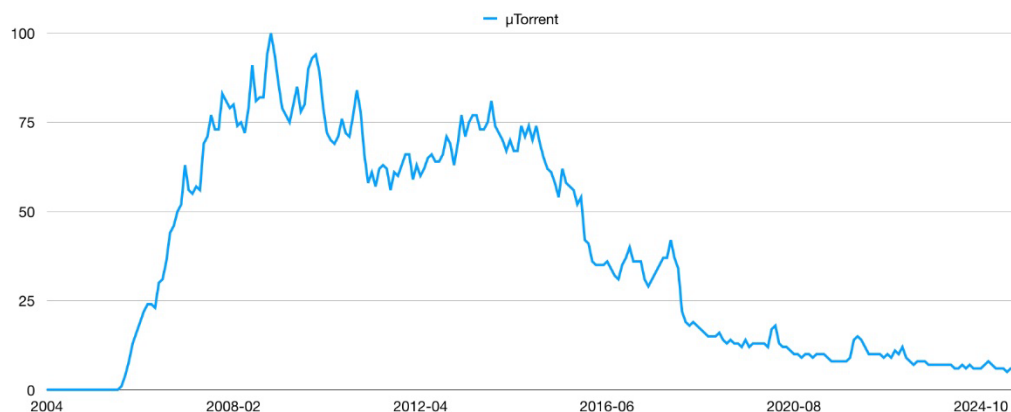Source: Google Trend

Fig. 4. Google search trend for the query « watch free» 2004-present.
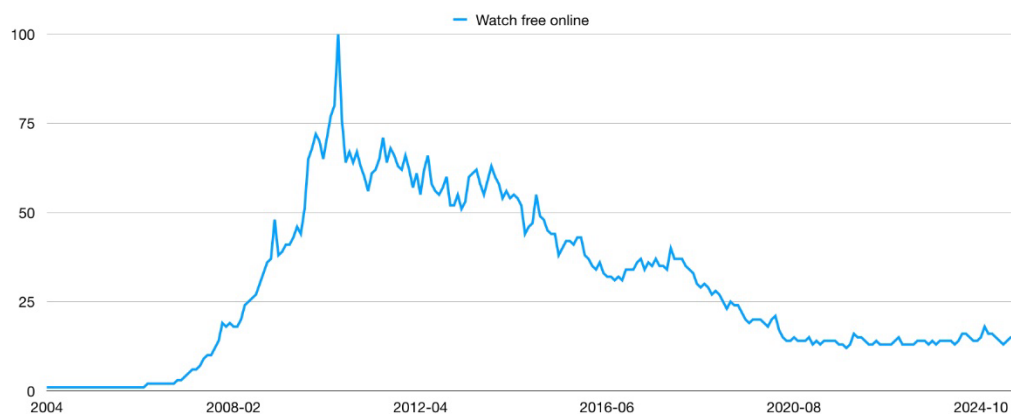Source: Google Trend

Fig. 5. Google search trend for the query « watch free online» 2004-present.
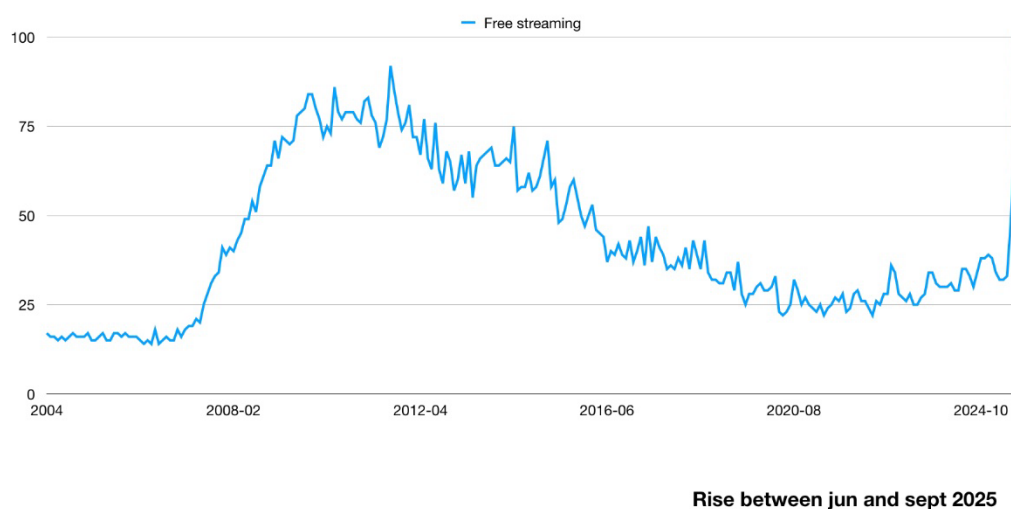Source: Google Trend

Fig. 6. Google search trend for the query « free streaming» 2004-present.
Source: Google Trend

These findings further confirm the relevance of the materialist approach in this field of analysis, highlighting another trend that commenced in 2018. In that year, SANDVINE[1] noted in its annual report that file sharing via the BitTorrent channel experienced its first rise after years of decline since 2012. Specifically, the report shows that while BitTorrent upstream traffic in North America decreased by 25.18% between 2011 and 2015, by 2018 it had become the second-largest channel for upstream bandwidth consumption globally and the largest in the Asia-Pacific region (SANDVINE, 2018). SANDVINE attributed the phenomenon to an increase in the price of OTT service subscriptions and the dispersion of content across competing libraries, a dynamic recently confirmed by MUSO's[2] 2024 *Piracy Trends and Insights* report which reads: «Piracy in 2024 has been shaped by three converging forces: content access fragmentation, particularly in streaming; ongoing demand for digital-first formats, especially Manga and episodic TV; economic disparities across regions impacting legal adoption» (MUSO, 2024).

Trends related to the term «free streaming» appear to reflect the same dynamic, indicating the latest developments in a market characterised by content fatigue (da Silva, 2020; Einwächter & Jensen, 2024) and increasing prices. Specifically, in the current context, intellectual properties are spread across various platforms, compelling fans of specific media franchises to subscribe to multiple services. Jenkins, Ford and Green have also addressed this phenomenon connecting piracy with fatigue, positing that

Unauthorized circulation of content often emerges from the frustrations which audiences have as they deal with the transitional state of alternative delivery channels, with the frustrations of trying to navigate through a system that seems to promise them the media they want when they want it but frequently disappoints. (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, p. 117)

Moreover, subscription costs and increasingly expensive bundle offers have escalated to the point where the affordability ratio between OTT services and cable TV is beginning to reverse[3] (Cuthbertson, 2024).

The fluctuations in the relevance of P2P file sharing can be further investigated by analysing the annual number of news items on Google that respond to the query "online piracy". The resulting graph (fig. 7) shows a surge in the issue's prominence in public opinion during 2020, evidenced by an increase from 208.000 news items in the previous year to 10 million news items. Furthermore, the graph shows a surprising finding at the end, revealing a drastic decline in the number of online news items related to the topic in the last year considered (2024). However, it should be noted that the overall data are influenced by factors such as the availability and archiving of news items, as well as the general growth of web content over the years. Despite this, the shift between 2019 and 2020 remains significant, given that these years are adjacent in the span. Similarly, the data for 2024 are not affected by these distortions.
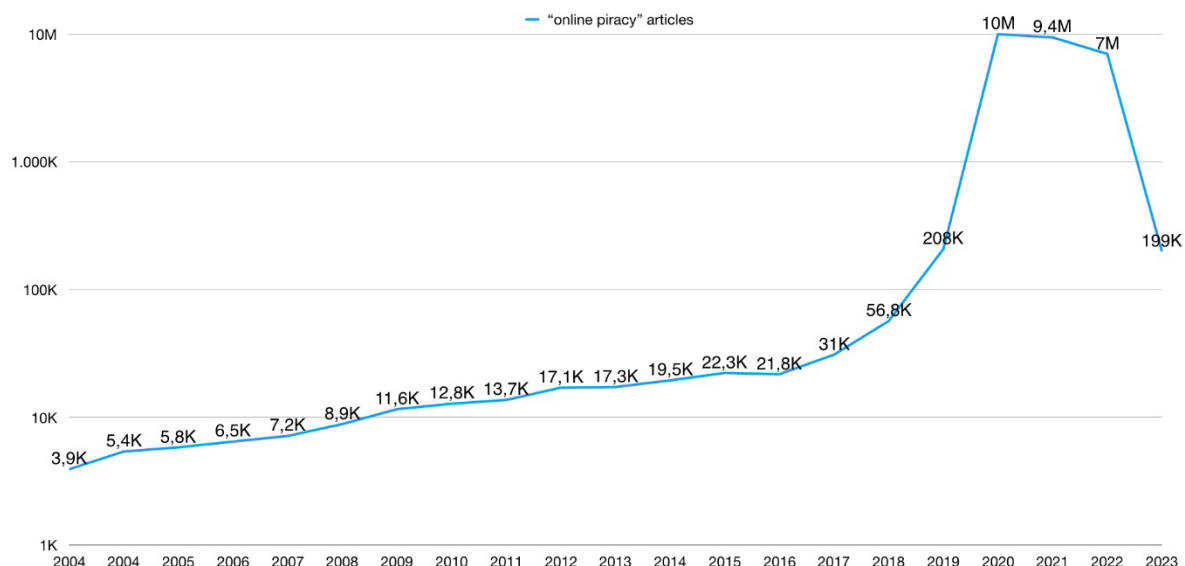

Fig 7. News items on Google News 2004-2024.
Source: Google News

The recent relevance of illegal platforms in consumption habits shown by this analysis is further confirmed by a questionnaire developed by the University of Urbino Carlo Bo unit as part of the "WokeIt – Investigating representation, inclusivity and social responsibility in RAI's fictional audiovisual productions (2015-2022)" research project. The questionnaire was designed to explore, on the one hand, the consumption habits of young audiences concerning films and series and, on the other, respondents' opinions on diversity within audiovisual media. The questionnaire was administered in March 2025 to 276 young people, giving preferential treatment to media and communication students in Italian universities. Although the results are necessarily biased by this choice, the respondents' active engagement with media consumption is posited to facilitate a more direct, varied, and aware access to audiovisual content. Consequently, this sample group still represents a particularly interesting field of observation.

Among the findings, it was observed that OTT (over-the-top) services are the most consumed, with Netflix prominently leading. However, illegal platforms ranked as the third most relevant result for series and the fourth for movies. In both cases, illegal streaming websites ranked higher than Disney+ (fig. 8, 9). Furthermore, it is important to contextualise this data, considering the potential for non-response bias due to the social stigma associated with admitting illegal activities, despite the anonymity of the survey.
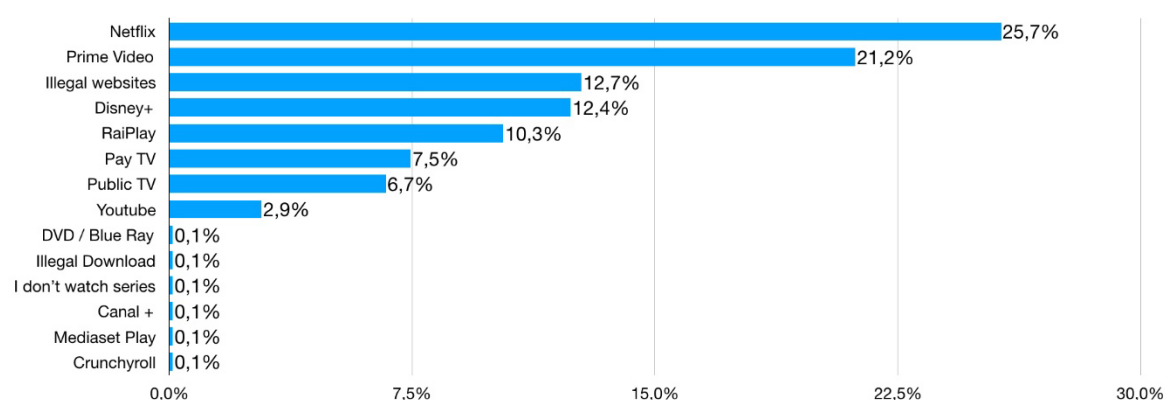

Fig. 8. Distribution of responses (n = 297) to the question: «Where do you usually watch series?»
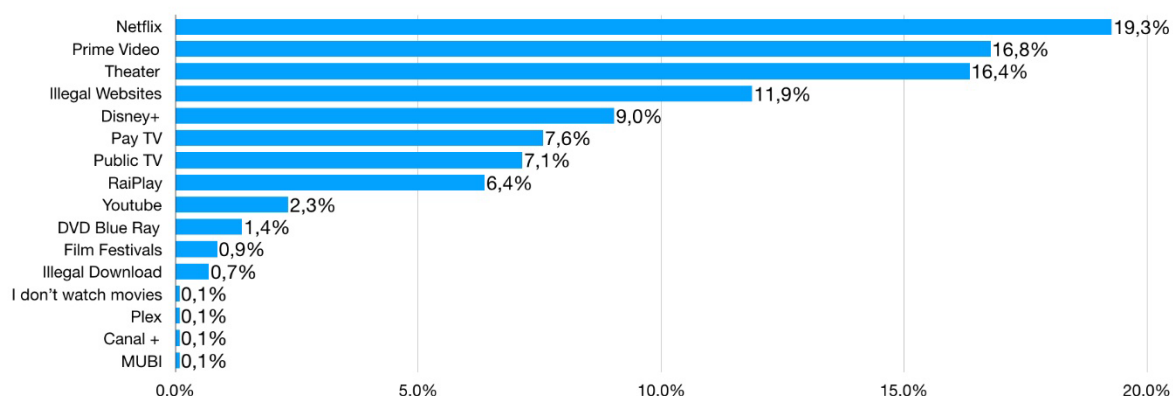
Fig. 9. Distribution of responses (n = 297) to the question: «Where do you usually watch movies?»

Consistent with these findings, a survey conducted by LaunchLeap in 2017 indicated that 47% of respondents aged 18–35 utilised pirated services in conjunction with legal ones. Furthermore, a study by Anatomy Media in the preceding year found that 67% of young millennials accessed some form of pirated video content. (LaunchLeap 2017 and Anatomy media 2016 as cited in Prosperi, 2024, p. 139)

These empirical findings further confirm the relevance of the emerging materialist-ecological approach, highlighting the competitive dynamics between P2P file-sharing domain and legal OTT streaming services. Therefore, to fully understand the potential of P2P file sharing in terms of audience empowerment, it is essential to analyse OTT platforms through an appropriate theoretical framework, as these platforms represent the primary alternative to P2P file sharing within the same digital ecosystem. Moreover, exactly like the P2P domain, they shape a specific type of spectator.

Nevertheless, before addressing this topic, it is necessary to make a preliminary remark. This contribution is not intended as a critique of the technological innovations that have led to the diffusion of on-demand streaming. Indeed, this technology has promoted participatory culture and self-representation, particularly in the social media context, and has in broad terms enhanced content accessibility. Platforms such as Mubi, Cinemascope, and Da Film, for instance, increase the visibility of films that, despite attracting significant attention at film festivals, struggle to access primary (theatrical) and secondary (television and

home video) distribution channels. Furthermore, the subscription model promoted by streaming services has undeniably had a positive impact on audiovisual production, responding to a more diverse and pluralised audience demand (Lotz, 2017).

Consequently, the critique presented in this essay targets two main elements: the economic model governing the management and exploitation of intellectual property, and the impact this framework has on viewers in terms of power dynamics. Thus, the focus of this analysis is not on technology itself but rather on its implementation within a purely neoliberal context. In this sense, the proposed examination rejects any form of technological determinism, opting instead to situate the critique within an "industrial" perspective. In this context, the term industrial should be once again understood within the theoretical framework proposed by Adorno, who addresses industry «more in a sociological sense, in the incorporation of industrial forms of organization even where nothing is manufactured — as in the rationalization of office work — rather than in the sense of anything really and actually produced by technological rationality» (Adorno, Rabinbach, 1975, p. 14)

OTTs as heterotpias and the disempowered spectator

To understand how and to what extent the OTT model shapes a specific type of viewer and grasp its cultural implications, it is appropriate to conceptualise these media environments as heterotopias. Nevertheless, this perspective relies on the assumption that these platforms can be understood as spaces. To explore this concept, it is essential to begin with McLuhan's assertion that «Any new technology, any extension or amplification of human faculties when given material embodiment, tends to create a new environment» (McLuhan, 1967a, p. 41). Building on this idea, and on McLuhan's notion of «invisible environment» (McLuhan, 1967b), Postman (1976) developed the aforementioned concept of media as symbolic spaces. Similarly, Jussi Parikka characterizes media as «an environment of relations in which time, space and agency emerge» (Parikka, 2011, p. 35).

From this perspective, media environments function not only as symbolic spaces but also as public settings, actively shaping the behaviors and roles of the individuals who engage with them. This insight is supported by many philosophers, who have recognized the interplay between social environments and symbolic constructions, highlighting how inhabitable spaces serve as sites for meaning-making, ideological conflict, and the formation of

identities (e.g., Lefebvre, 1974/1991; Foucault, 1975/1977; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962; Arendt, 1958). This idea is further reinforced by the semiotic approach, which confirms that online portals align with tangible spaces. In particular, Villani argues that the use of portals is inherently spatial and that any description of engagement with them inevitably refers to interaction with space. Furthermore, this semantic affinity goes beyond mere linguistic analogy and consolidates into a spatial function, so that portals simulate discursivised environments such as the cinematic milieu or the video store (Villani, 2023). Building on Villani's observation, and drawing on the media ecology approach, OTT portals reveal themselves as equivalent to tangible spaces as they are defined by the same value-based, discursive, and subjectivising boundaries. As an instance, just as museums defines the subject as a visitor, thereby reconfiguring their function and role, platforms define individuals as a specific type of user. This example in particular shows that, as noted above, OTT platforms are not simple environments, but constitute heterotopias, in the Foucauldian sense.

According to Foucault, heterotopias are fundamentally functional and concrete spaces that «have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect» (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). Here, Foucault's emphasis on the empirical nature of these spaces is crucial, as it differentiates them from utopias. This characteristic is particularly relevant to portals, as they not only replicate physical spaces by adopting their functions (Villani, 2023), but also affect subjectivities, shaping experiences, behaviours, negotiated identities, and political outcomes (Postman, 1979; 2000; Parikka, 2011; Citton, 2019). In this context, Foucault's distinction between heterotopias and utopias is not grounded in the dichotomy of material versus immaterial, but rather in the opposition between the tangible and the imaginary. Furthermore, just like heterotopias, OTT portals are related to other spaces, both medial and non-medial, creating a particular spatiotemporal relationship. More specifically, heterotopias are defined by six fundamental principles:

They exist in every culture;

They have a precise and determined function within a society;

They are capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces that are in themselves incompatible;

They are most often linked to slices in time;

They always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable;

They have a function in relation to all the space that remains.

According to these principles, Foucault identifies cinema and theatre as heteortopias, as they bring together in a single space «one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another» (Foucault, 1986, p. 25). This definition can thus be extended to any medium that provides the viewer with a space-time distinct from their immediate reality. From this perspective, an initial correlation between OTT spaces and heteortopias can be found in their ability to reframe the spatiotemporal modality of other media, understood as «the structuring of the sensorial perception of sense-data of the material interface into experiences and conceptions of space and time» (Ellestrom, 2010, p. 18).

In a related yet distinct approach, Burgin establishes a connection between heterotopias and media by conceptualising the «cinematic heterotopia». His argument is grounded in the definitive spatiotemporal dislocation of the filmic experience, yet he does not conceive the new media environments that host this displacement as tangible spaces. Specifically, Burgin notes that «'cinematic heterotopia' is constituted across the variously virtual spaces in which we encounter displaced pieces of films, the Internet, the media, and so on» (Burgin, 2005, p. 166)

Against this background, OTT platforms can be defined as heterotopic spaces from two main perspectives. The first aligns closely with Burgin's definition and can be described as content-oriented. OTTs are indeed designed to host media artefacts originating from other domains, such as TV and cinema, following a metamedial (Manovich, 2013) principle. In this sense, OTT platforms exemplify a heterotopic space, demonstrating a remarkable capacity to integrate other media environments to a significantly greater extent than traditional media – albeit without leaving them unaltered. Even native audiovisual content — the Originals — while demonstrating greater flexibility in both formats and distribution strategies, remains largely shaped by the conventions, languages, and dynamics of cinema and television.

By contrast, the second perspective aligns more closely with the characteristics identified by Foucault, relating to the function of a specific heterotopia within a given society and to the relationship that heterotopias maintain with all other spaces. Indeed, OTTs introduce into the new media context a mode of consumption and an industry–audience relationship that more closely resembles traditional media than the digital environments in which they are embedded.

This similarity aligns with Brembilla's observations, which highlight a notable discrepancy between OTTs' marketing strategies, which position them as an alternative to the broadcasting system, and their actual alignment with the traditional media industry (Brembilla, 2016).

This scenario is evidenced by a resurgence of essentially passive consumption, which contrasts with Jenkins' definition of culture (2006) by excluding the participatory element, since within OTT heterotopia, users cannot interact with content or each other. In this sense, OTTs constitute a space that inhibits any form of cultural participation within a context —the web— that is inherently participatory. Notably, Lobato (2019) emphasises how companies such as Netflix have no intention of exploiting the prosumeristic technological potential of the digital ecosystem they inhabit. In particular, these environments are characterised by an almost negligible level of active user participation, setting them apart from platforms such as Spotify, where a minimal degree of agency is possible, for instance, through the creation of playlists (Herbert, Lotz and Marshal, 2018). In this regard, scholars such as Musiani and Schafer (2011) and Smith (2022) have already emphasised how the web is undergoing a process in which the horizontal architectures are gradually being verticalised, leading to a process that may be termed as "broadcasterisation".

Linking this phenomenon to the role of media environments in the construction of the subject, OTT users appear reconfigured, as they are deprived of their prosumeristic privileges. In this sense, beyond their explicit economic function, OTTs serve an implicit cultural and political purpose by contributing to the disempowerment of spectators, frustrating their ability to shape their cultural environment.

This phenomenon can be observed on two levels. Firstly, unlike social media users, OTTs users are unable to actively influence the popularity and assessment of content through comments or rating systems. While on platforms such as YouTube or Reddit, the reputation of content is determined from the bottom up, on OTT portals, it is governed by the platform itself. This is particularly evident when considering the lack of transparency regarding viewing figures on these portals. Additionally, and more importantly, OTT users, unlike P2P users, are unable to preserve or introduce cultural artefacts within their environment, thus participating in the construction of culture. In this context, the subject defined by OTTs heterotopias delegates this role to an actor who operates mainly from a market-oriented perspective, implementing mathematical abstractions and arbitrage operations (Finn, 2018) in the construction of culture.

Consequently, the emancipatory potential of P2P architecture, which supports a collective and dispersed construction of culture and, more importantly, cultural heritage, is constrained by a structure that limits the grassroots preservation and dissemination of cultural products. Overall, users find themselves in a position of renewed passivity toward the dominant hegemonic cultural framework despite having the tools to adopt and engage with alternative and more balanced models. Moreover, the lack of interaction with the platform —and among users— that characterizes OTTs renders the resistance phenomena described by Bonini and Treré (2024) marginal, if not impossible, since these power struggle exploits the semi-structured rules of platforms that are still participatory to some extent. Indeed, the alternative aligned or non-aligned tactics described by the authors and their dissemination can serve as the primary mechanism for resistance only within a participatory context. On the contrary, this is impossible on OTT platforms, because not only are there no alternative modes of navigation, but users also cannot communicate with one another and form communities, except by migrating to other participatory platforms.

OTT platform and the rentist society

A key structural feature reinforcing user disempowerment within OTT platforms concerns the nature of content accessibility. Indeed, whether users subscribe for a fixed period (SVOD model) or rent/purchase specific content (TVOD model), they do not really own any cultural products. Instead, they enter into a licensing agreement that permits access to the content for a certain — also unlimited — period.

This is particularly relevant when this system substitutes the purchase of intangible assets. In such instances, the user effectively signs an unlimited licence agreement but is unable to fully dispose of the asset, as they cannot transfer it, store it on personal supports, or leave it as an inheritance. Furthermore, users do not have control over the availability of the content in question, as they would be unable to access it if it were removed from the company servers. This licence-based model is designed to limit the unauthorised copying and distribution of files; nonetheless, it also plays a key role in the marginalisation of spectators within the process of collective cultural construction outlined in the previous sections. Notably, the impossibility to store files on personal devices limits user's ability to intervene in their cultural environment, thereby undermining the formation of a decentralised cultural space that transcends

purely market-driven logics. In this context, it is crucial to acknowledge that the implementation of this feature in OTT platforms, while offering clear managerial advantages, was neither an inherent nor an inevitable evolution of the model itself.

This development parallels the phenomenon observed by Zuboff in her analysis of Surveillance Capitalism, where she argues that it represents a «logic in action» rather than the «inevitable expression of the technologies» employed in its development (Zuboff, 2019, eBook). Similarly, the shift from systems in which users stored files locally on their PCs[4] — such as Zuno or Amazon Unbox, both available online until 2015— to the full-streaming model of contemporary platforms like Amazon Prime Video represents a gradual transition driven by deliberate intent and directed toward a specific socio-economic outcome. Indeed, the transition from ownership to licencing follows the principles of a rentist society in which copyright — of both content and software applications used to access it — becomes the main tool for preserving economic power and maintaining the status quo. In imagining a post-capitalist future, Peter Frase identifies a context in which «when wage labor disappears, the ruling class can continue to accumulate money only if they retain the ability to appropriate a stream of rents, which arise from their control of intellectual property» (Frase, 2011). The extension of the rentist regime to all practices and tools pertaining to digital culture is thus enforced by restricting access to digital goods, making them artificially excludable despite their inherently replicable nature (Prosperi, 2024).

This phenomenon also demonstrates how copyright enforcement can be interpreted as a tool for preserving the power of dominant social classes. In this regard, Dan Burk (2016), presenting a materialist and anti-dualist critique of the notion of copyright, asserts that it produces value by privatising the symbolic dimension, thereby creating a power asymmetry between those who control the means of reproduction and those who use them. In this sense, Burk acknowledges that copyright not only delineates creativity but also constructs it as a concept, establishing what counts as a work, thereby reflecting the hierarchies of hegemonic Western thought.

The role of attention economy

The preceding sections examined the ecological competition between OTT platforms and other environments, emphasising material factors such as service cost and content accessibility. However, it is crucial to address how the platform itself incorporates tools that en-

hance its ecological relevance by reducing the visibility or viability of alternative — though legitimate — options. Thus, the real scale of this issue emerges when the role of the attention economy is integrated into the analysis. As articulated by Herbert Simon (1971), within a neoliberal framework, any resource characterised by scarcity is susceptible to commodification, including attention. Moreover, as Matthew Crawford highlights, this dynamic is not merely economic but also cultural, since «without the ability to direct our attention where we will, we become more receptive to those who would direct our attention where they will» (Crawford, 2015, p. 16). In this sense, Crawford describes a scenario in which the continuous administration of stimuli undermines the formation of the subject's individuality, as it becomes increasingly challenging to focus attention on what is deemed valuable. Notably, this scenario intersects with the concept of "infesting" cultural elements that haunt the spectator's consciousness, as described by Stiegler (2014/2004) and further explored by Burgin (2005).

These observations become particularly compelling when examining Yves Citton's perspective, which highlights the constraints of a theoretical framework characterised by an individualistic conception of attention, predicated on a one-to-one interaction between the subject and object. In contrast, Citton conceptualizes attention as a phenomenon «rooted in transindividual flows, distributed unequally over the surface of planet» (Citton, 2017, p. 17). In this sense, Citton implies that attention is not only a crucial element within media ecology but also an ecological problem in itself.

Considering these factors, it is clear that each OTT service tends to capitalise on users' attention, with the aim of keeping them on the platform for as long as possible. In this regard, it is worth noting that Reed Hastings, CEO of Netflix from 1997 to 2023, identified the hours users spend sleeping as the company's primary competitor (Raphael, 2017). This statement illustrates a dynamic that involves not only competition among OTT platforms but also between them and other online and offline spaces, creating a system that penalises the dispersion of user attention towards other platforms where resistance (Bonini, Treré, 2024) or alternative forms of consumption would be possible.

The primary elements that facilitate the capitalization of attention are recommendation systems and engagement design implementations. The latter involves the design of artefacts, contexts, and interactions aimed at creating an active, motivated, and meaningful connection between the user and the system (Zagalo, 2020). This context includes all fea-

tures that establish a connection between the platform and the individual, such as the use of the user's first name and the employment of colloquial and informal expressions when addressing them. Specifically, this type of interaction aims to establish a sense of intimacy (through categories named «your next watch»; «today's top picks for you»; «we think you'll love this») and spontaneity (through categories named «so completely captivating»; «restless crime dramas»; «Need a good laugh?») with the user.

The second key element facilitating the capitalization of attention is recommendation systems, which, according to Amatriain and Basilico (2012a; 2012b), are technologies that employ over forty interrelated algorithms designed to personalise the user experience, enhance user satisfaction, and ultimately increase the time spent on the platform. This system personalises each user's homepage by adjusting the sections, their sequence, and the arrangement of content within them with the final purpose to offer a more enjoyable and smooth user experience.

A further pivotal dimension of the system is the recommendation process itself, which consists of suggesting content to users based on preferences inferred from the meticulous collection of behavioural data (Zuboff, 2019). Consequently, this particular and unprecedented form of attention capitalisation has specific implications for the constitution of the critical subject since it cyclically determines the direction of its cognitive resources (Citton, 2017; Crawford, 2015). Notably, the possibility of reaching each user with tailored content, selected from a vast heterogeneous library —according to a neogeneralist paradigm (Pescatore, 2023)— could potentially drive the relationship between the cultural industry and its audience to the most pessimistic predictions of the Frankfurt School scholars. In this sense, the neogeneralist scenario in which it is possible «to offer content that is both specifically relevant to the individual spectator and sufficiently varied for a broad and diverse audience»[5] (Pescatore, 2023) reflects a system in which «something is provided to everyone so that no one can escape» (Adorno and Horkeim, 1947/2002, p. 97).

Nevertheless, the positive effects of the subscription model on the production industry cannot be overlooked, particularly with regard to cultural diversity. As Lotz observes, the growing significance of an increasingly diverse and less generalist audience has encouraged production companies to develop content targeting social groups that were previously excluded under the traditional majority-oriented model (Lotz, 2017). However, despite this ex-

pansion, the central issue remains the normative and hegemonic cultural framework within which such content is produced and circulated.

Notably, the cultural diversity inscribed in this neoliberal paradigm (Jenner, 2018) risks falling within what Boni has defined as the viewer's comfort zone, where alternative and counter-hegemonic representations are absorbed and domesticated by the very hegemonic framework that produces them (Boni, 2023). Conversely, a bottom-up approach to content distribution and selection is more likely to promote narratives and representations characterised by «uncertainty» and discomfort, thereby facilitating the viewer's critical engagement. Drawing on Adorno and Horkheimer (1947/2002), even when these neogeneralist narratives are situated within a diverse cultural context, they may still perpetuate continuity between everyday life and representation, thus maintaining the viewer in a state of uncritical domesticated comfort.

Conclusion: an enclave in the participatory environment

What has been outlined thus far regarding the relationship between OTT platforms, traditional media, and participatory culture may initially appear reassuring. On first inspection, comparisons between OTT media spaces and off-line broadcasting media might suggest a scenario in which the status quo is preserved and no new or specific issues emerge in the relationship between audiences and the dominant cultural framework. Yet, this very misperception risks compromising a deeper understanding of the scope and implications of this phenomenon.

Indeed, it can be argued that the attention economy has always been at the core of audience engagement (Beller 2006; Wu 2016) and that the relationship between the cultural industry and the public has always been fundamentally asymmetrical. However, in this context, it is crucial to recall Zuboff's formulation of the «unprecedented» in her analysis of Surveillance Capitalism—a framework in which, as discussed earlier, the OTT model plays an active role. As Zuboff observes:

> «When we encounter something unprecedented, we automatically interpret it through the lenses of familiar categories, thereby rendering invisible precisely that which is unprecedented [...] This is how the unprecedented reliably confounds understanding; existing lenses illuminate the familiar, thus obscuring the original by turning the unprecedented into an extension of the past. This contributes to the normalization of the abnormal, which makes fighting the unprecedented even more of an uphill climb» (Zuboff, 2019, eBook)

With this in mind, it is indisputable that technological innovations — such as recommender systems and engagement design features — have propelled the exploitation of the attention economy to unprecedented levels. Concurrently, within the environment of OTT platforms, the power dynamics between the subject and the hegemonic cultural framework exhibit a notable countertrend when compared with the participatory potential of the broader web. It is crucial to emphasise that this discourse specifically concerns potentialities rather than ongoing processes. In fact, participatory spaces such as social media are already thoroughly integrated into the neoliberal logics of centralization and concentration of resources. At the same time, there is currently insufficient evidence to assert that the P2P domain is inherently resistant to similar processes of subsumption (Marx 1867/1992).

More generally, neoliberal logic has increasingly promoted the centralisation of resources and spaces for interaction, resulting in their hierarchisation and reflecting a broader paradigm in which economic and political norms, devices, principles, apparatuses, and ideologies determine both the potential and trajectory of the media (Knoche, 2021a; 2021b).

Building on this analysis, the relationship between OTTs and heterotopias cannot be reduced to a comparison between old and new media. Instead, it must encompass the interaction between the regulatory elements that define these specific media environments and the cultural potential of the contemporary media ecosystem as a whole.

In conclusion, it is essential to recognise that the concept of media heterotopia does not merely reduce OTT platforms to replications of traditional media models. Rather, it refers to a fracture within a media environment — the broader web — that is potentially and essentially participatory in nature. Heterotopic OTTs can thus be understood as relational and systemic enclaves which, through technological and cultural innovations, renew and perpetuate power structures and asymmetries inherent to another space, producing anachronistic effects. Concurrently, other implementations of the same technological potential, are strategically marginalised.

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[1] Sandvine is a Canadian company providing network intelligence and traffic management solutions for ISPs and mobile operators. Its tools analyse internet traffic to optimise networks, enhance security, and support service delivery.

[2] MUSO is a UK-based company specializing in the collection, analysis, and visualization of data related to digital content in the film, TV, music, publishing, software, and gaming industries. Although the data and evaluations presented by these private companies may be biased by their commercial interests, the reports cited

above represent the most comprehensive, and reliable sources, as no equivalent report produced by public institutions is available.

[3] This effect becomes evident only when considering the concurrence of content dispersion, as users are prompted to subscribe to multiple platforms.

[4] However, the files were protected by DRM, meaning they were neither freely shareable nor copyable and could only be played through proprietary software. In contrast, the music sector followed a different trajectory. Beginning in 2007, Amazon MP3 offered music without DRM, a feature perceived by end users as advantageous due to the increased flexibility and compatibility of files across various devices. This development contributed to a rise in online music sales and prompted competitors such as Zune and iTunes to offer DRM-free music, albeit at a higher price. In this context, the increase in sales led major record labels to accept a greater risk of illegal file distribution. Nevertheless, over time, these companies identified Spotify as a more advantageous opportunity for legal online distribution and consequently entered into agreements to support its growth (Spotify, 2025; Universal Music Group, 2017). Accordingly, Spotify has consistently positioned the fight against piracy as one of its principal assets in terms of reputational capital (Ek, 2014)

[5] Translated from Italian by the author.

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Pierandrea Villa ha conseguito il dottorato in Film and Media Studies nel 2023. Nello stesso anno ha partecipato al progetto di ricerca *Mediamorphosis: Transmediality and Intersemiotic Translation in the Age of Convergence*. Dal 2024 è post-doc fellow presso l'Università di Urbino Carlo Bo, dove collabora al progetto *WokeIt: Investigating Representation, Inclusivity and Social Responsibility in RAI's Fictional Audiovisual Productions (2015–2022)*. I suoi principali interessi di ricerca riguardano gli studi critici su Internet, gli studi sulle piattaforme e le politiche di Diversity, Equity e Inclusion (DEI) nei media. Tiene regolarmente lezioni e seminari presso l'Università IULM di Milano, l'Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo e l'Università Parthenope di Napoli. Dal 2025 fa parte del comitato scientifico di *Emerging Series Journal*, di cui è anche caporedattore. Nello stesso anno è diventato membro del Corso di Orientamento PNRR per le scuole superiori, *Media Education and Diversity: Audiovisual Media in Support of a Culture of Differences*.

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