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PLATFORMS

MOVIN

CONFIGURATIONS OF FILM

IMAGES

PHILIPP DOMINIK KEIDL

JANA ZÜNDEL

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Platforms and the Moving Image

Platforms and the Moving Image

edited by Philipp Dominik Keidl and Jana Zündel

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Configurations of Film: Series Foreword

Scalable across a variety of formats and standardized in view of global circulation, the moving image has always been both an image of movement and an image on the move. Over the last three decades, digital production technologies, communication networks, and distribution platforms have taken the scalability and mobility of film to a new level. Beyond the classical *dispositif* of the cinema, new forms and knowledges of cinema and film have emerged, challenging the established approaches to the study of film. The conceptual framework of index, *dispositif*, and canon, which defined cinema as photochemical image technology with a privileged bond to reality, a site of public projection, and a set of works from auteurs from specific national origins, can no longer account for the current multitude of moving images and the trajectories of their global movements. The term "post-cinema condition," which was first proposed by film theorists more than a decade ago to describe the new cultural and technological order of moving images, retained an almost melancholic attachment to that which the cinema no longer was. Moving beyond such attachments, the concept of "configurations of film" aims to account for moving images in terms of their operations, forms and formats, locations and infrastructures, expanding the field of cinematic knowledges beyond the arts and the aesthetic, while retaining a focus on film as privileged site for the production of cultural meaning, for social action, and for political conflict.

The series "Configurations of Film" presents pointed interventions in this field of debate by emerging and established international scholars associated with the DFG-funded Graduate Research Training Program (Graduiertenkolleg) "Konfigurationen des Films" at Goethe University Frankfurt. The contributions to the series aim to explore and expand our understanding of configurations of film in both a contemporary and historical perspective, combining film and media theory with media history to address key problems in the development of new analytical frameworks for the moving image on the move.

Editorial

Philipp Dominik Keidl and Jana Zündel

The symposium "Platforms and the Moving Image" took place at Goethe University from October 27 to October 29, 2022. The event brought together doctoral students and faculty from the DFG Graduate Research Program "Configurations of Film," Concordia University's Platform Lab, and Digital Cinema-Hub (DiCi-Hub): A Research Hub for Digital Film Studies to exchange research on the intersection of film studies and platform studies. Each of the three participating research groups contributed a different perspective on platforms' impact on past and present moving image cultures. The members of "Configurations of Film" critically engage with the question of what comes after the "post-cinematic condition," considering platforms as a crucial site for understanding the current multitude of moving images and the trajectories of their global movements. The Platform Lab hosts research on the past and present roles of platforms in everyday life and distinct industrial contexts, including moving image distribution but also the platformization of apps, automobile production, convenience industries, the financial sector, and governmental institutions. DiCi-Hub is dedicated to developing new digital methods and tools for both researching and teaching film, thereby strengthening film studies as the primary discipline for the theoretical, aesthetic, and historical examination of moving images within the larger field of the humanities and social sciences.

Over three days, these approaches were represented in keynote addresses by Ishita Tiwary and Marc Steinberg, a workshop organized by Alexandra Schneider, Haidee Wasson, and Yvonne Zimmermann, and eleven research papers authored by doctoral students that critically explored the effect of platforms on moving image cultures at global, regional, and national levels. This volume's contributions consist of expanded versions of the symposium presentations and three additional chapters

by symposium participants, all framed by a foreword by Steinberg and an afterword by Tiwary. Together, these contributions present a diverse range of timely research on the social, political, and cultural effects of video streaming, social media, and apps on moving image production, circulation, and consumption.

Marc Steinberg's foreword delineates three different approaches to studying platforms. The first two approaches transition from theory or definition to praxis and, conversely, from praxis, the field of usage or discourse, back to theory. These approaches offer varying definitions of platforms and their social, political, media, or economic contours, reflecting their emergence not only within academia but also within the industry. The third approach is concerned with "platformativity" and the ways platforms produce social relations. Steinberg thoroughly examines each approach and evaluates their implications for studying platforms and how scholars situate them in geographically distinct milieus and different media environments and establish connections between the three approaches and certain essays in this volume. While the organization of chapters reflects the thematic focuses of the symposium, Steinberg's foreword and exploration of different approaches provide an alternative pathway through the volume.

The first section, *Fandom, Form, and Formats*, explores the impact of platforms on different forms and formats of moving image media and their effects on diverse audiences and their media consumption. Alexandra Schneider, Haidee Wasson, and Yvonne Zimmermann link digital platforms like YouTube to small-gauge cinema, demonstrating how the formatting and exhibition practices of such films serve as examples of "pre-platform intermediaries." Philipp Dominik Keidl examines the role of making-of formats on Disney+, arguing that the platform adapts the format to commodify its archival holdings and attract subscribers. Anna Bell, in turn, investigates how fans commodify their affective relationship with a filmmaker like Rainer Werner Fassbinder by designing and selling T-shirts on Etsy inspired by his appearance.

Amrita Biswas explores curatorial fan practices on Facebook, examining how fans engage in "historical gatekeeping" through their use and discussion of anecdotes and ephemera related to actor Uttam Kumar. Vinzenz Hediger concludes the section with a historicization and analysis of "social interaction films," which he defines as a scalable form of phatic communication with moving images and sounds, in which other forms of communication can be embedded.

The second section, *Digital Labor and Economies*, explores the impact of moving image economies and related work practices and conditions. Clara Podlesnigg, writing on the hologram as a speculative technology, explores the relationship of platforms to gimmicks, failure, and the "promise economy." Jake Pitre analyzes the economic politics of Twitch through the lens of futurity, arguing for retaining the binary of "work" and "leisure" rather than supporting platform rhetoric that encourages new forms of exploitation of cultural producers. Sam Thompson closely examines the interconnection between the functional and extractive dimensions of Netflix as a streaming service, emphasizing the home's function as a center for social reproduction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Isadora Campregher Paiva chronicles the development of IMDb from a digital commons to a privatized database while also reflecting on how scholars frequently use IMDb as a source but rarely theorize or historically examine it. The section closes with Sudipto Basu's examination of the cinephile piracy network KaraGarga as a distribution network, arguing how such networks differ from commercial and curatorial streaming platforms such as Netflix and Mubi, respectively.

The third section, *Infrastructures and Usages*, examines the role of platforms in creating and changing infrastructures and networks. Jana Zündel discusses how streaming platforms such as Netflix have transformed television markets, addressing questions of gathering and using data, of forming "taste communities," and of producing and distributing content. Zeynep Tuna discusses audience participation in the TV show *Müge Anlı ile Tatlı Sert*

(*Sweet and Sour with Müge Anlı*) in the context of contemporary Turkish politics, which affords potential for political expression as much as it reinforces limitations while solving crimes. Becky Holt underscores the value of porn studies within platform studies, focusing on the shifting definition of pornography under platformization and users' inventive tactics to bypass content moderation. Sneha Kumar delves into the streaming platform ALTBalaji, providing insight into its media industrial strategies and geopolitical expansion, revealing how data has reshaped conceptions of intimacy and queer sexualities. Finally, Colin Crawford traces the smartification of the home and Apple's strategies to build a closed eco-system, foregrounding the role Apple plays in data intermediation.

Ishita Tiwary's afterword closes the volume. She highlights how the contributions to this volume offer conceptual tools to understand platforms through peer-to-peer and commons-based labor, varied cinephilic and fan practices, and the technocultural logics, economics, and policy debates surrounding analog media.

Foreword: On Platforms—Three Approaches

Marc Steinberg

Media today live on platforms. Film and media studies are themselves informed by the platformed condition, as platforms—from Zoom to Google Docs—are the media *a priori* of research and experience in the current moment. Which begs the question: if understanding media today is to understand platforms, what are platforms? Or, better still, how have platforms been approached and how do the impressive contributions to this volume fit into these approaches to the platform problem? In this foreword I will briefly sketch out what I see as three distinct ways of approaching platforms as research objects, each of which has implications for how one situates platform research in geographically distinct milieus and in different media environments—reflecting the ambitions and provocations of the chapters in this book. In distinguishing these modalities of platform research I will also briefly situate how some of the contributions align with these different approaches.

The first approach moves from theory or definition to praxis, aiming to reduce the wide array of platforms to a set of principles, allowing the researcher to more easily adjudicate what is a platform, and what is not. This is the approach taken by Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy in their helpful methodological outline of platform research in their book *Platforms and Cultural Production.* There they define platforms as "data infrastructures that facilitate, aggregate, monetize, and govern interactions between end-users and content and service providers" (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022, 5). In framing them as mediators for third party transactions (a definition provided by the work of economists developing platform theory in the late 1990s and early 2000s), the authors explicitly exclude Netflix and other subscription video on demand (SVOD) services commonly framed as *and* written about as platforms—in trade literature, news media, and academic work. This has the upside of clarity, allowing researchers to focus

on what it means to research multisided market platforms and their impacts on cultural production in geographically distinct milieus. There is a certain utility in its circumscription and portability. The downside of this approach is that researchers take premade definitions to other geographies or milieus, rather that doing the difficult epistemological work of understanding what a platform means in a specific subnational, national or regional context, or within specific media or cultural industries. The advantages *and* hazards of this approach are especially evident in the work of Amanda Lotz, whose valuable conceptual and editorial contributions to global accounts of streaming platforms are accompanied by a normative definition of SVOD services based on US platforms.[1] While readers—and contributing researchers—benefit from Lotz's emphasis on the global dimensions of streaming platforms, this approach misses out on the lessons from postcolonial theory and global media research that asks us to critically check assumptions that knowledge begins and ends in the Global North.

Nonetheless, research projects based on the clarity of definition offer scholars an "in" to approaching or indeed contrasting what falls inside or outside these definitions—as is evident in Sudipto Basu's consideration of pirate networks as counterpoints to platforms, Colin Crawford's analysis of the platformization of the home, and Jana Zündel's analysis of the state of streaming platforms.

The second approach moves from praxis, field of usages, or discourse to theory. This approach aims to account for how

1 Symptomatic of this is the exclusion of Chinese streaming platforms in a recent co-authored article. "Chinese services iQIYI, Tencent Video, and Yoku-Tudou are not included here, despite all of them ranking among the estimated seven most-subscribed services worldwide"—because "a clear stand-alone SVOD market does not exist in China, which makes comparison very difficult" (Lotz and Eklund 2023, 5). It is difficult to see how one can "go beyond Netflix" while at the same time using its business model as the measuring stick for other services.

platforms are described by industry movers and shakers, and what the social, political, media, or economic contours of these descriptions are. Descriptions in this case must be plural because there are inevitably multiple ways of invoking platforms. This is an approach taken, for instance, by Tarleton Gillespie in what might be considered the inaugural article of platform studies (Gillespie 2010), wherein he situates his approach of following the usage of the term by YouTube against claims that this usage is an abuse of the "real," computational meaning of the term. (The idea that platforms begin and end with computers is, as I have shown elsewhere, a clear misnomer that erases the actual history of platform term and theory. Platforms start with cars, not computers (Steinberg 2022)). Beyond right or wrong, Gillespie's approach productively and pragmatically prioritizes considering *why* the term is politically and economically useful for YouTube, such that it starts describing itself as one, at a particular moment in time. I adopt a similar approach in considering the lineage of platform writing in Japan, tracking the first uses of the term in relation to automobiles and then hardware chips within government and private white papers, management research, and later in the industry of mobile telephony and later streaming video (Steinberg 2019). Likewise Luzhou Li's remarkable *Zoning China* offers an account of streaming video that emphasizes the distinct ways video operates in China, defined largely in part by inter and intraministry rivalries and turf wars that left online video relatively unregulated until around 2014 (Li 2019).

Becky Holt's approach in this volume likewise focuses on platform rhetoric and imaginaries, focusing on "how people *think* a platform works, which is important for analyzing platforms as cultural and social objects." The imagination of platforms and the limits placed on *our* imaginations by capitalist platforms is likewise the focus of Jake Pitre's contribution. Sudipto Basu's approach in this volume, while counter-posed to the normative elements of the platform, offers a definition based on praxis: "Platforms … carry specific connotations of modular,

monetizing, expansionist, and ambient technological surrounds which mediate an increasing number of everyday activities." This account is based on how platforms operate, rather than what they are, and leaning into the emphasis on platform experience or practical uses is equally found in the chapters by Anna Bell and Amrita Biswas. Countering the media industry emphasis in many accounts of platforms, they also offer a reminder that the specificity of the platform experience and *platform feeling* is also what makes platforms tick (Neves and Steinberg 2024; Lovink 2019; Alexander 2017). An approach from praxis to theory likewise forms the basis of the critique of an overreliance on assumed definitions of platforms in Alexandra Schneider, Haidee Wasson, and Yvonne Zimmermann's historically grounded rejoinder to the very presumption about the novelty or even stability of the platform as term or object, including its ability to explain media. Their suggestion that "platforms as an object of study need to be localized" further offers strong support for this second approach that starts from praxis before moving to theory.

There is a third approach we might best define according to Thomas Lamarre's term "platformativity" (Lamarre 2017); the ways platforms processually produce social relations.[2] Lamarre grounds his account in a critique of the methodological individualism of platform studies, which tends to presume a preexisting distinction between individual and society, and therefore cannot account for the move from one level to the other. Lamarre then shows how this blind spot in platform studies coincides with the nation-based model of Area Studies, which likewise traditionally presumed the self-contained and self-explanatory frame of nation to explain culture. Together they reinforce each other, allowing platform studies to continue hunting for yet another national context to focus on. Building on Rey Chow and Ani Maitra's critique of the very formulation "media in Asia" (Maitra

2 I am grateful to Anna Bell's contribution to this volume for reminding me to return to Lamarre's work on platformativity—and take the liberty of quoting a section that her chapter drew my attention to.

and Chow 2015), Lamarre remarks that "the paradigm of 'media in Asia' treats the platform as a mobile object to which a series of static attributes or cultural qualities may be subjectively added" (Lamarre 2017, 289).

This attention to process could also help us be more attentive to the social surrounds of platforms—including what I have been thinking of as the *paraplatform*: the various media, objects, organizational structures, and social relations around platforms that are the condition for their operation (Steinberg 2024). This would be the platform version of the paratext, as deployed by Jonathan Gray (2010). Paraplatforms help constitute the conditions for how platforms work. For instance, Julie Chen and Ping Sun emphasize the importance of managing battery life for battery-powered scooters in China's urban food delivery industry—resulting in a whole set of infrastructures (formal and informal) around battery-charging (Chen and Sun 2020), necessary for platform-mediated food delivery workers.

Such attention to the infrastructures and social consequences of platforms are visible in many of the interventions in this volume, including Sneha Kumar's attention to the infrastructural support for AltBalaji's "kinky entanglement of sex, data, infrastructure, and content"; Sam Thompson's attention to social reproduction and the "media fix," wherein platforms operate as care surrogates; Isadora Campregher Paiva's attention to the IMDb database and subsequent adjunct platform to Amazon; and Philipp Dominik Keidl's attention to the more classically paratextual elements within the making-of productions on Disney+.

There is of course a bleed across all of these approaches; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy base their definition of platforms on a thorough survey of the field that they themselves were instrumental in creating; and likewise Lotz. Clarity about what platforms are (and are not) comes from careful observation of platforms and reading across fields where the term is used. The second

approach that starts from a field likewise tends towards building definitions that then become sedimented themselves, requiring further challenge to loosen their hold—and their geographies—in order to better return to the localities from which the theory emerged in the first place. Here too the problem of what the field and localities are and how they are circumscribed in the first place also are a problem. And finally, the third approach's dictum to start from the middle in order *not* to presume the West as a geopolitical center or the platform as a settled object of study in order to "address the infra-individual intra-actions between platform and human, and individual and collective—a kind of performativity via platforms," (Lamarre 2017, 301) offers a productive way of returning to the importance of the action (including media operations) in the constitution of what might, if only in retrospect, be called the national, the social, the individual. And yet it too arguably sneaks a presumption (if not a definition) of what the platform *is*, as object, into its account of the platform activities of its users.

And so, whether starting from definition, from praxis, or from the processual middle, each approach ultimately benefits most from a critical dialogue with the other. And each also benefits from being put into practice, in critically examining platforms and their porous operations. This is precisely where I see the most important contributions of this volume. Each chapter productively engages with a different platform object, context, place, and problem, offering what is together one of the most intellectually robust and genuinely probing accounts of the platform condition today. The conversations they generate across chapters will carry on into the future—and indeed, *are* the futures of platform studies.

I would like to thank Vinzenz Hediger and the Configurations of Film research group for hosting and generously inviting us to the wonderful intellectual exchange that led to this volume. I also would like to thank Philipp Dominik Keidl and Jana Zündel for their incredible work organizing the theme and logistics of the visit, and for editing this brilliant collection. I am so impressed with the outcome.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleague Ishita Tiwary for kindly agreeing to co-organize the Concordia side of this exchange, and for always being up for a platform conversation—and to thank Haidee Wasson for joining the travels and the conversation.

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FANDOM, FORM AND FORMATS

[1]

Platform Studies and Small Gauge Film Historiography: A Reciprocal Challenge

Alexandra Schneider, Haidee Wasson, and Yvonne Zimmermann

Small film formats have long operated as what one might call "pre-platform" intermediaries, functioning not only as aesthetic experiences but also as conduits of exchange, tools of influence, and vehicles for fostering connections among people across all manner of boundaries and borders: geographical, political, religious, historical.

This essay brings small gauge cinema and platform studies into a dialogue. It is exploratory in nature and not intended to create any kind of simple, linear, or tightly continuous history from one media era to the next. Rather, through comparison and occasional analogy between some widely used definitions for "platforms" within media studies and small film formats, we hope to identify productive connections, contiguities, and differences across seemingly unconnected fields of inquiry. The aim is to make their mutually productive points of contact instructive across the multiplying fields of media study. We do this by mapping some of the pre-digital and pre-platform media phenomena that help to make current scholarship on media platforms more historically informed. And, conversely, we consider

the ways that the critical and creative thinking about present-day platforms might open up and energize historical work on media. Small format cinema here is our media history test case if you will.

Historiographically, we are building on Thomas Elsaesser's work, especially his essay *The New Film History as Media Archaeology* (2004). Elsaesser holds that with the "rupture" represented by the digital, we can no longer follow the genealogical model nor the chronological in writing film history. Instead, we have to conceive of the past as "at once irrecoverably 'other' and separate from us" that "can be seized only by a hermeneutics of the fragment, a discourse of metonymies, and an 'allegorical' view of (always already lost) totalities" (Elsaesser 2004, 99). Elsaesser's call was to disrupt presumed coherence in definitions and theories of cinema and to invite more attention to what false uniformities have obscured in our understanding of film's past.

This call for a critical and reflective mode of scholarship resonates with Thomas Apperley and Jussi Parikka's "Platform Studies' Epistemic Threshold" (2018), in which they turn to a media archaeological understanding of technology, thus challenging an often-presumed consistency to the notion of platform that is apparent in the emerging field of platform studies. They caution that "platforms are not recalled and rediscovered through platform studies, rather *in the process of 'doing' platform studies, a uniform platform is produced*. This makes the theoretical and methodological lenses that platform studies scholars use to produce the platform an immediate and central concern for the media history of digital gaming hardware, software, and cultures" (2018, 352–53). The authors are calling attention to the importance of retaining a self-reflexive scholarly practice for both present and past media. While they are focused largely on hardware and games, their assertion resonates with film scholars who work on nontheatrical and small format cinemas. These scholars have similarly been long aware that a false coherence to definitions of cinema had obscured vast and quotidian ideas and

practices pertaining to film. Their scholarship has been showing for decades that there is no such thing as a stable object in the history of cinema. Albeit dominated by images of large-scale, hi-tech movie theaters and big, beautiful, pristine movies, film, so we have learned, has long been a multi-sited and multi-formatted medium in constant transformation (see for example Waller 2016 and 2023).

Asserting a more dialogical and dynamic understanding of cinema's many iterations throughout the twentieth century helps to counter imbalanced and overly partial scholarly approaches. Yet all concepts, research, and scholarship are part of this historical process. Scholars are always inevitably making historical objects more visible and coherent in the present. This is a double-folded conceit. All configurations of technical media (from small format film to platforms) will eventually prove themselves to be objects in constant transformation; and we must then always be aware of the role played in creating definitions and categories that risk concealing this fact. With this in mind, we aim here to bring two unlikely media phenomena into dialogue: contemporary platforms and small gauge cinema. Methodologically, we seek to disrupt weighty assumptions of uniformity or coherence in what terms like "platforms" and "cinema" refer to, demonstrating that tending to unlikely pairings or, what some might term fragments, aberrances, or anomalies, does in fact help us to more fulsomely understand the media configurations we are tasked to assess.

What Is Small Gauge Cinema?

First, what is small gauge film and what does it mean to study it? Let's begin with the word "small." As we know, size is relative. The smallness of small film derives from its smallness in relation to the presumed "bigness" of the larger industry-standard 35mm film size, which was a worldwide standard for commercial and state-run theatrical film within the first decade or so of cinema's

rise. As powerful as 35mm film systems became, there were always other, usually smaller, systems filling-in the blanks. That is, small camera systems and projectors have long existed as affordable, portable, more accessible technical systems for making, distributing, and showing (and sounding) that enabled things that "big box" cinema did not. Those of us who study small formats look at the rest of the moving image puzzle, which recent research is showing was voluminous, diverse, and utterly transformative, not just for what we think of as *film*, but also, we argue, for *media* history and theory in the broadest sense. Studying small format cinema includes scholarship on particular genres of filmmaking (amateur, industrial, advertising, home) as well as the tools, technologies, and uses to which small format film technologies have been put. It also entails the many sites and institutions in which small gauges have operated and appeared (see for example Hediger and Vonderau 2009; Acland and Wasson 2011; Wasson 2021; Florin, Vonderau, and Zimmermann 2021; Waller 2023; Hediger, Hoof, and Zimmermann 2024).

Scholarship on small gauge cinema shows that film history is not flat or uniform or singular in terms of its technologies, sites, circulation, engagement, and use. And it shows that long before the digital era, small format analog film was constituted by international standards, new uses, markets, genres, epistemologies, experiences, and experiments in mediated making and engagement. Crucially, small format technologies arose with particular discourses, institutions, ideas, and manifestoes that made them "media" and rich for subjection to many of the scholarly paradigms we see feeding the study of platforms.

Taken together, such research shows that a good deal of the things that were important in the history of small format cinema are actually continuously important within digital media today: making, re-use, horizontal circulation, connecting people across vast geographies, creating new "publics"; complicating concepts of "value" in inherited media models. Small format cinema has also been deeply involved in facilitating industrial, military,

and consumer-facing interfaces with workers, soldiers, and citizens. Some were integral to the surveillance apparatus, and many blurred the distinction between leisure and work, turning entertainment into productive opportunities to make workers more efficient or citizens more compliant. Small film formats facilitated targeted messaging, enabling smaller and smaller, even individualized audiovisual address.

Once we get a glimpse of this other film history, or rather these other film *histories*, that is, histories that decenter and open up what digital media scholars call "legacy media," we can start to see continuities in media form and function that constructively lend nuance to some of the grand narratives and trite coherences that can mitigate against engaging fulsomely with platforms in the context of persistent media change. Simultaneously, this approach helps us steer clear of the pitfalls of constructing linear narratives of development and progress, as cautioned by media archaeology.

What Are Platforms?

Bernhard Rieder and Jeanette Hofmann have established that "platforms have not only become highly visible and valuable companies but also raise important social challenges" (Rieder and Hofmann 2020, 2). While there are many debates about the parameters of precisely what a platform is, scholars working in the area of Platform Studies generally agree that platforms can be defined as "large-scale infrastructures specialized in facilitating interaction and exchange among independent actors" (Rieder and Hofmann 2020, 2). For Rieder and Hofmann, platforms function as intermediaries that rely on digital technologies. At first sight, few objects in the field of media studies could be further from this than the analog cinematic formats and practices that are the focus of small format film historiography. Yet upon closer inspection, the two areas share more in common than their apparent differences would suggest.

Before outlining some of the commonalities, let us briefly take a closer look at the concept of an intermediary. If we do indeed understand a digital platform as an intermediary, what then would an older, pre-digital intermediary be? Let's consider the paradigmatic platform known as YouTube. Without considering the changing nature of YouTube over its nearly twenty years of existence, the core service of the platform has been to host and share video content. Before YouTube, access to audiovisual content was fragmented over a variety of different services and technologies (broadcast television, video, DVDs, film prints), but also among communities and media ecologies (business, amateur, entertainment, art, etc.), many of them with sometimes distinct legal and technological frameworks. From a non-theatrical and small film format scholar's point of view though, it was somehow surprising that for many scholars it was only with YouTube that they started fully recognizing the importance of decentralized circulation and abundant film supply for moving image cultures beyond theaters. Non-theatrical scholars have long assumed the outsized scale and broad variety of moving image cultures. We have studied the production, distribution, and reception of the audiovisual on different technical systems such as 9.5 and 16mm film gauges, as well as other small media formats such as VHS or DVD, within different institutional contexts such as school, church, military, home, business, or leisure, for the past thirty years. Yet looking back via a platform such as YouTube, we realize that there is still a lot of research to be done to better understand what might be called pre-platform media, whether as technical systems, as business ecologies, or as transactional intermediaries.

At the same time, as suggested above, platform studies might also learn from small format or non-theatrical findings. The independent actors who engage with contemporary digital platforms are, more often than not, producers of moving images, and a prominent element of their exchanges involve moving images and sounds in one way or another. Small gauge film culture has

a long, deep, and dispersed history of operating in some ways similar to YouTube. Small gauge film culture, for instance, can be described as a network of interaction and exchange among independent actors in the context of amateur film clubs, which were also global media phenomenon. The parallel also holds when examining dispersed distribution and production circuits, which characterized the making and movement of small gauge films, partly because they were relatively easy to transport, store, share, sell, and show. Both small gauge film and platforms have been instrumental in creating new markets.

There are also interesting technical confluences between small media and platforms. For instance, platform culture is inextricably linked to the advent of the smartphone, a device that has become crucial for the production, distribution, and consumption of moving images that were once the domain of small gauge film (see for example Odin 2012). In addition to shared devices, we can observe that there is an additional confluence in terms of the range of the audiovisual forms each media format has facilitated. From amateur content to a diverse assortment of professional titles, monetized platforms such as YouTube and small format film technologies have both enabled and made visible production and distribution circuits that use moving image and sounds for educational, ideological, religious, industrial, and business purposes. Each media form demonstrates logics of instrumentality (see for example Jacobson 2017; Zimmermann 2020; Peretti 2024). Many of the hallmarks of what is assumed to make platforms unique have long been extant or in development for decades in the small film ecosystem. In what follows we present two case studies to help flesh out the interesting comparative field opened up by bringing together small format film and platforms, focusing first on a shared technical and aesthetic phenomenon (compression), and second on a socio-cultural application (structured participative events).

Case Study 1: Formats

Platforms like YouTube seem to have upended inherited models characterized by limited access or media scarcity through their billions of available audiovisual files. Yet, the compression formats the platform relies upon have many compelling and significant historical precedents. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines compression in the context of computing as "the process of reducing the amount of space occupied by data that is being stored or transmitted, by minimizing redundant information." Compression can also be understood more generally as the reduction of data to the threshold of comprehensibility (see Schneider 2020, 129 ff.). This is a technical process that characterizes all electro-acoustic and audiovisual media.

The small gauge reduction print is an interesting example. Reduction prints were normally films that were originally recorded in a large format film size such as the industry standard 35mm. French and American companies were forerunners in establishing smaller formats that used fewer materials and hence came with reduced printing, duplication, storage, and shipping costs. Like contemporary compression formats (such as MP4), small-gauge reduction prints had a key purpose: through their more compact size, they were intended to facilitate and increase the circulation of moving images, expanding cinema beyond commercial movie theaters to schools, homes, and many other screening venues. As we have suggested elsewhere, substandard or small-gauge reduction prints can be understood as a pre-digital compression format (Schneider 2014). "Reduction" refers both to the film's smaller gauge and its duration, with reduction prints often shortening full-length feature films to the essential 3 to 20 minutes necessary to screen them in programs alongside home movies and other short films. The reduction itself could be achieved in different ways, and could include using a smaller film gauge, cutting down sequences, or isolating certain segments in order to sell them individually as many titles instead of one title. But

the elimination of color or sound were also standard practices for making cheaper prints. What some consider mutilated copies of presumably "original" theatrical versions, others appreciate as condensed manifestations of concentrated "flavors," similar to a culinary reduction (Schneider 2020, 129). These reduction prints also extended the circulating lifespan of film prints as well as increased access to film content.

Reduction prints were marketed throughout the twentieth century for nontheatrical exhibition purposes, for venues such as homes but also institutions like schools, churches, social clubs, libraries, and others. In recent years, reduction prints have also become increasingly relevant for archival and restoration purposes, as reduction prints are often the only available copies or fragments of otherwise lost films. However, reduction prints have so far not been researched as distinct media objects in their own right, neither by archivists nor by film scholars. Yet, reduction prints are not mere oddities in the history of cinema. They are also a kind of "liminal format," with liminal being used in the sense of being "not there yet," or transitional; a kind of *format de passage*, if you will (Schneider 2020, 131). Particularly productive here is the idea of the liminal as a period of "passing through an adjacent, often marginal space characterized by a dissolution of established social order and hierarchy" in order to secure broader structures (Taylor-Alexander et al. 2016, 154). For Victor Turner (1969, 7), there is a "peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both." In this sense, liminality is a figure of thought for understanding the pre-electronic compression practices of moving image cultures. At the same time, "that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both" also refers to the multiple genealogies an object can belong to but is not fully part of. This might include forms of film that were private and seen on small screens, of which reduction prints were a prominent example. Such forms prefigured later media such as television, just to name the most obvious, and today strongly resonate with platforms such as YouTube, where abbreviated film

forms such as trailers, fragments, and clips coexist—and often stand in for the "full movie" that is not accessible for free—in a new media ecology of accelerated and dispersed watching.

Case Study 2: Nestlé's Film Club for Kids

As stated above, platforms can be understood as technological intermediaries, and as such can be traced back to the pre-digital era. Another definition that lends itself as a framework to studying pre-digital media is Eggo Müller's notion of platforms as "formatted spaces of participation"—a notion that he suggested already in 2009, that is, in the very "infancy" of Platform Studies. Müller's take on the subject is interesting for at least two reasons. First, he not only studies YouTube as a "formatted space of participation," but also considers television shows such as "Aktenzeichen XY" and "Big Brother" as formatted spaces and hence as pre-digital platforms. Second, Müller understands "formatted spaces of participation" as institutionally and culturally structured and holds that this concept "allows for a more differentiated and adequate analysis of the technological, economic, social and cultural powers and conventions that structure the diverse participatory practices which these spaces allow for and also provoke" (2009, 60). In other words, the concept of "formatted spaces of participation" helps to move beyond the range and depth of technologically defined forms of interactivity and participation and to adjust the focus toward a dialectical understanding of participatory practices in formatted spaces.

Apperley and Parikka's (2018) argument that platforms are not only technologies but also "techniques that sustain interactions as well as offer an epistemological framework" (253) resonates with Müller's approach. Tarleton Gillespie's 2010 definition of platforms also fits in here: For Gillespie, "'platforms' are 'platforms' not necessarily because they allow code to be written or run, but because they afford an opportunity to communicate, interact or sell" (2010, 351). The focus Gillespie puts on the functions and

uses of platforms sounds similar to approaches to non-theatrical cinema that conceive of small format film as useful media. With this in mind, let's look at Nestlé's Fip-Fop Club as a possible case of a pre-digital, proprietary "formatted space of participation."

The Fip-Fop Club was a film club founded by the Nestlé Food Corporation (see Zimmermann 2008, 2010), named for its two featured advertising characters Fip and Fop. Switzerland served as a test market for the film club, which ran from 1936 to 1957 and was open to all children aged five to fifteen. Access to commercial movie theaters in Switzerland was only allowed from 16 years of age. In other words, Nestlé provided children with films who otherwise were legally excluded from cinema entertainment. The core feature of the club was a traveling small gauge film show. Nestlé toured the French and German parts of Switzerland twice a year and presented programs of shorts that would include films with Charlie Chaplin, Laurel & Hardy, cartoons, and now and then a documentary on the production of chocolate. The shows were held in cinemas, theaters, town halls, and gymnasiums and were hybrid media events that also featured live stage acts and puppet shows. There were animators who presented themselves as "aunts" and "uncles." The club's inventor Karl Lauterer, head of Nestlé's marketing department in Switzerland, officiated as the "godfather" of the club. The entire club was built on a family model: membership in the club opened the door to an alternative family and fan community consisting of friends, peers, "godfather" Lauterer, and funny "aunts" and "uncles." The social practice of collective film consumption was thereby crucial in helping to construct the Fip-Fop "family." To strengthen the social bonds of the club, there was a Fip-Fop call and a Fip-Fop song, both of which would be performed by all attendees during the shows.

A trading card system helped to sustain the club's community between the biannual film screenings. The cards were enclosed in Nestlé, Peter, Cailler, and Kohler chocolate bars. They were meant to be exchanged among kids, which happened mainly in the schoolyard. Children also pasted cards into lavish albums devoted

to historical, geographical, biological, and other instructive topics. Like many other food corporations in Switzerland and elsewhere, Nestlé had produced such albums since the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Last but not least, there was the Fip-Fop Magazine, a monthly magazine published by Nestlé in German and French. The magazine wished to both entertain and educate the company's child readership in citizenship (i.e. democracy and patriotism), film culture, and consumption. In addition, it provided club members with a forum to participate in puzzles and to contribute drawings, poems, and picture stories that were inspired by Fip and Fop, the club's advertising characters, or the film screenings, the brand, or by Nestlé products. Hence, the club offered a formatted participatory space for entertainment, education, and amateur creation.

Measured by popularity, Lauterer's marketing initiative was a huge success. In 1949, the club counted 120,000 members, that is, one in eight children in Switzerland. That is also one in eight children that Nestlé provided with his or her first cinema experiences on a proprietary pre-digital "platform" that exchanged corporate entertainment for future consumer engagement. From an economic perspective, the corporate investment into the club was too high to be exported as a model to foreign markets. Also, television and its establishment as a mass medium in the late 1950s brought an end to the Fip-Fop Club. Nestle's previous screen monopoly was dismantled by domestic televisions. The Fip-Fop hybrid, exclusive, site-specific model could not compete.

The case of Nestlé's Fip-Fop Club suggests that there is indeed some historical continuity or at least contiguity in efforts to commodify media and redraw the lines separating watching, using, and making in ways remarkably similar to contemporary digital platforms. Or, to use Müller's concept, Nestlé built a formatted space of participation. It entailed access to moving images and the exchange of content and community belonging. All of these were built around print, audiovisual, and performative media,

which users embraced in exchange for being immersed in corporate interests.

Contemporary platforms are more than simply "formatted spaces of participation." That said, if this is indeed one of their paradigmatic qualities, then it is plain that there are many media precursors that can not only help us to see continuities but to ask more precise questions about the differences and specificities of contemporary "formatted spaces" and the modes of participation they enable. The case of Nestlé also draws attention to children as savvy media users and creators, a group that has been rather neglected both in Platform Studies and in small format film historiography beyond the classroom (Schneider and Strauven 2017).

Thinking more carefully about the specificities that comprise groups that find themselves in these formatted environments will also help us to better understand the ways in which platforms are themselves subject to human contingency and difference. That is, sometimes humans do unpredictable things in structured, technological, and institutional contexts. Also instructive here are the benefits of studying the local and even the "site specific." In another surprising parallel, like many film and media scholars who have long sought to reject the conceptualization of film as a "mass" medium, platform scholars have been underlining the importance of localizing platforms, seeking to ground the study of media phenomena that often seem to defy terrestrial and geo-political boundaries. Hence, platforms must be studied with this in mind. The same goes for small format film historiography. Henri Lefebvre's call to "always spatialize," which helped initiate the so-called spatial turn in literature and cultural studies in the early 1980s, is worth recalling here.

Conclusion

We have made the case that media history provides crucial points of reference, critical debates, and methodological tools for studying digital platforms. Many of the qualities that are thought

to constitute the specificity of platforms have long pre-existed their digital iterations across media history—hence our suggestion to mine/unearth "pre-platform" intermediaries. We have used the case of small format film to provide two concrete and grounded case studies that demonstrate the many ways that a medium often construed as utterly distinct and even antithetical to digital platforms holds many precedents and earlier iterations of phenomena now understood as common to our platform era: informal circulation, formatted spaces and experiences, the creation of multi-functional media ecologies, and diversity of genres, uses, and mediations facilitated by media systems understood as intermediaries. In this sense, Elsaesser's call for an embrace of unlikely angles, fragments, and historiographical experiment also reveals new coherences and continuities to examine and debate.

Finally, while the authors of this essay identify as historians, we would like to leave you with a few thoughts about why people who study the past should be engaged with new and emerging media and their debates. Platform Studies offers those of us otherwise immersed in the past to import some of the fresh insights being applied to recent media phenomena. For instance, the arising ways of talking about platforms resists many of the inherited biases of studying film, which have long been predicated on overly narrow conceptions of unchanging texts, big theater ideals, audiences, and received aesthetic categories. Many of these assumptions which included emphasis on great directors, and concepts of "art," have functioned to obscure a sizable portion of media history. Platform Studies tends toward aesthetic agnosticism and therefore decenters received aesthetic hierarchies and norms. The concept of an audience or a canon is absent, and instead we have more dynamic concepts of users, prosumers, and collections. The presumption of content abundance and dispersed traffic is a far more productive starting point when working to map small media ecologies. Rather than focusing on what small media were not, one can begin with what

they were. And what they were was a lot like platforms, operating in a range of ever-adapting and flexible environments, yielding unique kind of films, uses, and experiences.

Platforms have been defined in multiple ways, and the expanding and varied approaches to understanding them reflect ongoing debates about media in a broader sense. From the purview of film historians, some of the productive transhistorical threads of productive dialogue across both the study of platforms and an expanded film historiography are the following: 1) the importance of tending to medium specific dynamics across media phenomena; 2) approaches that decenter genre and include textual agnosticism; 3) consideration of an elasticity of function and value (not tied to one cultural output or thing, i.e. books or movies); and 4) a shared informality of use/interface (audiences are not the de facto idea; media are de-eventified, with a more horizontal model for media engagement).

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[2]

Things Worth Filming, Things Worth Building: Disney+, Making-ofs, and the Walt Disney Archives

Philipp Dominik Keidl

In 2023, the exhibition *Disney 100* opened in Philadelphia and Munich, promising visitors "special behind-the-scenes glimpses into the creation of the most popular characters, films, shows, and attractions—from Disneyland to Walt Disney World and beyond" (Disney 2023). Both versions of the exhibition commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Walt Disney Company by displaying 250 artifacts from the Walt Disney Archives, audiovisual installations, and a hologram of the company's eponymous founder. *Disney 100* qualifies as a "blockbuster exhibition" (Rosso 2022) for its considerable size, highly anticipated global tour, corporate sponsorship, popular subject matter, and projected high visitor turnout. The "blockbuster" status is further evidenced by the elaborate promotional campaign for the exhibition. *Disney 100* is being advertised through behind-the-scenes specials about the making of the exhibition, following the customary making-of format typically employed in promotional campaigns for large-scale Hollywood films (Arthur 2004; Hediger 2005). In addition to a brief interview with curator Becky Cline, featured on the exhibition's official website (Disney 2023), ABC and Hulu

aired the thirty-minute-long special *Disney 100: The Exhibition—Making the Magic* (2023). *Disney 100*, the exhibition, and *Disney 100,* the making-of about the exhibition, are examples of Disney's encompassing franchising strategy. The archival collections and personnel of the company's archives are seamlessly integrated into the entertainment portfolio of the organization, both as a producer of new content and as the subject of new content for Disney divisions like ABC and Hulu.

Although *Disney100* is a recent prominent example, the streaming service Disney+ has, since its launch in 2019, emerged as the primary platform to showcase the company's archival divisions. The docuseries *Disney Insider* (2020) provides concise updates on diverse projects such as the launch of new exhibitions (episodes 5 and 12), the creation of hand-made collectibles (episode 4), and consultation with archivists for current productions (episode 9). The feature-length documentary, *Mickey: The Story of a Mouse* (2022), chronicles the history of Disney's most famous character, incorporating archival materials and statements from curators and archivists. Meanwhile, the docuseries *Prop Culture* (2020) delves into the details of props, costumes, and set pieces from films such as *The Nightmare before Christmas* (1993), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), and *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003). While making-of documentaries conventionally center on the various stages of film production and the personal accounts of the cast and crew during pre-production, filming, and post-production (Hight 2005), these behind-the-scenes documentaries on Disney+ illustrate a thematic extension into the domain of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting the history of Disney and its films.

This essay analyzes the role of making-ofs in communicating and commodifying the studio's history, expanding stories about Disney and its intellectual property across different non-fiction productions. The main interest of this argument, however, is not whether these making-ofs cohere to academic standards in their

construction of historical narratives.[1] Productions involving the Walt Disney Archives are driven by commercial imperatives, created *by* Disney, *about* Disney, *for* Disney. Their goal is to reinforce Disney's brand image of family-friendly entertainment, not confronting positive internal perceptions with critical external commentary. The Disney+ making-ofs are highly staged and selective accounts of what it means to work for the studio and its archives. They may offer a glimpse into the inner workings of the archives, but they are driven by a corporate agenda to adapt to new platforms and technologies, generate and maintain long-term audience appeal, and establish reliable revenues and predicable costs through various textual extensions to spread their brand as far as possible. Hence, this essay is more interested in how archives and archival labor are integrated into existing narrative tropes of the behind-the-scenes genre, with a particular attention to the presentation and promotion of archivists as fans and fans as historians in films and series produced for and available on Disney+ respectively.

The Making-Of and Disney

The tradition of creating behind-the-scenes content in Hollywood precedes the emergence of streaming platforms. As early as the 1910s, productions such as *How Motion Pictures are Made and Shown* (1912) provided audiences with insights into the different departments of film studios. In the 1930s, making-ofs

1 Recent scholarship foregrounds the potential of making-ofs as a means of conveying production histories and expands definitions of the genre that include not only industry products, but also amateur recordings and artistic interventions (Göttel 2019; Hasebrink and Linseisen 2020; Hasebrink 2022). These writings challenge more skeptical positions that caution against an uncritical utilization of making-ofs as historical source material, which have defined discussion about behind-the-scenes productions. These critics argue that making-ofs promote a film through gossip and hagiography (Wulff 2023), and therefore lack a profound engagement in critical discussions on the social, political, and cultural significance of the film in question (Hight 2005; Caldwell 2008; Evans 2010).

began to focus on individual productions, advertising forthcoming prestigious releases with 10-minute-long behind-the-scenes films (Hediger 2005, 337). Television picked up the genre after the Second World War. By then the dominant national advertising medium (Anderson 1994, 154), TV channels broadcast promotional films for forthcoming Hollywood productions, "narrativizing film production work" and making Hollywood's "own production operations as compelling and mythologized as the movies themselves" (Steinhart 2018, 99). The making-of genre reached a peak in popularity with the proliferation of DVDs, as studios produced behind-the-scenes content as "extras" specifically for both new and classic releases for the home entertainment market (Evans 2010). Today, streaming services create their own making-of formats, which cover not only films and television but also other IPs such as toys and video games (i.e., *The Toys that Made Us* [2017–2019] on Netflix). Meanwhile, video sharing and social media platforms have given rise to a "digital 'making-of' culture" characterized by the accessibility of privately recorded footage of sets and production sites (Hasebrink 2022, 111).

While the history of the making-of genre is characterized by formal and aesthetic variation and flexibility (Hasebrink 2022, 112), the themes intended to generate audience interest in the promoted films have hardly changed. The success of the making-of, as Vinzenz Hediger (2005, 332) explains, is due to a gesture of "democratic initiation": the presentation of alleged "insider" knowledge that is easily available to anyone. Four discursive tactics define this initiation of public secrets. First, making-ofs focus on technological innovation, revealing how special effects and cinematic illusions are created (Hediger 2005, 333–34). Second, they establish a proximity to stars, who guide viewers through the studios and share their own professional and private experiences (Hediger 2005, 333–34). Third, they present Hollywood as a welcoming community and wonderful workplace, advertising the industry as much as the films (Hediger 2005, 335–38). Finally, they participate in discourses around authorship, typically portraying

directors as the key figures responsible for the artistic vision behind the film (Hediger 2005, 338–39). Although these four tropes represent a predictable variation of sameness, the gesture of "democratic initiation" seems to be successful in the sense that the genre continues to be popular, is adaptable to different contexts, and consumed independently from its source film (Arthur 2004).

Scholars, however, criticize a lack of artistic ambition in making-ofs, labeling them parasites (Evans 2010, 590) that pose as "culture film," "reportage," and "educational film" and would not exist without their source text (Hediger 2005, 338). The portrayal of labor has been of particular interest and concern, with behind-the-scenes documentaries being criticized as "pseudo-backstage performances" that rarely depict the real conditions and routines of work in the film industry (Evans 2010, 594). Rather than aiming for an accurate depiction of work in the film industry, behind-the-scenes documentaries generate deliberately reductive and proprietary self-theorizing and sense-making of the industry, unsurprisingly in line with the media brand that produces them (Caldwell 2008). Indeed, since audiences are mostly absent from behind-the-scenes features, the cast and crew compensate for this absence by speaking from the position of a "virtual fan" of the production in question (Hediger 2005, 340). The result is the portrayal of a dedicated, self-contained, creative community that is focused on technological accomplishments, while ignoring the economic motivations of the industry (Caldwell 2008, 144–45).

The formal and aesthetic flexibility, thematic registers, and branded industrial self-theorizing have all been evident in Disney's making-of productions. For instance, RKO's *How Walt Disney Cartoons Are Made* (1937) promoted *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) by showcasing how the company produced its animated films with state-of-the-art technologies and talented personnel. Moreover, the film contributed to promoting the image of Walt Disney himself as the authoritative figure responsible for the company's coherent artistic vision, an idea

that the company Disney continues to promote today. In the 1950s, Disney used television as a companion medium to cinema. Consistent with Walt Disney's idea of "total merchandising" (Anderson 1994, 134), the show *Disneyland* served as a "brand management platform" (Gillan 2014), programming animated films from the company's film library alongside new cartoons and behind-the-scenes previews for upcoming films and the forthcoming theme park. On DVDs, Disney embedded behind-the-scenes extras in what Tom Brown refers to as "enclosed environmental artworks," where they not only balanced experiences of intimacy and spectacle through the content of the DVD, but also through the design of the interfaces (Brown 2007).

On Disney+, these narrative tropes are not only continued but also expanded upon. The platform offers a wide range of making-ofs for old and new releases as well as behind-the-scenes documentaries covering all aspects of the Disney entertainment complex. According to Jake Pitre (2022, 15), these documentaries help the company build and maintain brand loyalty by giving users a behind-the-scenes perspective that "certifies the collective cultural memory of the company as the past and future of happiness." In terms of strategy and selective disclosure, then, Disney+ is as much an "electronic museum" as the 1950s show (Anderson 1994, 23). However, Disney not only makes available much of their back catalog for a monthly subscription fee, but also integrates other film-related materials. By producing making-ofs on the inner workings of the Walt Disney Archives, the content of the film vault present on the platform is complemented with insights into the processes of how film-production materials are collected, archived, preserved, and made available to the public.

Today, as this development illustrates, making-ofs have progressed from mere promotional materials to essential components of media franchise logic. Media franchises are defined by "a high degree of industrially designed intertextuality, which links together numerous texts and consumer products, as well as media companies and audiences" (Herbert 2017, 43).

As the following three sections demonstrate, making-ofs are created both to generate profit as a cultural product and to establish textual connections with a diverse array of existing products. They adapt, cite, recycle, and expand upon existing content, forms, and formats of the making-of genre, as well as the films they cover. Additionally, they are connected to exhibitions, coffee table books, studio tours, collectibles, and other merchandise based on the company's history. Crucially, the industrial processes and intertextual connections within media franchises also allow for the recognition and inclusion of fan works. Although normally not legally sanctioned or allowed to generate profit, select fan works are recognized and approved by the studio (Herbert 2017; Keidl 2022). In Disney's case, this is evident in collaborations with fans for the production of making-ofs. However, making-ofs not only work with fans but also employ a rhetoric that presents the company's archivists, and employees in general, as fans themselves.

Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives and the Archivist as Fan

Typically, a making-of about a film centers on the intricacies of the diverse production departments of film studios. Conversely, productions on the collection, preservation, and exhibition of Disney's history have the Walt Disney Archives as their focal point. Established in the 1970s by Dave Smith to make the historical materials relating to Walt Disney and the company he founded available for research, the Walt Disney Archives have become a place of longing for fans. Fan magazines describe the archive as a destination that "fans dream of walking through" because "pieces of entertainment history that we'd only previously witnessed on a screen make for a different type of magic" (DePaoli 2022). Access to the archives, however, is limited and further mythologizes the collection as a "treasure trove" (Abrams 2023). Indeed, the promise that the World Disney Archives "is available to … fans all

over the world" (Abrams 2023) is mostly realized through touring museum exhibitions or blogs and print media, as well as through behind-the-scenes documentaries in which Disney employees offer guided tours.

One example of such a documentary is *Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives* (2020), which features the producer of *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Don Hahn, as he takes a tour of the archive, aiming to visit Walt Disney's restored office. The production is reminiscent of the early making-of documentaries, which provided insights into the different departments of a studio rather than focusing on a specific film. Moreover, *Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives* follows the example of making-ofs by employing celebrities as narrators and guides (Hediger 2005, 335). Hahn's humorous performance as he seeks Disney's restored office echoes Robert Benchley's comical journey in *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941), a fictionalized making-of film in which the comedian roams different departments of the Walt Disney Studio in search of Walt Disney, intending to pitch an idea for a film to him. *Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives* employs the gesture of "democratic initiation" on two levels. First, Hahn meets filmmakers as well as archivists and curators who recite information about Disney films and their technological innovation, the work of stars, the communal atmosphere at the studio, and Walt Disney's role as the authorial figure who is presented as being single-handedly responsible for every decision, and who allegedly inspires employees even today. Second, the archivists and curators talk about their own work in the archives and collaborations with museums. Viewers are shown a positive work environment and see how objects are discovered and prepared for exhibitions, as well as being exposed to state-of-the-art practices in restoring and digitizing collectibles.

Like in making-ofs about films, the encounters in *Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives* are highly staged. The archivists and curators are mainly shown skimming through catalogs and databases, walking through corridors lined with shelves,

handling objects from the collection with white gloves, presenting restored props, and discussing the finished installations for their exhibitions. What viewers do not see is how metadata is organized, objects are appraised, storage conditions are determined, restoration plans are developed and acted out, costs are calculated, and exhibitions are conceptualized, planned, and built. Neither are any financial or economic aspects of the Walt Disney Archive addressed. The archive and the exhibitions curated from its collection, though, play an important part in establishing and maintaining the company's brand identity and the studio's legacy. Objects from all of Disney's corporate products and divisions are collected in the archive, and the collections of newly acquired businesses and franchises such as Star Wars and Marvel are neatly integrated into Disney's omnipresent discourse on creating "magic" in projects such as *Disney 100*. For instance, *Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives* includes an interview about the costume collection that the archive received when the Walt Disney Company acquired 21st Century Fox, absorbing films like *Moulin Rouge* (2001) into the Disney catalog and the collection of the 20th Century Fox Archives[2] into the Walt Disney Archives. While the film celebrates the cultural and historical relevance of 21st Century Fox catalog, the financial worth and economic potential of using the collections of the Fox Archives for future projects is not addressed. With such aspects ignored, the archive and its employees are pictured as being solely driven by their passion for film and as acting outside of commercial interests.

Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives portrays the archivists and curators as knowledgeable and skilled professionals, but like

2 The 20th Century Fox Archives were established in 1992 to collect and preserve 20th Century Fox's collection of props, set decorations, photographs, and art department and publicity materials. Part of the collection was on display at the Frank G. Wells Building at The Walt Disney Studios, where the collections of Fox and Disney are narratively connected by highlighting the work of artists who have worked for both studios in the past (Lark 2020).

other industry employees featured in making-of documentaries, they often mythologize their work (Steinhart 2018). They use rhetorical expressions of fandom to establish consubstantiality between the archivists and viewers (Raw 2020). While archivists are delineated from viewers by foregrounding their skills, expertise, and privileged access, anecdotes about the archivists' passion for Disney create a feeling of commonality. Working in the archives is portrayed not only as an occupation, but as a life-long dream that originated with the first encounters with Disney as a child, linking the biographies of the employees to the history of the company and its films and attractions. In episode 5 of *Disney Insider*, merchandise underlines this rhetoric of fandom. By wearing a Mickey Mouse T-shirt for the interview, the director of the Walt Disney Archives complements her verbal expressions with a non-verbal, sartorial manifestation of fandom (Carter 2018, 171). These sentiments might be honest expressions of an individual's fandom, but the focus on the affective relationships of Disney employees to Disney and its entertainment portfolio is also evident in productions on other departments of the company. Archivists, like their colleagues interviewed for other Disney+ docuseries, are placed in a "branded lifeworld experience without acknowledging labor as a potential exploitative wrinkle" (Pitre 2022, 12). Within this branded environment, the corporate and economic incentives of the archives are veiled under the pleasure fans have in practices of acquiring, archiving, collecting, exhibiting, and the making of history (Keidl and Waysdorf 2022). Within the film, then, the industry archive is reimagined as a community archive for past and present Disney employees.

Prop Culture and the Fan Historian

Archivists and curators are not the only experts on Disney history that appear in the making-ofs on Disney+. The docuseries *Prop Culture* stars filmmaker and Disney fan Dan Lanigan, who is known for his vast collection of Disney production materials. Each episode explores one film produced or owned by Disney, as

Lanigan discusses iconic props, costumes, and set designs with various industry professionals, including archivists, curators, restorers, directors, actors, set and costume designers, choreographers, musicians and composers, and special effects artists. Mixed with scenes from the films as well as behind-the-scenes footage from the studios and workshops, *Prop Culture* follows the narrative and stylistic formula of behind-the-scenes documentaries and expands it with themes and genre conventions from the films at the center of the episode. The episode on *Mary Poppins* (1964), for example, foregrounds family values by showing Lanigan watching the film with his own daughter. In the episode dedicated to *Tron* (1982), Lanigan investigates the synthesis of digital and analog techniques. And when he explores the making of *The Muppet Movie* (1979), he sets out on a road trip across the United States. In other words, each episode follows the same premise (Lanigan researching a film and its props) but brings variation into customary narrative tropes (technology, stars, industry, authorship, plus archival work) by paying tribute to the genre of the respective films (family film, road movie, costume film, etc.).

Unlike *Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives*, which mainly provides an overview of the archive's departments, *Prop Culture* puts more emphasis on specific items in the collection. The show caters towards "object-oriented fandom" (Rehak 2014) and related interests in merchandise (Geraghty 2014), fashion and costuming (Affuso and Scott 2023), customization (Godwin 2015), or prop building (Hills 2014). According to Tamao Nakahara (2019), the interest in the films' material culture results from the ability of props, costumes, and sets to generate an "emotional residue" that drives fans to further engage with a storyworld and its material culture after a film. Fans manage this emotional residue by collecting further information about the filmmaking process, thereby gaining a feeling of intimacy and authenticity about the narrative function of production materials and their construction. *Prop Culture* satisfies this interest in the material culture of film,

for example, by integrating captions about material facts of the object under investigation. But the main strategy of the show is to emphasize the "emotional residue" the objects left with Lanigan as well as with the members of the cast and crew, exploring the metaphorical meanings of the props in the films' narratives as well as the symbolic meaning they have in the lives of those involved in the productions. For instance, a sword and armor from *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005) symbolize how the character matures through leadership, but also signify growing up on a set and the familial bonds to other cast members.

Lanigan's role as a host is comparable to Hahn in *Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives*. But whereas Hahn has produced several blockbusters for the studio, and is introduced as a "Disney Legend," Lanigan is presented as accessing the archive as a fan rather than as an employee or filmmaker. His fandom is omnipresent throughout the series and serves as the entry point to the episodes and his ventures into the archives and discussions with industry professionals. Still, while the appearance of archivists in the making-ofs emphasizes the fandom of professionals, Lanigan's participation highlights the professionalism of fans as historians, as he is shown as a devoted fan and knowledgeable historian, who collaborates with the studio's archivists as an equal. Throughout the show, he participates in the work of archivists, unpacking objects, evaluating their condition, and contextualizing them in the history of the studio. Furthermore, Lanigan is allowed to take some of the objects with him across the country or abroad to discuss them with his guests, implying that the studio trusts him. As such, his expertise as a Disney specialist is not only established by what he says about the films and their history but also how he handles the archival collection. Through Lanigan, the show presents fans as the second pillar in preserving Disney history and having the necessary connoisseurship to trace down and preserve valuable objects from Disney's history, ultimately contributing

to safeguarding the studio's legacy and implying a possibility for fans to transition from amateur to professional historians working for the industry (Keidl 2022).

However, as is the case with *Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives*, *Prop Culture* only shows select aspects of fandom while leaving out others. The show does not give any more detailed insight into the practices and routines of fan collectors, including searching at flea markets and yard sales, where according to Lanigan many of the objects are found. Neither does the show address that prop collecting is a rather expensive hobby, placing fans with economic capital at the top of hierarchies among Disney memorabilia collectors. Indeed, prop collecting has become an industry, with several auction houses specializing in the buying and selling of film-related objects, and purchases being used for financial speculation as well as an investment into the memory of a favorite film. Lanigan himself, for example, is known for having spent $270,000 on a single item (Chun 2017). Finally, the show downplays the fact that only few fans are invited to contribute to official franchise histories like those of Disney (Keidl 2022). In the case of Lanigan, the fan historian has the financial resources not only to invest in his collection, but also to produce the show and hire himself as host with his own production company, Cinema Relics. While he stresses in interviews that he sees no interest in a show on the financial aspects of prop collecting (Lopez 2020), his dual role as host and producer of *Prop Culture* allows him to monetize his fandom and expertise beyond fandom's gift economy, in which most fan historians operate (Keidl and Waysdorf 2022). And although *Prop Culture* is as much about his own experiences of fandom and collecting as it is about Disney, his own position in the industry as a filmmaker is comparatively muted.

Training the Disney Archivist and Historian

Disney experiments with diverse making-of formats beyond Disney+, highlighting and recreating archival work and historical

research. This is manifested in merchandise and tie-in products based on the company's films and characters as well as their costumes, props, and sets. In these "material making-ofs," the focus shifts from portraying professional archivists as fans or fans as authorized historians to actively involving consumers as archivists and historians themselves.

Consider the company's collaboration with Hachette, which released the first issue of the subscription-based magazine *Disney Dolls' House* in 2022. With a total of 120 issues planned, subscribers receive the materials and instructions to build a Victorian dollhouse with every issue. Each of the ten rooms in the house is modeled after one Disney classic, with miniatures such as mirrors, tea sets, and furniture from, among other films, *Peter Pan* (1953), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (1977). The magazine includes instructions, reproductions of film posters, character portraits and behind-the-scenes articles, also covering films that are not represented in the house. Here, too, the behind-the-scenes articles follow established narrative tropes, but *Disney Dolls' House* adds one notable expansion: it offers a hands-on approach to exploring the history of Disney throughout the building process. In contrast to *Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives* and *Prop Culture*, which simply represent archivists, curators, and fans handling objects, subscribers to *Disney Dolls' House* learn about Disney history while actually working on and with objects modeled after Disney classics.

Model building is another example of "object-oriented" fan practice that enables engagement with a fictional text through tactile interaction with physical objects (Rehak 2012). Behind-the-scenes reports about films have been a staple in print media since the 1910s (Wulff 2023). The magazines that accompany model-building sets, however, not only teach about the films, but they also offer "the opportunity to realize, with three-dimensional presence and heft, the media fictions in which [fans] were invested" (Rehak 2012, 28). The subject matter of *Disney Dolls' House* of course makes the magazine interesting to fans, and is

advertised as a chance to "discover your favorite characters as you explore every room of your dolls house, reliving their classic stories as you go" (Hachette Partworks 2023). Yet, throughout its articles, the magazine does not employ the same rhetoric of fandom as *Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives* and *Prop Culture*. The articles are written in a straightforward manner, introducing Disney history and films in a tone that is more informative than enthusiastic. Neither does the magazine directly address readers as Disney fans. The sober style suggests that the magazine is aimed at individuals interested first and foremost in model building. This is evident from issue 1, where the opening article aims to develop a relationship between the subscriber and Disney by revealing Walt Disney's passion for miniatures (Bauen Sie Ihr Puppenhaus
2022a, 8–9).

The magazine reads like a curated introduction to fandom, as each issue offers a lesson on Disney history, linking the hobby of model building with the studio's past through building instructions as well as summaries and behind-the-scenes insights on the making of the films. The intended dual process of building the dollhouse and learning about the films becomes a self-historicizing function. Media franchises' intertextual character animates consumers to "make mental connections between the media texts they consume and the media they have consumed previously" (Herbert 2017, 25). While subscribers learn from the articles and instructions in the magazine as well as the video tutorials, the act of constructing the dollhouse may prompt viewers to consider their prior interactions with the films: Have I seen the film? Where have I seen it? With whom have I seen it? Will I watch it (again)?

The fact that the model is a dollhouse is central to this process of physical construction and subjective recollection. As objects primarily to be looked at rather than played with, the domestic spaces of the dollhouse can function both as a literal and metaphorical site of personal memories and history-making

(Hastie 2007). Once the building process is completed, the dollhouse simultaneously serves as an archive and exhibition space. The different rooms form a narrative structure that represent the films and their cultural history, but also store and generate the emotional residue of film experiences and the handling of related objects. The magazine does not give subscribers access to the Walt Disney Archives or present builders as fans-turned-historian-turned-professional. Rather, the process of building the house trains them about Disney, making them archivists and curators of their own autobiographical (Disney) history.

Conclusion

As this article has shown, the archival divisions of Disney are seamlessly integrated into the entertainment portfolio of the company, both as a producer of new content and as the subject of new content. Productions like *Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives* and *Prop Culture* speak to the interest fans have in the history of film. Representing archivists as fans and fans as historians speaks to a desire to participate in the construction of this history. The documentary and docuseries blur the lines between professional and amateur and suggest the idea that the project of "Disney history" is a communal effort—even though it is deeply imbedded in the logic of strategically producing and administering textual and cultural canonicity among different texts and attractions of franchises that continue to span decades and multiple generations of fans. In an increasingly competitive streaming market, however, with all major media conglomerates competing with their catalogs and original content, the Walt Disney Archives are also a source of comparatively inexpensive content. Disney's vast film catalog comes with an equally expansive collection of production materials that afford the retelling of film production histories, while also engaging in contemporary stories about film heritage and fandom across various formats. Indeed, acquisitions such as 21st Century Fox expand not only the company's film catalog but also their archival

collection, thereby providing the source material for new stories about collecting, preservation, and exhibition. Although not on Disney+, *Disney Dolls' House* falls into this logic, it adapts the making-of-format and equally engages with Disney's history and archival collection through articles but also haptic interaction with miniatures. As such, *Adventure Thru the Walt Disney Archives*, *Prop Culture*, and *Disney Dolls' House* show how archives and their film-related collections have become a prevalent discursive domain and entertainment form in popular culture.

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[3]

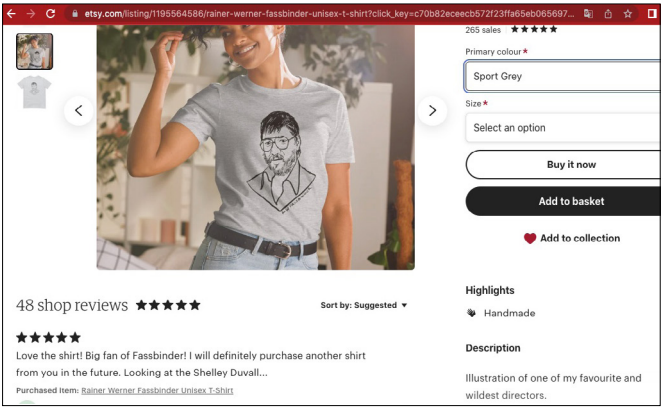
“Wear Your Rainer Werner Love”: Affective Reputation and Handmade Cinephile Merch

Anna Bell

“You can’t buy love, but you can buy handmade, and that’s kind of the same thing.”[1]

“Illustration of one of my favourite and wildest directors,” reads the description of a T-shirt that is highlighted as “handmade” on the London-based *Etsy* shop *SprocketsFilm* (SprocketsFilm 2022b). The design of this shirt (see fig. 1) is a front-centered print on light-colored fabric. It consists of a close-up portrait of a bearded man with glasses in the style of hand-drawn simple black dashes with the lettering “R.W. FASSBINDER” underneath. While the T-shirt itself is ready-made and the motif is machine-printed, the *Etsy* highlight “handmade” is meant to be understood in the sense of original design and, as I argue throughout the text, attached to emotions of passion and intimacy. Besides being an artwork and

1 There is no original source to be found, but the saying circulates on the internet, especially in connection with crafted goods, e.g. see CraftProfessional 2022.



[Figure 1] Screenshot of *Etsy* Listing "Rainer Werner Fassbinder Unisex T-shirt" (Source: SprocketsFilm 2022b)

homage to the infamous West German filmmaker bearing these initials and last name, its practical use as a garment is demonstrated by two photos of models wearing the "Rainer Werner Fassbinder Unisex T-shirt."[2] One of the models could be read as a white male, the other as a non-white female, a perfect match to present a unique, yet basic article of clothing for everyone who feels passionate about the filmmaker who has been deceased for over 40 years. "Love the shirt! Big fan of Fassbinder!" reviews an *Etsy* user in June 2022 after buying the product (SprocketsFilm 2022b).

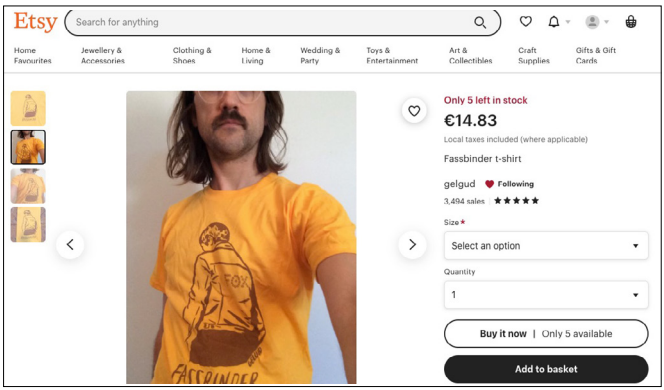
Another Fassbinder T-shirt, also highlighted as "handmade," is offered by the US-based *Etsy* shop *gelgud* (see fig. 2). The product description exclaims: "It's back! Originally commissioned by the Film Society of Lincoln Center in 2014, we're bringing back the Fassbinder shirt … The pictures of the shirt on the 'model' (aka yours truly) are the most accurate" (Gelgud 2022b). While "we"

2 Both models are rather photoshopped into wearing them, since *Sprockets-Film* uses the same set of pictures for displaying other T-shirts on offer in her *Etsy* shop.

and "yours truly" refer to designer and *Etsy* shop owner Nathan Gelgud, the former commission hints to a Fassbinder retrospective with the title "Fassbinder: Romantic Anarchist" which took place in New York City (Film at Lincoln Center 2014a, 2014b).[3] The homepage of the organizers *Film at Lincoln Center* advertises: "Wear your Rainer Werner love with our exclusive Fassbinder tote bag and T-shirt, designed by Nathan Gelgud" (Film at Lincoln Center 2014a). Eight years later, Gelgud himself wears his "Rainer Werner love" with a slightly crumpled yellow Fassbinder T-shirt in two photos on his *Etsy* listing. Gelgud's "Fassbinder T-shirt" is also adorned with a one-color print in a hand-drawn style. It depicts a medium shot angular rear view of a person with short dark hair, head hanging low, hands in the pockets of his dark trousers, and wearing a light jacket adorned with studs forming the letters "FOX" on the back. These are clearly hinting at Fassbinder in his leading role as "Fox, the Talking Head" aka Franz Biberkopf, in his film *Faustrecht der Freiheit / Fox and His Friends* (1975). Additionally, the motif includes two letterings: a large "FASSBINDER" below and a smaller "GELGUD" on the side, seemingly crediting them both as authors of the design or even serving as brands. Below the photos one finds various enthusiastic reviews from *Etsy* users who followed Gelgud's example: "I love this shirt so much—it's my second purchase of the same design," or: "Grabbed this shirt … in grey and purple years ago. So glad to get a new one in new colors!" Another reviewer just writes: "love love love love love love love this so much" (Gelgud 2022b). All of them are seemingly proving the saying right, that "you can't buy love, but you can buy handmade, and that's kind of the same thing."

Etsy is considered the pioneer and most popular of online craft-specific marketplaces (Silva 2020, 57–71; Miller 2013; similarweb 2022). Karla Ade, illustrator and owner of the *Etsy* shop *Sprockets-Film,* states that she likes how the platform helps her with

3 It took place in two parts: from May 16–June 1 and from November 7–26, 2014.



[Figure 2] Screenshot of *Etsy* Listing "Fassbinder T-shirt" (Source: Gelgud 2022b).

marketing: "it features other illustrators doing similar things. I've never been good at the marketing business side, so I like that etsy [!] brings the occasional customer through SEO [Search Engine Optimization] and its pages section (it's like a blog/-listicles featuring sellers). With other platforms all the marketing is on the seller" (Karla Ade, pers. comm., 2023). Besides facilitating economic transactions, *Etsy* enables social interaction and the circulation of emotions. Following its motto "Keep Commerce Human," *Etsy* self-claims to encourage creative user participation, passionate production, and meaningful consumption (Etsy 2022). To accomplish the task of creating a "more personal place to do business" (Miller 2013), it embraces social media features like a forum and groups, the possibility to write shop reviews, follow shops and other users, and send private messages to them. Although sellers build little one-person businesses around their craft/artistry, *Etsy* shops like *SprocketsFilm* and *gelgud* evoke feelings of intimacy and passion by selling self-designed aka handmade products in limited amounts and promoting them by featuring themselves as individuals and fellow fans.

Looking at both T-shirt designs as examples of "handmade" cinephile merch circulating via online platforms, this paper discusses

how this merch and filmmakers' reputations are entangled through logics of commerce and affect. Additionally, it considers how online platforms, built upon the premises of the same logic, may enhance this entanglement. As I would contend, besides designing merch and selling it, these affective and commercial cinephile fan practices do not only profit from the reputations of the filmmakers depicted, but, at the same time, may have an influence on them, as these practices may enhance the chances of films becoming part of cultural memory. Before diving deeper into the case studies of the T-shirt designs by *SprocketsFilm* and Gelgud dedicated to Fassbinder, as well as their circulation via *Etsy* and (to a lesser extent) *Instagram,* I will explain my understanding of the term affective reputation, its connection to practices of remembrance and memory-making, as well as to online platforms, since this is essential for my argument.

Memory and Reputation

In thinking about how collective memory is made from the myths and meaningful prejudices that manifest themselves through repetitive circulation in public discourse, I find the concept of reputation as a valuation heuristic quite helpful. This does not mean that facts do not play a role in the social, collective process of memory making. However, due to the complexity of reality and limited resources, this process consists of both remembering and forgetting. Cultural memory, as a special form of collective memory, is formed through the mode of a potential archive that is composed of accumulated existing information and art works, as well as the mode of actuality, that is, the evaluation of what appears to be relevant from the perspective of the current situation (Erll 2017, 6–7). This is where reputation comes in. An intact reputation creates trustworthiness, attention, power, and legitimization of hierarchies while at the same time it reduces the actual verification of facts. In short: it ascribes relevance (Eisenegger 2005, 34–37). As a heuristic, reputation is mainly used in the economic marketing context. However, public relation

scholars Mark Eisenegger and Kurt Imhof assert a universal claim to the validity of their reputation theory, meaning it can be applied to any individual or collective actor in various fields of action (Eisenegger and Imhof 2009, 246). The idea of connecting reputation with the attributions of relevance to artists and their artworks as well as to their anchoring in cultural memory is nothing new. It is already applied, for example, in the works of American sociologists Robert Kapsis as well as Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang in the late 1980s/early 1990s. While Kapsis discusses Alfred Hitchcock's influence on changing his own reputation from that of a mere craftsman to an auteur, Lang and Lang examine the influence of artists' posthumous reputations on the preservation and the value attribution to their etchings (Lang and Lang 1988, 1990; Kapsis 1989, 1992). All of them, however, assume a quite broad understanding of the term reputation. In this paper I therefore combine their ideas with Eisenegger and Imhof's reputation theory. I understand the reputations of filmmakers as being produced and constantly reproduced through public mediatized communication by the aggregation of images ascribed by third parties. While the term image refers to the short-term evaluation of objects or subjects by individuals, reputation is endowed to publicly known subjects on a collective level and has a medium to long-term lifespan. Eisenegger and Imhof argue that reputation is a three-dimensional construct, which entails functional, social, and affective components.[4] Functional reputation refers to the performance in the respective functional system and is mainly an aggregation of the evaluation by persons having expertise in this field. Being regarded as an auteur director corresponds to Fassbinder's functional reputation as it is a status derived from collective evaluations of his work

4 In 2005, Eisenegger only mentioned functional and social reputation. The third dimension was added in his 2009-paper with Kurt Imhof as "expressive Reputation." Since I focus on affect and the third dimension is formed on an affective basis, I use the term "affective reputation," drawing on Oliver Pellarin, who adapted it as "affektive-expressive Reputation" (Eisenegger 2005, 37-38; Eisenegger and Imhof 2009, 247-249; Pellarin 2015, 124-127).

by knowledgeable third parties via media, for example in film reviews. The social dimension refers to general social values and moral standards. Everyone can give their opinion on how those are reflected by the behavior of the respective publicly known person. *SprocketsFilm*'s product description, cited at the very beginning of this text, reflects one facet of Fassbinder's social reputation very well, as he is frequently remembered as a wild child or enfant terrible who denies moral standards. What matters for the affective component of reputation is the emotional and aesthetic attraction of the evaluated. This results from his*her appearance and charisma combined with the personal tastes of the third persons evaluating (Eisenegger 2005, 21–22, 25–29, 34–41, 45–46; Eisenegger and Imhof 2009, 245–48). *SprocketsFilm*'s T-shirt design can be seen as reflecting this reputation and contributing to it, as it shows Fassbinder's face and the creator's personal taste is declared using the words "my favourite" (SprocketsFilm 2022b). Affective reputation is always entangled with the functional and social components and cannot exist without them. Nevertheless, I regard it as the most important dimension because it endows authenticity to the other parts (Eisenegger and Imhof 2009, 248). This also corresponds to queer-feminist scholar Sara Ahmed's notion of affect as an important part of public opinion. I also follow Ahmed in not discussing the different levels of internal experiences that the terms "affect" and "emotion" might entail, which have been suggested elsewhere, but in understanding personal and public feelings as social and cultural interactions (Ahmed 2014, 208–209) that take "shape through each other or even … shape each other" (Ahmed 2014, 14). As collective feeling expressed via public mediatized communication, affect shapes Fassbinder's reputation and remembrance.

Platforms' "Affective Infra-individual Potentiality"

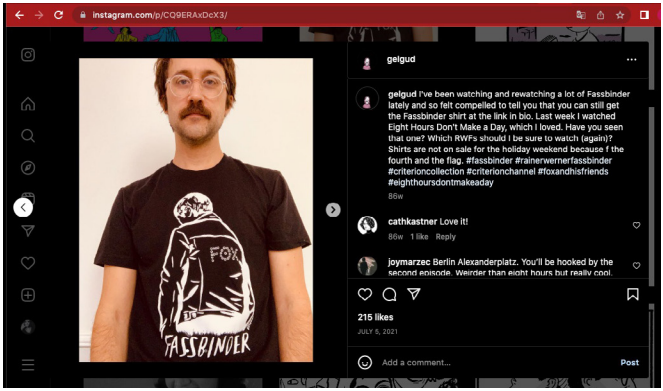
Public mediatized communication nowadays happens online in various forms and formats. The public is thereby understood as an audience without any recognizable boundary or seclusion, which enjoys the privilege of being able to use the respective media. Besides being limited by internet access and economic capital, the public that Gelgud and *SprocketsFilm* reach with their products is biased geographically, since *Etsy* is based and most popular in the US, which is reflected by Gelgud printing in New York and UK-based *SprocketsFilm* getting the shirts printed on demand and shipped from the US as well.

Like the process of a reputation being formed through an aggregation of individual images about a person known to the public, online platforms work through the aggregation of practices of individual users. While Jean Burgess notes that platforms are "by design relatively closed systems whose interfaces and user experiences are personalized to individual users" (Burgess 2021, 44), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines platforms as websites that enable interaction (OECD 2019). I argue that platforms are both, or in the words of Thomas Lamarre, referring to Gilbert Simondon: "individuation is only ever individual and collective" (Lamarre 2017, 288). Lamarre also sees an "affective infra-individual potentiality" in platforms (2017, 301), where a technical individual, aka platform, and various human and screen-life individuals, represented in this paper in the form of Fassbinder drawings printed on T-shirts, interact with each other while making use of the platform's affective qualities (Lamarre 2017, 301–302). In my case studies, this public interaction takes place in posts or comments on social media like *Instagram*, or via product reviews or photos of T-shirts on marketplaces like *Etsy* and can have an influence on Fassbinder's posthumous reputation and the remembrance of his films.

Both sellers link their *Instagram* handle to their *Etsy* shop description, and vice versa their *Etsy* shop to their *Instagram* bio (SprocketsFilm 2019, 2023; Gelgud 2022a, 2023). *Instagram* is, by the way, how I got the opportunity to interview Karla Ade and Nathan Gelgud for this paper: messaging them about my project and getting my questions generously answered via email. *Instagram* already seems part of the deal, as a fake dictionary definition of "etsian" on a downloadable poster listed on *Etsy* reads: "One who is an owner, artisan, designer, crafter, maker, seller, hustler, printer, programmer, instagrammer, blogger, postal worker, crier, non-sleeping coffee drinker and happy dancer. (*see also:* **crazy**)" [emphasis in original] (DazzleStruck n.d.). Gelgud states that both platforms make the circulation of his work easier, and by using them, he still gets what he enjoys most about in-person sales: "personal interactions, people saying what they like about the shirts and bags, … talking to people about movies" (Nathan Gelgud, pers. comm., 2023). Ade does not use her real name on either platform, but operates under *SprocketsFilm*.[5] She does, however, publicly state her personal tastes describing Fassbinder as her favorite director on both platforms. While she only puts a picture of one of her earlier illustrations of Fassbinder in black on white on *Instagram* (see fig. 5), Gelgud posts several pictures of the actual T-shirts and uses his own name and body for the promotion of his self-designed merch on *Instagram* as well (see fig. 3). His post from July 21, 2021 displays two styles, both of which he wears himself: a black T-shirt with the Fox motif in white and a yellow one with a light brown print. Besides hinting at the T-shirts in their *Etsy* shops, Gelgud's[6] and *SprocketsFilm*'s posts have in common that they contextualize their pictures with information about themselves (re-)watching Fassbinder's

5 On *Instagram* the handle *sprocketsfilm* is written in lower case letters and the pronouns are proclaimed as being "she/her." In the text I use the spelling SprocketsFilm and the name Ade when citing from the personal interview with her.

6 I still use the spelling "Gelgud" as in Nathan Gelgud since he puts his clear name both in his *Instagram* bio and on his *Etsy* shop's profile.



[Figure 3] Screenshot of Gelgud's *Instagram* post from July 5, 2021 (Source: Gelgud 2021).

films and addressing their knowledgeable followers. Gelgud, for example, recommends Fassbinder's miniseries "Eight Hours Don't Make a Day" (1972) and provokes interaction with his post by asking his followers what else he should include in his personal RWF watchlist. This post receives 215 likes and 29 comments from his 6,578 *Instagram* followers (Gelgud 2021). *SprocketsFilm*, on the other hand, just ironically asks her followers to wish her luck with her self-set task of (re-)watching Fassbinder's oeuvre and gets four likes from her 366 followers (SprocketsFilm 2022a). In my interview with her, Ade states that she doesn't have a great relationship with social media: "I end up feeling the need to conform to the mainstream. If you haven't formed a solid identity, social media can push you to play by market logic. I know I could use social media better, but it saps my energy and makes me less likely to draw" (Karla Ade, pers. comm., 2023).

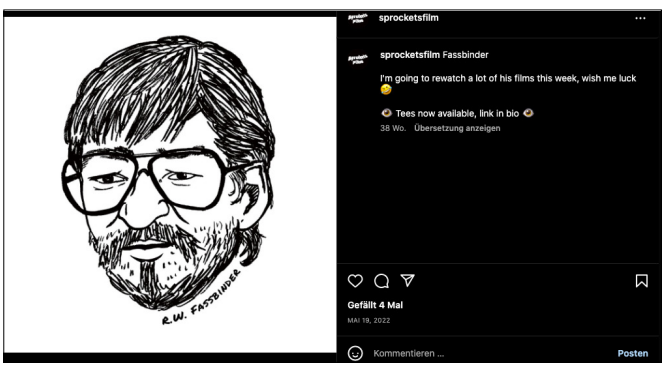
Authentic Bodies

In the realm of merchandise, T-shirts are ascribed a special subcultural value, since wearing them serves both as an act of identification with the object of fandom and as a distinction from

the mainstream (Carter 2018, 171). Gelgud sees his T-shirts as a marker for passion and personal taste, as well as a catalyst for exchange with like-minded people: "I hope it's helping people celebrate their love of movies, or maybe they're meeting people or having conversations about … Fox and his Friends because of one of my shirts. Or, best of all, maybe they're discovering new movies or getting to recommend them" (Nathan Gelgud, pers. comm., 2023). In his description on *Etsy*, Gelgud uses his own body to describe the fit of the T-shirts: "I usually wear small and in this the small is a tad snug but just about right. I'm 5'7 and 140 lbs" (Gelgud 2022b). However, a pre-condition for circulating Fassbinder's affective reputation by bodies wearing those T-shirts displaying Fassbinder, and for creating them in the first place, is Fassbinder's own body.

Fassbinder's appearance changes a lot in his 13 years of obsessive filmmaking between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, partly due to substance and self-abuse. Ade explains that her sketch matches her "DIY image of Fassbinder. He's a bit of a mess as a person and a complicated human. I like that he's not perfect, that in his career he just committed to doing things, that's why he was prolific, even if they were messy" (Karla Ade, pers. comm., 2023). Although *SprocketsFilm*'s T-shirt motif mostly consists of dashes and was created thinking about Fassbinder's personality rather than depicting one of his films, one recognizes a face that might correspond to the Fassbinder played by Fassbinder in the episode of the anthology *Deutschland im Herbst / Germany in Autumn* (1978), written and directed by Fassbinder. Discussing politics with his mother Liselotte Eder, played by Eder, this Fassbinder sits at the kitchen table with unkempt hair and beard, tired eyes behind big glasses, wearing a beige, slightly unbuttoned shirt (see fig. 4).

Gelgud states in the interview that he decided on the Fox motif for aesthetic reasons: "I did a few other test drawings for that, of him in a fedora and sunglasses and leather jacket, but the Fox one looked best" (Nathan Gelgud, pers. comm., 2023). *Fox and His Friends* also has personal value to Gelgud: "I recently rewatched



[Figure 4 and 5] Mirrored screenshot of Fassbinder in *Germany in Autumn* (*Deutschland im Herbst*, 1978, episode 2, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, min. 19:36) vs. *SprocketsFilm's* post of her Fassbinder illustration on *Instagram* (Source: Sprockets-Film 2022a).

a lot of his stuff, and Fox is still my favorite. The first time I saw it was at Film Forum in maybe 2002 with my friend Sean. We were cracking up, it's got so many great moments, and is one of the RWF movies that's all about class and money, important topics" (Nathan Gelgud, pers. comm., 2023). The pose depicted by Gelgud on the T-shirt is taken from a scene near the end of the film, after Franz (Fassbinder) realizes he has lost all his money

[Figure 6] Screenshot of *Fox and His Friends* (*Faustrecht der Freiheit*, 1975, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, min. 107:04)

and friends and shortly before leaving his last confidant, his alcohol-dependent sister Hedwig (Christiane Maybach) (see fig. 6). Directing their fandom to Fassbinder as a filmmaker but depicting him in acting roles in his own films in their T-shirt designs, Gelgud and *SprocketsFilm* make them cater, above all, to cinephile people who are familiar with his films. At the same time, the designs open the possibility of building an emotional bond to the merch while remembering the films as well as Fassbinder in the depicted leading roles. His presence as an actor also has an impact on his reputation. As Richard Dyer argues in his book *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* it is the embodied characters and their films that occupy a privileged place in the images of actors and actresses and that significantly shape them (Dyer 2004, 2, 3, and 9).

If recognition does not dawn on the person looking at the motif, however, there is at least Fassbinder's name spelled out on both T-shirts (see fig. 1–3). In addition to being informative, this name can have complex and functional properties. As Michel Foucault states in 1981, names can have an "author-function" and serve as a means of classification by creating connections between different texts. They are caught between fiction and the bourgeois status of a person and characterize the existence of a discourse (Foucault 1981, 283–84). Drawing on this, I argue that Fassbinder's name on the T-shirts serves as a label connected to a pre-existing discourse and reputation circulating about him as auteur, and therefore can be used as a brand and marketing tool at the same time. The same can be said for Gelgud's name underneath the motif, which people might recognize from the comics he has published quite prominently in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Review of Books*.

When focusing on the affective dimension that circulates with this merch, however, the question remains of the authenticity of the depicted Fassinder. According to contemporary critics, Fassbinder's episode of *Germany in Autumn* was an honest and radical personal self-staging. One critic writes: "The most spontaneous and therefore probably most authentic contribution was made by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. In it, he plays himself .... And with an honesty that borders on exhibitionism" (Rehder 1978, my translation). Novelist Gerhard Zwerenz, in his book on Fassbinder, which was published shortly after the director's death, cites his wife Ingrid, who was in attendance at a press screening of *Fox and His Friends*: "In reality, he stands there as he is a few minutes later on the screen: jeans tucked into black boots, which are probably tailor-made, face half skeptical, half accommodating, sporty jacket, in reality it is made of black quilted leather, in the film it is light blue and equipped with silver rivets that form the name FOX on its back" (Zwerenz 1982, 70–71, my translation). The crux of self-staging is, according to Dyer, to appear in public in the same way as the private self. For this, stars do not have to

be authentic or honest in the true sense of the word, but rather stage themselves self-confidently, calmly, and above all, precisely. The criterion for the attribution of honesty, authenticity, and the revelation of one's innermost being is above all the body of the star (Dyer 2004, 12). While Dyer's work refers to Hollywood actors, these remarks can also be applied to Fassbinder as an actor, and through his multiple functionalities, also to his role as a director in the New German Cinema and as a public figure. Already through these examples we can see that Gelgud's and *Sprockets-Film's* designs are depicting "authentic" film scenes, building upon a history of Fassbinder's appearances on and off-screen and on his pre-existing reputation. At the same time, by the handmade touch of their designs and by including signs of intimacy and personal passion into their *Etsy* listings and *Instagram* posts, both designers and sellers are above all circulating and actualizing the affective dimension of Fassbinder's reputation, which ascribes authenticity to the pre-existing functional and social dimensions of his reputation.

Affect and Commerce

Both *SprocketsFilm* and Gelgud are motivated by personal taste, and to some extent such sentiments are articulated to connect with potential customers who care about the movies and film-makers portrayed as well. Depicting Fassbinder's face in a hand-drawn style and publicly declaring their passion for him, creates, despite or even because of the publicness, a feeling of intimacy and an affective bond with potential buyers, who share this Fass-binder fandom.

Gelgud describes himself as an "American cartoonist and movie lover" (Nathan Gelgud, pers. comm., 2023), who starts his merch career by selling Godard-themed totes at craft fairs. Fassbinder-Fox is Gelgud's first T-shirt motif ever. Although his product, simply titled "Fassbinder t-shirt," is originally a commissioned work, there is passion and intimacy involved in its manufacturing

process and (re-)circulation. Gelgud credits the idea for the motif, as well as for making movie-related merch in the first place, to his girlfriend, who he describes as a fellow movie lover. The printing, from the first tote bag until today, is done by his friend Justin, who owns a screenprint business in New York. Gelgud states: "Justin and I put so much care into the designs and the printing, I just hope people can see what we do is different" (Nathan Gelgud, pers. comm., 2023). While Gelgud learns that his merch sells better than his original artwork and that he could make some extra money with it, Ade starts out to do the merch alongside her full-time job. The directors she likes at the time are not represented in merch available online. Motivated by her fandom she begins making her own merch, although her motifs "probably weren't good from a business perspective." Doing merch also gives her fulfillment at a time when she is not getting it from her work: "I think that drawing/making art makes me feel human. I'm only 26, but I feel alienated from most jobs. Art and film make me feel less lost" (Karla Ade, pers. comm., 2023). Although both are driven by slightly different motivations, they translate their passion and personal taste for Fassbinder and his films into actions: (re-)watching films (or at least posting about it), and their economic and cultural practices of wearing, creating, and selling their own Fassbinder merch. At the same time, together with pictures of their original designs they share emotions of passion and intimacy, enabled by the platforms "affective infra-individual potentiality" (Lamarre 2017, 301).

Writing about *mukbang*,[7] Lamarre argues that it could also be seen as a case of "parasociality," since people feel "an intimate connection with the people on the small screen, people they do not really know" (Lamarre 2017, 301). This could also be extended to the designers' productive fandom. (Re-)watching Fassbinder's films, as well as creating Fassbinder-themed merch, drawing parts of his body, and printing them on T-shirts, the designers

7 A Korean trend of live-streamed videos that show a person eating.

make themselves intimate with him. At the same time, customers and followers become intimate with Gelgud and *SprocketsFilm*, learning on the platforms *Etsy* and *Instagram* about their designs and their passion for Fassbinder and for other directors and movies. Buying and wearing the T-shirt adorned with his body on one's own body, (re-)watching films he not only directed, but also acted in, and seeing his body on the small screen in one's home, they also become intimate with Fassbinder.

An emotional bond is formed between the sellers, their self-designed products, the consumers, and the directors referenced, which in turn influences the directors' as well as the sellers' reputations. While the decision to depict a certain film and/or filmmaker on merch and another person's choice to buy it is already influenced by the established, above all, affective reputation of the respective filmmaker, the merch's circulation has a feedback influence on it. While both *Etsy* sellers capitalize on Fassbinder's reputation and enhance their own reputation as cinephile artists, they also use the platform to share their fandom with like-minded people and have an impact on Fassbinder's posthumous reputation as a filmmaker and on his remembrance.

Fassbinder, Cult Filmmaker

Using the example of the two Fassbinder T-shirts designed and sold by *SprocketsFilm* and Gelgud via their *Etsy* shops, this paper examines how filmmakers' reputations are circulated and influenced via cinephile merch on online platforms. In both case studies the T-shirts are adorned with motifs of Fassbinder's appearance together with lettering of his name. Additionally, choosing motifs that are references to his films and displaying them together with the personal tastes of the creators of the merch draws from and shapes the affective dimension of Fassbinder's reputation. While there is no tendency toward a common iconography of Fassbinder that can be recognized in these two examples, both could be seen as depicting him as a lead actor

in his own films. Therefore, the functional reputation circulated is not restricted to Fassbinder's role as director, but as main creative force in shaping his films. His physical presence already influenced his affective reputation during his lifetime, and it continues to do so posthumously, as his appearance, especially as lead actor in films, still circulates with his (digitized) films that people (re-)watch, as *SprocketsFilm* and Gelgud claim to have done on their *Instagram* posts. Both publicly share their passion for Fassbinder and his movies via *Instagram* posts that at the same time refer to the *Etsy* listings of their self-designed T-shirts. They transmediate Fassbinder's appearance into their own artwork and circulate it in the form of prints on T-shirts via photos on *Instagram* and *Etsy* and via courier and postal services around the globe. Besides the transmediations of Fassbinder's appearance, they make use of Fassbinder's name as a label of his reputation to use it in the names of the products on *Etsy,* as hashtags in *Instagram* posts, and as lettering on the actual T-shirt. The circulation and shaping of Fassbinder's reputation is not an end in itself, but rather a by-product of the circulation of the sellers' artworks that are motivated by passion, but also by the building of cultural capital through enhancing their own reputation as cinephile artists as well as their economic capital. Incorporating the means for social interaction gives both platforms an affective potentiality and makes them apt for the circulation of emotions. They can therefore be seen as ideal tools for sharing passion, creating intimacy, and shaping Fassbinder's affective reputation.

Although Fassbinder was a West German citizen, it is not so surprising that US-based *Etsy* customers are passionate for him. First, he had already enjoyed a high reputation in the US as an auteur filmmaker during his lifetime. Second, being German and dead for several years makes him just the right amount of unknown and underground. Putting illustrations of Fassbinder's face, body, and name on these T-shirts indicates a shift in Fassbinder's reputation from being an auteur to becoming an object of fandom. While I do not think a separation of cinephilia and

fandom is productive, as similarly argued by Philipp Dominik Keidl (Keidl 2024), I argue that due to the affective bonding to Fassbinder and to other persons that are passionate about him, this can be described as Fassbinder enjoying a reputation as cult filmmaker. Cult films have a "nearly worshipful audience" (Telotte 1991, 5). It doesn't matter if they are "classical films that have been resurrected by a special audience or the popular 'midnight movies'" (Telotte 1991, 6). They are therefore able to cross temporal boundaries (Telotte 1991, 9). Cult films are defined by consumption (Jancovich et al. 2003, 1) and said to "stage the audience, who exhibit and celebrate themselves in reception," since they identify with the films, their filmmakers, and their passion for them (Wulff n.d.). To understand Fassbinder as a cult filmmaker makes him the perfect motif for a handmade T-shirt that is circulated together with his affective reputation, since "you can't buy love, but you can buy handmade, and that's kind of the same thing."

Epilogue

An important factor for successful sales on crafters' platform *Etsy* is that buyers evaluate the seller as being authentic and their handmade goods as being different from mass-produced goods. "I guess lately I've been thinking about how much stuff there is that's poorly made, or that's printed cheaply and anonymously by a third party and 'drop shipped.' Justin and I put so much care into the designs and the printing, i [!] just hope people can see what we do is different," Gelgud points out in the interview with me (Nathan Gelgud, pers. comm., 2023). At the same time, one could also critically reflect upon what *Etsy*'s category "handmade," and their motto "Keep Commerce Human" really mean in this context. As already noted at the beginning of this paper, the attribute "handmade" in both *Etsy* listings referred to the original design and, as argued throughout the text, to the emotions of passion and intimacy attached to the merch and its circulation, while the motifs are machine printed and the T-shirts ready-made. While

SprocketsFilms states that the T-shirts are made (mostly) from cotton imported from Bangladesh, Honduras, Haiti, Mexico, or Nicaragua (SprocketsFilm 2022b), Gelgud is mostly concerned about providing the exact measurements to make the T-shirts fit his customers "just about right" (Gelgud 2022b). None of the product descriptions enlightens us on social and environmental standards connected to the manufacturing of the T-shirts used as a base and to the shipping. So, what does the Fassbinder love shared, sold, and bought online and worn in real life entail? Who, besides the customers, is paying for it and with what?

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[4]

Of Anecdotes and Intimacies: Curatorial Fan Practices of Knowledge Production

Amrita Biswas

I thought to myself, 'Isn't this Guru? Let me surprise him' … I pressed the car-horns loudly to shock him. But he wasn't startled at all. Slowly, he turned his head and looked at me. Then he just kept walking straight. He seemed so unfazed … He walked like a tiger. This is the unknown Uttam Kumar. Such confidence in his gait, such a strong persona! Pranabesh Ganguli 2022

Mobilizing anecdotes about Uttam Kumar, fans position their knowledge about the star in the Facebook group *Uttam Kumar, Suchitra Sen-The Golden Pair.* For instance, the anecdote above unearths "unknown" details about Kumar, a strategy geared towards establishing intimacy with the star. In this paper I analyze

the social media fan group on Kumar[1] to understand fan practices that generate knowledge by contextualizing and circulating photographs with anecdotes about the star who worked predominantly in Bengali-language cinema.

The fan group seeks to foster a participatory culture of historical knowledge production (Keidl 2021). Participatory modes solicit a democratic approach where power hierarchies are challenged, leading to a culture where fans produce, share and consume historical information. The production of history, however, becomes a regulatory mechanism where specific narratives are leveraged to create hagiographies surrounding Kumar. The imaginary of building a participatory space is thus punctured by acts of gatekeeping where fans render specific forms of knowledge invalid by positing their greater intimate knowledge about Kumar. This makes it necessary to investigate the motivations that spur fans' engagement with history as well as the exercise of agency in processes of history writing. Mapping a specific practice, this paper therefore adopts a conjunctive lens of enquiry and employs archival and anecdotal evidence to study the curatorial mode through which fans construct histories and display their intimacy with the star on a specific platform. In this exercise, I take cues from the theorizations of Philipp Dominik Keidl and Abby S. Waysdorf, who suggest that a study of the mobilization of specific platforms for historical work undertaken by fans is as relevant as the works themselves. The authors emphasize the points of intersection between fan studies and platform studies since platforms shape the historical narratives that fan

1 Uttam Kumar (1926–1980) has an expansive body of work in Bengali-language cinema, starting in the 1950s and culminating in the 1970s. Besides films, he also worked in theaters. His cinematic oeuvre, where he worked with Suchitra Sen, has been termed the "new bourgeois melodrama" (Biswas 2007). Films such as *Harano Sur* (1957) and *Agnipariksha* (1954) catapulted Kumar and Sen to stardom, typifying them as the romantic star couple of Bengali-language cinema (Gooptu 2010). To know more about the star couple, see *Modernities and the Popular Melodrama: The Suchitra–Uttam Yug in Bengali Cinema* (Banerjee 2023).

communities build through networking on diverse platforms. Borrowing from their work, this paper examines the fan practice engendered by a specific social media platform to understand the politics of historiography (Keidl and Waysdorf 2022). The politics is rendered visible through fans' investment into anecdotes, and their associated authenticity, to delegitimize any narrative about the star that contradicts the dominant hagiographic discourse. By analyzing how the circulation of anecdotes over Facebook becomes a method for fans to construct historical knowledge about the star, this paper situates itself at the conjunction between fan studies and platform studies. This paper thereby adds to the work of Keidl and Waysdorf by underscoring how anecdotes are crucial to the production of histories by fans. In this endeavor, I foreground how Facebook enables habitual posting of curated histories within a peer group and thereby offers fans the opportunity to network and foster participation as well as to engage in peer-policing (Stevens and Webber 2022; Chun 2016; Good 2012).

Methodology

This brings me to the conceptual and methodological thread that sutures the multiple fan posts together: anecdotes. Lionel Gossman (2003, 152) argues that from its earliest usage in modern European languages, the term "has been closely related to history, and even to a kind of counter-history." Elaborating on the critical usage of anecdotes in historiography, he states that highly structured anecdotes have functioned to reinforce dominant points of view in history. On the contrary, fragmentary anecdotes have stimulated enquiry into established knowledge domains. Emphasizing the historical negotiations between "anecdote" and "factual accuracy," Gossman notes that anecdote's associations with orality and the private sphere of life made modern historians regard the authenticity of anecdotes with suspicion. However, he argues that the value of anecdotes lies less in their factual accuracy. Gossman claims that "if the

meaning of an anecdote were to be sought less in its factual accuracy than in what it conveyed about states of mind and general trends, then even when its factual veracity was in doubt it might still be thought of as in some way illuminating historical reality" (2003, 159).

Gossman's formulations provide a critical matrix to examine the value of the anecdotes that the fan group engages with. In a similar vein, Sean Cubitt (2013, 1) engages with the notion of anecdote and claims that the anecdote is "a viable and indeed vital form of evidence." Arguing that the currency of an anecdote can be comprehended by the significant motives that it reveals, Cubitt emphasizes that the ingenuity of the anecdote lies in its "specificity" of experience (2013, 1 and 2). Aligning with these theoretical templates, this paper does not investigate the truthfulness of the anecdotes but unearths their interpretive value to gain insight into a specific curatorial fan practice. I understand anecdote as the narration of an incident that is carefully extracted (either from memory or from material objects) and articulated. The anecdote often functions as a strategy of representation or distinction, revealing aspects about people, processes and social relations that have a significant historical or cultural value. My imperative, therefore, is to analyze fans' conjugation of anecdotal evidences with archival materials, to read them as knowledge generating processes.

The specific Facebook fan group that I discuss, *Uttam Kumar, Suchitra Sen-The Golden Pair*, is a private group with 99k members currently. I stumbled upon this group when I was searching for images of Uttam Kumar on Facebook in 2022. The group was the first search result that Facebook displayed, detailing the mutual friends that I shared with the group (more than seven) and the number of daily posts that were published on the group (ranging between ten and fifteen). While the Facebook search displayed other results as well, my interest in the group was motivated by the fact that a significant number of peers had already joined this group. I had the option of checking the "featured"

posts. However, I clicked the "sort" option to check the "newest activity" where Facebook shows "posts with recent comments first."[2] My rationale was to construe which posts generated significant engagement within the group members. It is through this navigation strategy that I found the specific posts that this paper discusses, in which fans and group admins carefully curate photos and anecdotes that have been extracted from magazines, memoirs and newspapers within their personal collections as well as from institutional archives.[3]

Mining these data, fans employ Facebook as a discursive space of knowledge production and circulation. An analysis of the curated posts renders explicit the diverse range of information that fans habitually share. The anecdotes pertain to daily routines as well as social habits that inscribed the star's life (such as morning walks or his rapport with contemporary actors at parties), thereby offering clues about the biography of the person that constituted the star text.[4] These practices are driven

2 While most of the Facebook groups on Uttam-Suchitra are geo-tagged in Kolkata, I cannot confirm that all the posts are necessarily written by people based in the city or who have associations with the city. This is primarily because I did not visit the profiles of the individuals whose Facebook posts I analyze in this chapter. My method is to examine the content and the discourses evidenced by Facebook posts. Furthermore, I emphasize the operational logic of the Facebook group. Towards this endeavor, I contacted a few admins of the Facebook group for an interview. One of them responded to my questions over Facebook Messenger over a period of two days.

3 The magazines include *Bichitropotro*, *Bortomaan*, *Anondolok*, *Prosad*, and *Filmfare*, besides others. The memoirs include *Achena Uttam* by Patha Mukopadhyay and *Amar Dada Uttam Kumar* by Tarun Kumar. *Uttorbongo Songbaad Potrika*, a newspaper, was mentioned in several posts. A specific post credited Ray Foundation for the images that had been uploaded on the post, evidencing how fans mobilize archival materials on the group. The group admin also posted a number of images that were extracted from film magazines along with their captions, without citing the source of the photographs. All such images bore a digital signature of the admin, implying a quasi-copyright over the image.

4 Kumar's star text has been theorized by Smita Banerjee and Sayandeb Chowdhury. Banerjee focuses on characters played by Kumar in the

towards understanding facets of the star's personality that are not circumscribed by his on-screen image. On the other end of the spectrum, the posts share historical knowledge about the contexts in which the star's films were produced or exhibited, mentioning specific locations and dates where his films were shot or screened.

The multiple narratives that circulate about Kumar thus manifest not only an intimate knowledge about his personality but also a detailed and habitual engagement with the oeuvre of his films and public interviews. This repetitive and habitual aspect of curatorial practice is crucial for collectively producing knowledge in an organized manner as well as for foregrounding the legitimacy of the group. As Wendy Chun (2016, 6) notes, "habit … unlike instinct, is learned, cultivated." Foregrounding the creative potentialities of habitual cultural practices, Chun's theorization offers a vantage point for understanding the operational logic of the Facebook group. The group seeks to cultivate the practice of circulating narratives about Kumar to ensure "inter-generational transmission" of historical knowledge about Kumar (Chowdhury 2022). There is, however, a curious consistency among the fans concerning which narratives are legitimate and which are inauthentic. The specific fan posts dedicated to Uttam Kumar thereby offer a critical template to understand how the community-building of fans is predicated upon acts of boundary policing. Such efforts in policing reflect epistemological anxieties concerning the veracity of anecdotes by ensuring that specific discourses about the star circulate on the platform. This raises the pertinent question, which anecdotes are considered culturally viable by the members of the group?

1970s to understand aspects of his star text that go beyond the popular perception that Kumar is a romantic hero. Reading Kumar as a disillusioned figure, Banerjee underscores his performance of masculinity (Banerjee 2019). Chowdhury too, focuses on the meanings that have been ascribed to Kumar's performances to theorize his films as metropolar melodrama (Chowdhury 2017).

Curatorial Fan Practices: Suturing Archival and Anecdotal Evidence

An admin post shared an old photograph of Uttam Kumar on the occasion of Mother's Day, on May 8, 2022, with the hashtags #HappyMothersDay and #*MatribhoktoUttam* or #Devoted-SonUttam. The photograph depicts the star as he bends down to touch the feet of his mother, while the mother gestures towards blessing the son. The setting is likely domestic—the grains and the texture make it difficult to decipher the exact objects within the photo. The photograph had probably been published in a magazine since the post shows the photograph surrounded by white borders. This was usually the pattern of design in film magazines that inserted images of stars. The admin affixed a digital signature on the photograph, rendering a form of quasi-copyright to the image. The post however did not credit the sources of the photograph or the anecdote that contextualized it. The anecdote foregrounded how devoted Kumar had been as a son. With his first salary, Kumar had bought a saree for his mother, Chapala Devi. Surprised, Devi told him that the gift was unnecessary. Kumar promptly responded that he wanted to get a gift for God with his first salary. And so, he bought a saree for his mother. The anecdotes provided further insights into the close-knit relationship that Kumar shared with his mother.

The post gathered 977 reactions, with 816 likes and 152 heart emojis. It also had 89 comments where fans lauded the devotion that Kumar showed towards his mother. A fan commented that he was grateful to the admin for providing such unknown stories about the star's life. The photograph, in conjunction with the anecdote, activated a space where fans could discuss their memories and talk about their own personal experiences, which further validated, and reinforced, the anecdotes. For example, in the aforementioned post, another fan commented that Kumar worked in the Port Trust prior to his career in acting. She stressed that the anecdote resonated with the many stories

about the star that she had heard from her father, who also worked at the Port Trust. Mapping functional and formal parallels between scrapbook and Facebook, Katie Day Good contends that social media practices are "entrenched in a long history of habits and hobbies by which people interacted with media texts to both express themselves socially and, simultaneously, to document their lives" (Good 2012, 559). Good conceptualizes the simultaneous social and archival potentialities of these apparently different "old media" and "new media" forms, arguing that an analysis of the practices engendered by the media formats reveals their designation as "cultural and biographical texts." Further, the author foregrounds how the media formats facilitate peer networking by allowing peers to emphasize their taste and cultural capital and formulates them as sites of "personal media assemblage" and "personal media archive" (Good 2012, 557–61). My work builds upon the scholarship of Good by examining the hierarchical politics evidenced by peer networks engaging in habitual practices of sharing knowledge. However, instead of reading these repetitive cultural practices as "messy" and "fragmented," I read these as carefully curated strategies for sharing knowledge and displaying an intimacy with Kumar (Good 2012, 558). My interest in mapping these anecdotes is to understand not only the work that fans put into curating such posts, but also the multiple forms of gratification that they receive for it. The posts are not limited to sharing a random photo or anecdote pertaining to the star. Fans often form networks with the star's family members, scout materials, create artworks and curate them in juxtaposition with other materials to build narratives about the star. While such practices engender knowledge about Kumar, they also serve as catalysts for creating a dialogic space where fans exchange material objects as well as their affective memories.

Following Roos Gerritsen's work, where she analyzes images of the Tamil superstar Rajinikanth within the domestic spheres, I read such fan practices as knowledge-generating efforts geared

towards realizing an intimacy with, and thereby personalizing, the star (Gerritsen 2019). Gerritsen makes two interrelated analyses. Firstly, she studies how fandom is anchored in familial relations as well as how it is informed by them. The second argument emphasizes how the images stimulate an affective and intimate relationship with the star. Gerritsen's work provides a framework to understand how fans achieve intimacy by mobilizing images and anecdotes within their personal collections that comprise magazines, memoirs, books, and publications centering on the star. Such intricate details about the star's life, although seemingly banal, are significant strategies for forging a personal connection with the star, to resonate with Gerritsen. This is not to state that the posts that I describe constitute the only modality of fans' engagement with the star on social media. There are multiple routes through which the fan groups on Kumar associate with narratives about the star. However, in studying the specific fan posts in the group, I found the conjunctive mode of knowledge generation a significant method through which fans created discourses around Kumar. Attributing currency to the star text, the anecdotes highlight the element of banality that configures stardom as well as congeal affective discourses associated with it. The discursive registers are actualized by establishing a space where fans can participate and share their narratives. The narratives have a wide spectrum though; they engage with Kumar's habits, his rivalry with contemporary actors, his conjugal life, his interaction with fans, his oeuvre as well as the missed opportunities that could have added more value to his stardom.

The motivation, therefore, is to foster a "participatory historical culture," which, despite its apparent inclusive definition eventually engenders new modes of institutionalization, hierarchization and exclusion (Keidl 2021, 57).[5] Inducting multiple

5 The access to as well as the use of digital infrastructures is predicated on caste-class privileges, which also punctures the sense of apparent inclusivity. To read more about this, see Mukherjee et al. (2016).

perspectives and voices through the curated posts, fans occupy privileged positions that often constitute acts of boundary-policing to gatekeep the historical knowledge circulated about the star, as I demonstrate later. Mapping the points of intersection of history and fandom that materialize on a specific platform, I underscore the complex affective and epistemological dynamics that undergird the construction of knowledge about Uttam Kumar. The affordances that distinct platforms offer to fan communities in terms of "accessibility, ownership, features, and culture(s)" make it incumbent to employ a platform-oriented approach to explore platform-specific fan cultures and discourses (Alberto 2020).

Platforms and its Constituent Features: Mapping Cultures of Use

On asking Maumita Roy Chowdhury, the admin of the group under discussion, why she chose Facebook as a platform for the fan group, she described in detail Facebook's affordances. The group was formed on January 14, 2019 with the intention of offering an avenue where fellow fans of Kumar could share their knowledge of and memories associated with the star. The goal was to ensure that the newer generation found a space for acquiring information about Kumar's "great cinematic works." This, Chowdhury argued, would further aid them in garnering a "taste for good cinema" and fuel their interest to know the "persona that constructed the star figure" (Chowdhury 2022). She actively devotes her time to publishing new posts daily on Facebook, despite creating a fan page on Instagram. In her opinion, Facebook affords every member of the group the option to participate in and contribute to the group discussions. As such, fans are not restricted to being mere readers who can only post comments on pages, as is the case with Instagram. On the contrary, fellow group members have the opportunity to mobilize archival materials within their collections as well as anecdotes about

the star through detailed posts. This enables them to recount multiple narratives about the star (Chowdhury 2022). This is in consonance with the arguments of Stefano Calzati and Roberto Simanowski (2018), who underscore how social networking sites have emerged as significant tools for representation and identity construction by facilitating the exchange of mundane and small stories. Although the authors emphasize the narrative strategies of self-representation, I find their work useful to conceptualize how specific platforms function as crucial infrastructures for circulating anecdotes and narratives (Calzati and Simanowski 2018, 24–25). This possibility of the "involvement" of every interested fan is what makes Facebook the "ideal platform" for building the fan group (Chowdhury 2022). Such groups are predicated upon building social relationships where the sharing of affective memories and narratives around a particular point of interest, the star, evokes communitarian familiarity. The effectiveness of Facebook groups as tools of participatory learning that can be mobilized to share knowledge has also been demonstrated by Eli Miron and Gilad Ravid (2015, 372–73).

This, however, does not mean that the platform is devoid of limitations. Chowdhury elaborated upon a specific incident that significantly hampered the public reach of the fan group. Claiming that her group witnessed significant popularity within days of its creation, she credited it to the number of posts that the admins actively publish on a frequent and organized basis. The imperative has always been to bring in "novel information" and unseen photos of the star that no other fan groups have "seriously" invested into. As such, the group earned the scorn of individuals who, "without any reasonable basis," reported the group and the admin's Facebook profile. Chowdhury suggested that it is a "practical problem" that Facebook does not thoroughly investigate into issues of reporting, thereby failing to identify genuine reports from malicious ones. As a result, the group witnessed a decline in membership requests. Chowdhury speculated that the reporting must have resulted in waning public reach of the posts,

as evidenced by the significantly low membership requests that continued over a period of time. The incident specifically affected Chowdhury because the panel of moderators are extremely attentive and "allow specific posts" to appear on the public forum. Only "authentic" anecdotes and stories are published, whereas rumors and "gossips" are never approved. The team ensures that posts that are not in concordance with the group rules are declined. As such, each post makes it to the group's feed only after undergoing a rigorous screening procedure. Chowdhury, therefore, positioned her fan group as a culturally legitimate repository of knowledge that critically invested into sieving "accurate" information from the meshes of gossip and scandals that otherwise circulate about Kumar. In this endeavor, the group is "distinct" from other fan groups on Kumar where, in her opinion, gossip about the alleged affair between Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen proliferate (Chowdhury 2022). This is in alignment with Good's theorization about how social media practices are geared towards building cultural capital (Good 2012, 566). While rigorous screening methodologies result in a tremendous workload, Chowdhury felt that their reward lay in garnering appreciation for their efforts from fellow fans. Further, by commenting on the posts and by placing requests for specific information, fans render explicit their engagement with the group and the admins construe that as a validation of their "passionate work" (Chowdhury 2022).

Although Chowdhury foregrounded strict measures against the circulation of gossip, a specific post that I now discuss reflects how the notions of anecdote and gossip can be subjectively construed. While the anecdotes, mentioned previously, celebrate the star and employ an affirmative stance towards the innate humane and charismatic traits of his persona, few posts also offer anecdotes that contradict the dominant discursive template. The intention of such posts is not to denigrate the reputation of the star but to engage with the star's reaction to competitive gestures from his contemporaries. In one such post, uploaded

to Facebook on June 6, 2022, a fan elaborated on an anecdote from Ratna Chattopadhyay, a close friend of Kumar as well as the producer of some of his films, which had been published in the *Anandolok* magazine. Juxtaposing three images of Kumar with his contemporaries, the post described the envious rivalry that his peers exemplified towards Kumar. Not divulging details about the fellow actors, the anecdote described how, in a drunken stupor, Kumar sat down with a harmonium to sing during a party. His fellow actor, desperate to grab the limelight, snatched the musical instrument from Kumar in a bid to sing a song himself. This led to a cold exchange of words that gradually escalated to mutual verbal and physical abuse. Garnering 227 likes and 45 comments, the post led to disagreements within the fan community. While some emphasized that Kumar possessed a genteel and meek persona that was incongruous with toxic physical or verbal abuse, others enquired into the veracity of the anecdote. Demanding details about who Ratna Chattopadhyay was and how she gathered knowledge of the incident, they suggested that the writer offer publication details of the anecdote. Another fan wrote that while the cold exchange of words could be believed, the idea that Kumar could be physically violent towards somebody was beyond comprehension. A few users also commended the post, claiming that it was a great article, rendering visibility to unknown facets about the star's personality (Facebook 2022).

A specific fan, however, dismissed the post as useless since the star had passed away forty-two years before. Another fan echoed this perspective by commenting that Ratna Chattopadhyay probably provided this anecdote to *Anandolok* magazine after Kumar had passed away and, therefore, should not be trusted due to her lack of ethics. The fan who uploaded the post, however, maintained that the anecdote was genuine, lashing back at his critics by arguing that "truth is often bitter." The post provoked fans to collectively think through the notions of credibility, with reference to the sources of anecdotes, and the associative value of truth. The admin however declared the post to be an "atom

bomb" and lauded the discussions that the post triggered. This proves that the post was not construed as derogatory gossip by the admins since they control which posts get published. Some fans, however, felt that the anecdote was "inauthentic" and the post was "offensive to the memory of the star." The numerous comments reflected the epistemological anxiety shared by fans concerning what knowledge about the star should be circulated and what should be dismissed. The affirmative anecdotes shared about Kumar, without any credits to the source of the anecdotes, were not questioned by fans. The post that ran contrary to the reputation of Kumar invited scorn, ridicule and questions concerning the truth of the anecdote. When the source was shared, fans further questioned the legitimacy of the source and, by extension, the moral standards of Chattopadhyay (Facebook 2022). Such acts of boundary-policing are aimed at gatekeeping knowledge surrounding the star figure. Within this context, I understand gatekeeping as a practice in which institutions or collectives mobilize their various forms of social, economic, political or cultural capital to prescribe certain forms of narratives, behaviors, ideologies or activities as legitimate. In the process, boundaries are established to strive for a consensus within the institution or the collective, thereby making it incumbent to police different modes of deviance. The post shows how the production of histories levitates certain fans to the role of gatekeepers who foreground their cultural capital and taste to delineate what forms of narrative are legitimate (Keidl and Waysdorf 2022).[6] Fans seek to gatekeep by articulating their greater intimate knowledge about the star's personality, which gives them the currency to invalidate other forms of knowledge as incredulous. By displaying their claims to intimacy and thereby,

6 This is in alignment with the argument of Michel Rolph-Trouillot. Trouillot ascribes significance to the processes and conditions under which narratives are constructed, claiming that history emerges through narrative production where the "differential exercise of power" renders prominence to some narratives, while silencing others (Trouillot 1995, 25).

to authenticity, fans engage in multiple forms of policing to structure what narratives construct the star image of Kumar.

Conclusion

I contend that intimacy operates as a crucial template that structures curatorial fan practices of knowledge construction on the Facebook fan group. By associating photos with contiguous anecdotes, fans invest in affective memories to personalize and to realize an intimacy with the person constituting the star. Knowledge generation however co-constitutes gatekeeping, which is predicated upon the greater intimate knowledge about Kumar that certain fans declare to possess. A claim to intimacy, through sharing authentic anecdotes, is thus mobilized as a rhetorical strategy to police narratives and discourses about the star. Introducing notions of legitimacy, fans engage in boundary-policing to invalidate counter-discourses to Kumar's star persona, thereby manifesting epistemological anxieties. This paper therefore argues that historical knowledge-generating practices by fans, which ascribe a cultural currency to personalizing anecdotes, can be understood as gestures aiming to evoke intimacy with the star figure, operative on multiple registers. The fan group and its congruent cultures of use render explicit how varied dynamics of intimacy are utilized not only to foster a participatory space but also to rupture it through policing the anecdotes shared by fellow fans.

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[5]

Social Interaction Films: Smartphones, Platforms, and the Expansion of Cinema

Vinzenz Hediger

Everybody is making content now … whatever 'content' is.
Mel Brooks

The moving image has always been an image on the move. Film, understood here as a temporal object constituted from sounds and images,[1] has long been scalable across a variety of material supports, formats, and platforms—including analog supports in gauges ranging from 8 to 70mm and various types of electronic and digital video and their adjacent supports and formats from the VHS tape to MP4 files (see Sterne 2012).[2] Cinema studies as a

1 "Temporal object" is a term borrowed from Edmund Husserl. Temporal objects, for which Husserl uses the musical melody as an example, are objects which "spread their matter over an extent of time, and … become constituted in acts that constitute the very differences belonging to time" (Husserl 1991, 41).

2 See also Jankovic, Schneider, and Volmar (2019).

discipline started out with a focus on the aesthetic specificity of film and its uses as a medium of art. Cinema studies originally defined its object through the trinity of index, *dispositif*, and canon: as an imprint of reality captured on analog film projected in the movie theater and a catalog of works of art made relevant, like those of other art forms within the horizon of a European modernist understanding of art history, by their novelty and distinctiveness.[3] But from under that definition film has continued to migrate to new places in new formats and new forms (VHS for instance became a fact of life just as cinema studies matured into a discipline in North American and European universities), forcing a debate in cinema studies about the very contours of its object.[4] The most recent challenge comes from what André Gunthert (2019, 20), with a view to digital photography, has described as the insertion of the image into the infrastructures of (digital) communication. Digital infrastructures can be sorted into first-order (the internet) and second-order (portals, platforms) (see Edwards 2020). The emergence of second-order infrastructures can be described as a process in which regulatory frameworks and other disciplining forces condition the creation of new standardized formats and modes of distribution (Hesmondhalgh et al. 2023). Ravi Sundaram (2022, 32) has described the net-based digital image culture of the early 2000s as the "nervous, playful movement of the pirate aesthetic," which "anticipated the meme culture of the post-2010s era." With a focus on India, but describing a logic of global relevance, Sundaram stresses how the "lightly edited, single-shot video of this period is an important legacy, even as it has migrated to more controlled platform architectures in the post-2010 era" (2022, 33). Building on that legacy, everyone who can afford a smartphone and a

3 At the outset cinema studies largely adhered to a conception of the index as physical trace as promoted by Rosalind Krauss, and followed in the footsteps of W.J.T. Mitchell in its diagnosis of the crisis of the index; this is why the advent of digital photography and cinematography were experienced as a moment of major crisis in the field (Mitchell 1992; see also Hediger 2006).

4 On the history of home video see Newman (2014).

data plan can now produce their own films and distribute them through the second-order infrastructures of portals and platforms like YouTube, snapchat, and TikTok (unless you live in India, where TikTok has been banned since 2020 for political reasons connected to border disputes with China and the Kashmir conflict (see Sundaram 2022, 29)). Usually short, often consisting of one take and made with the aid of platform-specific tools, including sound files and graphics, they are digital videos circulating in compression formats. In communication studies these videos are subsumed under the category of UGC, or user-generated content, a term which has been around since the early 2000s (see Naab and Sehl 2017). But they are undoubtedly also films in the sense proposed above, namely temporal objects constituted from images and sounds. What is more, notable filmmakers and film critics in the cinephile/auteurist tradition, including Paul Schrader and Jean-Louis Comolli, insist that UGC videos—and YouTube videos in particular—are, in fact, cinema. Taking a cue from Schrader and Comolli, this contribution adopts a cinema studies perspective, that is, an approach that takes the form of film and its perceptual specificity seriously, to address the taxonomical challenge UGC videos pose to the field of cinema studies itself.

At first sight this challenge appears to be entirely negative and quickly resolved. As stated above, cinema studies started out as a discipline built on the trinity of canon, index, and *dispositif*. UGC videos are everything that cinema in that sense is not: non-canonical, digital native, and made for the small screen. But even with the recent expansions of the field of cinema studies to include home movies, non-theatrical amateur and utility films (including science, educational, and industrial films), and advertising films alongside fiction, documentary, and experimental films, UGC videos fall through the cracks of the field's classificatory systems. In the 1970s Christian Metz went to great lengths to stress that cinema, quite simply for a lack of reciprocity, is not a form communication (even though, ironically, some of his most influential essays were published in a journal

called “Communications”). UGC videos not only offer the ability of a response, since everyone has access to the same platforms and technologies and can directly reply to a previous video. UGC videos also mark the first time in media history that moving images and sounds can be used for “free, aimless social intercourse,” that is, a form of what Malinowski calls phatic communication. Such a use of moving images and sounds has been imagined before, not least in cinema—think of video telephones in science fiction films. But prior to the advent of the video-capable personal device in combination with second-order digital infrastructures for their distribution it was neither technically nor economically feasible to engage in “free, aimless social intercourse” by means of combinations of moving images and sounds (see Malinowski 1936).

The films UGC videos are most closely related to are home movies and amateur films. In her work on home movies, film scholar Alexandra Schneider has shifted the focus in home movie research from sociological readings, which argued that home movies produce the family as a social unit, to home movies as a practice in which families make and screen films (see Schneider 2004). Like these films UGC videos can originate in what Richard Chalfen, in his study of vernacular photography, has called the “home mode” of communication. But by virtue of the affordances of portals and platforms they are not confined to the home (see Chalfen 1987). Their audience is not limited to the family but is potentially limitless, and they can be interlaced with a multitude of other forms of communication, including some that take the form of economic transactions.

Even with the broadest and most up-to-date understanding of cinema studies, then, the claim by such luminaries as Schrader and Comolli that UGC videos should be treated as cinema seems far-fetched.

But they are still films, temporal objects made from images and sounds.

Perhaps, then, rather than letting UGC videos fall through the cracks, we should adjust our conceptual frameworks to account for them from a cinema studies perspective.

The most sophisticated challenge to Metz's claim that cinema was not communication came from one of his students. Shifting the focus from semantics to pragmatics, Roger Odin argued that cinema can be broken down into a succession of "spaces of communication" defined by specific uses of moving images (see Odin 2022). Building on Odin and with a focus on the phatic quality of UGC videos, this contribution claims that we are currently witnessing the emergence of a new space of communication—one that is shaped by what, drawing on a distinction introduced by German musicologist Heinrich Besseler between "Präsentationsmusik" and "Umgangsmusik," that is, presentational music and social interaction music, we may call the "social interaction film."

I will first introduce the concept of social interaction films and then, in a second step and engaging with Wendy Chun's concept of "algorithmic authenticity," discuss how film format shapes self-presentation and communication in the social interaction. Taking up the challenge introduced by Schrader and Comolli, I will next discuss whether and how social interaction films can be treated as cinema. I will do so by analyzing a relatively random test case, namely the work of NPC TikTok livestream performer Pinkydoll. In conclusion I want to pick up a central thread from the history of video and discuss whether social interaction films fulfil one of video's central promises at the point of its emergence, that of democratizing cinema.

How to Communicate with Moving Images and Sounds: Introducing the Social Interaction Film

Over the last two decades cinema studies' definition of cinema has progressively been enlarged to include non-theatrical films

of all types, from amateur to home movies, educational, science, and mobile phone films.[5] One way of securing the coherence of this ever-expanding field is to classify films by form and/or purpose. Fiction films have certain stylistic properties and serve the purpose of entertainment and artistic expression. Documentary films have different stylistic and formal properties and serve the purpose of education and political mobilization. Experimental films again have distinctive properties and serve to create a unique aesthetic experience. Utility films—including industrial, science, and educational films—can borrow all kinds of formal properties from other types of film but always serve a specific purpose defined by the organization that commissions and uses them. The films made possible by the combination of smartphones with portals and platforms again have their own properties. They are often shaped by the format restrictions of the platforms. For instance, snapchat videos can be between five and sixty seconds long, Instagram reels have a maximum length of 90 seconds, TikTok videos of 10 minutes, while YouTube has no length restrictions. Snapchat videos are designed to be ephemeral. They are visible only to the audience with which the maker shares the videos and only for a limited period of time (but they can also be saved to the smartphone used to make them). Other platforms keep the videos in cloud storage to make them available to the largest possible number of viewers. Formal aids like TikTok's music library, filters, and graphic applications support and facilitate the production process and lower the threshold of access. Where fiction, documentary, and experimental films are made by professionals for audiences inclined to appreciate and admire their craft and expressive abilities, these films are made by relatively unskilled and untrained producers for their friends, peers, or a community of followers. The primary

5 See for instance Hediger (2005, 2006a); Vignaux (2007); Hediger and Vonderau (2009); Acland and Wasson (2011); Streible, Orgeron, and Gordon (2011); Zimmermann and Jacques (2011); Masson (2012); Laborderie (2015); Gaycken (2015); Curtis (2015); Gordon and Field (2019); Hoof (2019).

purpose of these films is not artistic expression, education, or persuasion, but communication.

In film theory Roger Odin has probably gone further than anyone to account for the uses of moving images for the purposes of communication. Odin developed a semio-pragmatics of film in the 1980s, anticipating the current expansion of the scope of cinema studies by two decades. A student of Metz, Odin moved beyond Metz in three important ways. He shifted the focus from semantics to pragmatics, that is, from inherent meaning to what readers of films make of them; he suspended the privilege of the classical *dispositif* and the fiction film, which was at the center of Metz's thinking, and included home movies and all sorts of non-theatrical films in his model (including, as soon as they appeared, mobile phone films, which he was among the first to study); and he questioned Metz's categorical claim that film is *not* communication (because audiences could not respond in kind) and argued that the configuration of film texts with specific modes of reading constituted, in fact, distinctive *spaces of communication.* What Odin did not fully capture yet when the original French version of his eponymous book appeared in 2011 was how the nexus of video-capable personal devices and second-order digital infrastructures would create a new space of communication in which communication for its own sake through moving images became fully possible for the first time. To use a concept from the early days of semiconductor technology as a comparison, semio-pragmatics treats films as ROM or read-only-memory devices, which cannot be altered after fabrication, even where it deals with mobile phone films. By contrast, the video-capable device/platform nexus can be understood as a R/W or read-write configuration, designed for instant reversals and overwriting of previous content, thus enabling free-flow communication through moving images (see Lessig 2008, 28).

To account for the R/W property of the device/platform nexus and the films it makes possible, it may be useful to turn to music. Prior to the advent of the gramophone the preferred way to have

music in one's home was "Salonmusik," that is, music played by family members on the piano and string instruments, a key element of bourgeois culture in Europe in the nineteenth century. The sale of scores for "Salonmusik" was an important source of revenue for the music publishing industry. Famous composers like Brahms routinely published arrangements for small string ensembles for house music alongside the orchestral scores of their new symphonies (see Ballstaedt and Widmaier 1989). In Germany in the early twentieth century, the distinction between E- und U-Musik ("Ernste" or serious music vs. "Unterhaltungsmusik," that is, popular entertainment music) was introduced to award a higher share of copyright revenues to publishers of classical music, partly to compensate publishers for the diminishing sales of house and Salonmusik sheets. The gramophone and later the radio as delivery devices formed a read-only-memory system for music, but the read-write system of house music continued to thrive alongside the professional system designed to monetize recorded sound. The difference between recorded and self-made music broadly tracks with the difference between music performed by professional musicians for audiences of paying listeners and music performed by individuals and groups in non-professional settings. To account for this latter difference, musicologist Heinrich Besseler proposed the concepts of "Präsentationsmusik" (presentational music) and "Umgangsmusik" (social interaction music) (see Besseler 1978).[6]

6 Heinrich Besseler (1920–1969) could be described as the Zelig of German musicology in the age of totalitarianism. A student of Heidegger's, he became a professor of musicology in Heidelberg in 1928. A Nazi party member since 1937, Besseler was responsible for music in the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, the committee that organized the plunder of European art during the Second World War at the behest of Hitler. As a consequence he was fired from his professorship in 1945 but took up another professorship at the University of Jena in the GDR in 1949, from where he moved to Leipzig in 1956. In the GDR Besseler once again rose to become a high functionary for cultural policy for the communist dictatorship. In 1967 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Chicago. For the pointer I thank Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann.

Presentational music encompasses professional concerts, but also records, while "Umgangsmusik" covers all non-professional musical modes, from house music to football chants.

Similarly, we can distinguish between presentational films—or ROM films, to stay within the digital nomenclature—and "Umgangsfilme" or social interaction films, that is, films for the purpose of communication. As indicated above, they come in a wide variety of forms, often defined by platform-specific formats. One form of social interaction films that became particularly popular during the pandemic actually centers on performances of "Umgangsmusik" (see Fink et al. 2021). But they share a commonality. Where Metz had a point when he insisted that cinema—or presentational films—were strictly speaking not communication, "Umgangsfilme" or social interaction films are inherently dialogic or conversational, with multiple participants potentially involved in both the input and output streams. As a matter of fact, if the default mode of presentational films is to provide a viewing experience, the default mode of social interaction films is phatic communication, that is, communication for the sake of communicating with others, or phatic communication in the sense of Malinowski.

One can argue that social interaction films have more than a hundred years of precedent in the practice of home movie making and viewing. Home movies, too, can be described as dialogic or conversational, and like social interaction films require only a modest level of skill to produce. However, different from home movies social interaction films are scalable, in both the write and the read components of the device/platform nexus.

First, the threshold of access to the technology required for social interaction filmmaking is considerably lower than for home movies. Between the 1920s and 1960s the equipment, whether the Pathé 9.5mm or 16mm formats, was relatively expensive, and home movie making was mostly reserved to middle-class and upper-middle-class families (see Schneider 2002; van der

Heijden and Santi 2022). To stay within the musical analogy, home movies in the first half of the twentieth century are the cinematic equivalent of Salonmusik or house music, which requires the apparatus of the bourgeois salon, the piano, and other musical instruments (particularly strings). Social interaction films require technology but are ultimately more like humming a tune or group singing (whether in a choir or as part of a football fan group, for instance). Home movie making became more affordable and accessible with the 8mm and Super-8 formats. But even then, equipment and film processing costs were considerable. Accessibility increased with VHS and DV home video cameras, until video capability became ubiquitous with the smartphone in 2002. And with the emergence of platforms distribution capability also became ubiquitous.

Second, and as a consequence, while the home movie audience remains limited to family and friends, social interaction films, like photographs on portals like flickr and tumblr, reach a potentially unlimited audience through video platforms and portals. This can be a gradual difference, as illustrated by some of the COVID house music performance videos that start out as home movies and turn into social interaction films by virtue of their wide distribution (see Schneider 2022). And where analog home movies required a temporal delay of film processing before they could be projected, video-capable devices in combination with platforms and portals are designed for quasi real-time communication, further facilitating their scalability (even though videos may be put out on a platform and draw a response only later, after a period of hibernation, so to speak).

Leaving behind the playful anarchy of the pirate esthetics of the early 2000s, social interaction films, by virtue of a standardization process and the scalability of the producer and audience bases, have become a key element of what Cunningham and Craig call "social media entertainment," "an emerging, distinct industry based on previously amateur creators professionalizing and monetizing their content across multiple social media platforms

to build global fan communities and incubate their own media brands" (Cunningham and Craig 2021, 146). In 2008 Lawrence Lessig, underestimating the reach of his own argument about the potentials of digital remix cultures, wrote that there "is no market in licensing music to amateur video" (Lessig 2008, 3). TikTok has since proved him wrong. The business model of musical.ly first and then TikTok was precisely to offer licensed music to amateur filmmakers for free in exchange for the content that it inspired. Home movies, certainly in the first half of the twentieth century, were a luxury (albeit probably a luxury necessary for the building and maintenance of the bourgeois family). All costs invested in home movie making were sunk costs. Social interaction films offer the possibility to monetize communication. Many social interaction filmmakers recoup not just the basic investment in a smart phone and a data plan, but actually make a living.

Formatting Self-Presentation and the Pitfalls of Algorithmic Authenticity

One important thing that home movies and social interaction films do have in common, however, is that in them, format shapes behavior and modes of self-presentation in particular. In the fiction film, the work of the director is to control and shape the actions and the behavior of actors in front of the camera. In the documentary the work of the director, at least in observational documentary, is to minimize, to the largest extent possible, any effect of the recording apparatus on the behavior of the subjects observed. In home movies and social interaction films the agents in front of the camera shape their behavior to fit the requirements of the format unencumbered by the controlling instance of a director, both voluntarily, at the level of action, and involuntarily, at the level of behavior. In home movies, family members act in front of the camera in ways that show that they are trying to reference and imitate film stars, particularly in entrances and when they are conscious of being filmed (while

the person holding the camera is usually too busy operating the device to develop a more complex mise-en-scène) (see Schneider 2004, 184–95). In television, it became obvious as early as the 1950s that audiences feel compelled to wave at the camera when they know that it is being pointed at them. In social interaction films filmmaker-performers adapt their actions to the formats of a platform even while continuing to adhere to social conventions of self-presentation. Even in free-flow formats such as YouTube videos, where no restrictions to form or length apply, social interaction filmmakers who aim to scale up their audience strive to make themselves and their "content" interesting and engaging, hoping to gain favors from the recommendation algorithm as much as those of the individual viewers themselves. The medium may or may not be the whole message, but the format certainly shapes how users act.[7]

But when they aim to become social media entertainment entrepreneurs, social interaction filmmakers face another set of conditions and restrictions. Standard economic theory assumes clearly distinct units of production and consumption. In the information economy "production often takes place in networks, and consumption is heavily dependent on the community context within which an individual acts" (Hutter 2003, 266). Success in the information economy is both serendipitous and ephemeral. Hits are always surprise winners, and "the monopoly position of the 'hit' is only temporary" (Hutter 2003, 267). In the making of hits, audiences become part of the production process—not so much in the sense that they co-create a given film or text, but that their preferences set a template for producers who assume that a similar, but new film (or "content") could have similar success. In the case of social interaction films (and SME more generally speaking) the networks of production and consumption imply the reversibility of the roles of producer and consumer in the read-write set-up of the device/platform nexus. This reversibility can

7 On the distinction between medium and format see Turquety (2019).

be (and has been) celebrated as a sign of new creative freedom (think of Alvin Toffler's concept of the prosumer with its strong neo-romantic overtones). But the safest way to success is still a combination of imitation/repetition and variation of successful templates. If self-presentation in a social interaction film is to resonate with a broader audience it should be distinct, but not too distinct ("optimally distinct") from existing successful performances (see Brewer 2003). Incidentally, this applies to both blockbuster and social interaction filmmaking.

But if formats and the economic logic of their circulation shape the self-presentation to such a degree, this puts to the test the very claim that social interaction films serve the purpose of communication and, in particular, phatic communication. How can there be communication, broadly defined as a meaningful exchange between individuals with differing horizons of experience, that is, with something to say to each other, in the digital space, if platforms—their technical infrastructure and the economic logics of their operation—condition self-presentation to such a degree?

Wendy Chun has introduced the concept of "algorithmic authenticity" to address one crucial aspect of this tension, that between the standardization of algorithm-based outputs and the idea of a true self expressed through communication. Chun argues that, ultimately, "algorithmic logic and authenticity are two sides of the same coin," (Burton et al. 2023, 10 and 11)[8] and what may be perceived as authenticity in digital communication is precisely the outcome of an algorithmic procedure. What is required, then, for an understanding of social interaction films as instruments of communication, is an approach which accounts for their form, addresses the self-presentations transposed to the digital space as social interaction in terms of performance, and combines both with a mechanology of algorithmic techniques (see Rieder 2020), an analysis that accounts for the way in which

8 See also Chun (2021), 139.

 digital infrastructures facilitate the confluence of production and consumption and shape the outcomes in the process. The question of whether social interaction films are cinema is part of such an analysis.

Cinema in the Digital Space: Epistemic Authority and the Maxims of Conversation

In an interview with Empire magazine in 2019 and a follow-up op-ed for the New York Times, director Martin Scorsese declared that Marvel movies were not cinema. Cinema was "about confronting the unexpected on the screen and in the life it dramatized and interpreted, and enlarging the sense of what was possible in the art form." According to Scorsese, these are things that Marvel films are incapable of. In an interview two years later Scorsese's erstwhile screenwriter Paul Schrader, who has directed his own films for going on fifty years, took the opposite stance: Marvel films were indeed cinema. Schrader went further: "So is that cat video on YouTube, it's cinema." Schrader is not alone among high-profile *film* critics and theorists to argue that social interaction films are cinema. In 2017 French film theorist and former editor in chief of the *Cahiers du cinema* Jean-Louis Comolli published *Daesh, la mort ou le cinema*, in which he insisted that Daesh execution videos should be considered cinema, since they were moving images with the power to move an audience, however perversely deployed.[9] Similarly, the Ukrainian documentary video collective Babylon*13 has been using the term "cinema of civil society" since 2014 to frame its ongoing stream of short online documentaries about the Ukrainian democracy movement and self-defense against the Russian war of aggression, distributed over YouTube and a dedicated website (Babylon*13 2023).

9 For Comolli's work during the post-68 period see Fairfax (2021a; 2021b).

According to Schrader YouTube cat videos are the new cinema because the "cultural center," which used to evolve about network television and Hollywood studio movies, has been lost, and audiences have moved to margins and niches. "It's not that the filmmakers have changed, it's that the audiences have changed," Schrader said. "Now we have a generation that's been informed by video games and manga" (Schrader 2023).[10] But audiences have not moved to margins and niches. They have moved to an entirely new space, the space shaped through the combination of video-capable personal devices with platforms and portals for film and video distribution over the last twenty years. The first mobile phone with a camera was introduced in the US in 2002. YouTube went online in 2005. In 2007, Apple launched the first iPhone, a pocket computer with telephone, photography, and video capabilities and internet connection, which became the model for all subsequent smart phones. Instagram went online in 2010; musical.ly, which evolved into TikTok, started in 2017. These platforms have long since surpassed the cinema, cable, and home video as the main purveyors of moving images. With more than 120 million daily users, YouTube has as many visitors in ten days as North American cinemas (US and Canada) had in a typical year prior to COVID (see Statista 2023a). YouTube users watch one billion hours of video per day. In three days they stream the equivalent of the aggregate screen time of all films projected in North American theaters in one year (see GMI Research Team 2023). And even if we assess that the theatrical market accounts for only 25% of the revenue stream of a typical Hollywood movie, YouTube generates an audience engagement which is orders of magnitude larger than the engagement of audiences with theatrical films controlled and monetized by Hollywood distributors.[11] A similar case can be made for TikTok, now a full-

10 While Schrader argues for an expansion of the domain of cinema to include YouTube cat videos, he notably objects to a woman taking the top spot in the BFI poll of the ten best films of all time (Schrader 2023).

11 The largest country for YouTube in absolute terms is India with an audience size of 476 million as per April 2024, followed by the US with 239 million,

fledged video sharing service, with 780 million daily users inside the People's Republic of China, where it is known in Chinese as Douyin, and 1.8 billion monthly users worldwide (see Business of Apps 2023). In the People's Republic of China movie theaters sold 712 million tickets in 2022, that is, less than the daily visits to TikTok (see Statista 2023b). And as early as 2010 Paola Voci demonstrated in great detail that moving image culture in China was now a small-screen online video culture by default. Social interaction films are far from marginal. In fact, for a film critic or film theorist to claim that they are really just cinema would seem to be akin to a small country making a claim for a chunk of a very large empire by conceptual fiat alone.

As the ground started shifting from under cinema in the original understanding of the field, film theorists began to describe the new digital space in temporal terms as "post-cinema"—a concept that points to a transformation and maintains a melancholy attachment to what is implicitly posited as the original object of cinema studies (see Leyda and Denson 2016; Hagener, Hediger, and Strohmaier 2016; De Rosa and Hediger 2017). But if there is one point on which Scorsese and Schrader can agree, it is that even in the space-time, or age-space, of post-cinema there still is a thing called cinema. Having become detached from the classical *dispositif* of projection, the concept of "cinema" is both resilient and fuzzy. One could argue that in the digital moving image space "cinema" now "circumscribes a distinctive realm of knowledge, rather than a specific medium, technology, or art form" (Hediger and Simon 2023, 249). This does not preclude analytical precision. For instance, Bhaskar Sarkar (2022) proposes the concept of "videocinemas" to describe filmmakers who use platforms and portals to distribute their self- and home-made fiction films. But for Scorsese, "cinema" is ultimately an epistemic concept: cinema is about an increase in shared knowledge based in an

Brazil with 147 million and Indonesia with 139 million. In terms of saturation (users relative to total population) the US is still ahead of India, but India is projected to catch up by 2029 (see Statista 2024).

aesthetic experience. Comolli similarly calls Daesh videos cinema to highlight their perception-altering, shattering impact, while Babylon*13 use "cinema" to stress the medium's ability to create and mobilize a cognitive and affective community (see Kithsinska 2023). The difference is that Comolli and Babylon*13 leave out the director as *auteur*. In the case of Babylon*13, this omission is programmatic. Theirs is a democratic collective working for the benefit of a democratic polity. But the omission of the *auteur* also points to an important property of social interaction films. They do not depend on an epistemic authority such as the *auteur*, a filmmaker with a unique vision of the world who uses film to share it with an audience. If the epistemic promise of cinema is to film to know the world, the epistemic promise of the social interaction film is to know the other and to make oneself known to others, and in the reversible read-write set-up of the device/platform nexus, epistemic authority depends on the respect of rules of communicative exchange (including the proper use of algorithms).

To capture how an epistemic promise comparable to that of cinema in Scorsese's sense persists in social interaction films, we can return to the example of cat videos and analyze them using the conversational maxims proposed by philosopher Paul Grice, that is, the maxims of truthfulness, informativeness, relevance, and clarity (see Neale 1992, 524–26). Cat video viewers will expect the video to be truthful, that is, not doctored (a reasonable expectation, since after the dust of the crisis of the index in the transition to digital cinematography had settled it became clear that digital video could be a truthful record of the outside world, too), that it will show something worth knowing (the cat will be shown doing something unusual and unexpected), and something that is relevant to the viewer (the cat's shenanigans will be endearing and uplifting), and will do so in a clear way (the cat will be easy to identify and clearly visible). And if someone makes their own cat video and uploads it to YouTube, they will make sure—particularly if they aspire to scale up their

audience—that the four maxims will be met, in particular the maxims of informativeness and relevance, which is best achieved when the video shows the cat doing something unexpected.

But if we shift from the ROM to the read-write perspective, the question is who communicates what in a cat video. Cats don't make films; their owners do (that is, the humans cats entertain for food and company). Cat videos are also animal documentaries. They record and document spontaneous non-human behavior. They best fulfill the maxim of truthfulness if the behavior is untutored and if the footage is unedited (following another important maxim in filmmaking, the "montage interdit" rule first stipulated by Bazin, according to which the elements of an action must be shown simultaneously in the same frame in an unedited shot for the representation to be plausible (see Bazin 1958)). In that sense the cat video is both a specimen of pure cinema and the quintessential case of algorithmic authenticity: a technologically facilitated, digitally formatted sequence of behavior from an agent who is completely oblivious to the *dispositif* and continues to behave rather than perform even as the *dispositif* turns their behavior into a performance. Seemingly at the opposite end of the spectrum are films featuring performances of NPC or non-player characters from video games on TikTok live. Using mechanical mannerisms of background characters in video games as the gist of their performance, NPC live stream performers build self-presentation from blocks of programmed behavior, seemingly counteracting the social interaction film's epistemic promise of knowing others and making oneself known to others.

Dada Data/Data Dada: Pinkydoll as "star text of connection"

In TikTok live shows performers enter in dialogue with viewers who send them gifts in the form of digital tokens to which the performers respond. One recent example of an NPC performer

is Pinkydoll, a woman from Montreal who performs a real-life embodiment of an NPC or non-player characters from a video game. Pinkydoll's birth name is Fedha Simon (see fig. 1). She is a single mother who used to run a laundry service and work as a stripper before establishing herself as a TikTok performer to sustain herself and her five-year old son (Wikipedia 2023). Pinkydoll performs in TikTok live streams but also maintains Instagram and Onlyfriends accounts, where she shows some of the same content and images. In her TikTok stream Pinkydoll responds to tokens from viewers—who pay for the tokens, while the performer receives a cut of the revenue—with signature sounds like "Yesyesyes" or semi-grammatical sentences like "ice cream so good!" (Sinon 2023). Pinkydoll is online seven days a week for six hours a day, and while she made about USD 250 a day in the beginning her revenue went up to USD 7,000 as her performances went viral (see Chan 2023). Thanks to her unique delivery and performance style Pinkydoll's NPC enactment went viral. In short order major English language publications, from Rolling Stone (see Dickson 2023) to the New York Times (see Kircher 2023) and the Guardian (see Chan 2023), published profiles of Pinkydoll.

Once a performer reaches the visibility and standing of Pinkydoll in the digital platform space they act as the center of an aggregate of media formats that is structured analogous to what Richard Dyer call a star text, consisting of a central performance element and a multitude of other, adjacent media texts, including journalistic coverage (see Dyer 2019). The difference to a classic star text is that the performers create their image themselves rather than participating in its creation through the apparatus of feature film production and studio publicity, and they do so in a live dialogue with fans using the affordances of a digital platform. As Elizabeth Ellcessor pointed out already in 2012, social media performers become the focus of a "star text of connection," which is neither the output of a hierarchical, capital-intensive corporate process, nor the work of a single filmmaker, author, or performer. Rather, it combines a multitude of inputs in a

[*left* Figure 1] Screenshot of a Pinkydoll video in which she breaks character and talks to her son (YouTube: 2023).

[*right* Figure 2] Screenshot of an unidentified Twitter user commenting on a tweet by @DrBrianKeating, which shows a video of two women doing a similar routine to Pinkydoll.

distributed mode of production, with the performer at its center (see Ellcessor 2012, 44–66).[12] Among other things, the success of Pinkydoll has led to increased attention for other NPC performers, and as with every success of a female online performer, to a sexist and racist backlash. Pinkydoll also inspired imitators, whose performances mostly served to underline how much skill went into her own act. Free riders attempted to hijack Pinkydoll's

12 For an analysis of distributed productivity on Twitter see also Simmert (forthcoming).

success by recording her performances and uploading them on their own YouTube channels, or by putting out explainer videos using her material without permission (see fig. 2).[13] While these uploads and videos can be read as fan artefacts, they are also clearly designed to attract attention and, potentially, revenue to those who make and upload them.

Pinkydoll's performance can easily be read as complex text in modernist terms, a contemporary case of the off-modern, of the indomitable potentialities of modernity (see Alpers 2001). The anarchic eroticism, the nonsensical word play and staccato delivery, the human embodiment of a digital game avatar complete with the avatar's mechanical mannerism (an inversion of sorts of Bergson's famous definition of the comical as the living caught up in the mechanical). Pinkydoll's performance has echoes of Dada and Alfred Jarry's pataphysical theater and a similarly spellbinding and liberating effect in its attack on the rules of language and social performance. In that sense Pinkydoll's videos and her star text of connection can also be read as another expansion, or variation, of cinema as a cultural form, which carries an elevated degree of cultural capital in the digital platform space. But such a reading would have the effect of reifying Pinkydoll's performance into a valuable cultural object. From a theoretical point of view the more important meaning of her work lies in what she has to say about phatic communication through the social interaction film and cinema.

One particularly popular set of videos shows Pinkydoll breaking character and talking to her son, who is playing with the family dog in the background off screen, in English and French (see Funny Videos 2023). Even as she goes on with her performance, and without really averting her gaze from the camera, she calls her son to order and at one point even threatens to sell the family dog. These are moments of cinema in Scorsese's sense.

13 See for instance ColeDaSoul (2021) (the video has since been deleted, presumably for legal reasons).

They confront the audience with the unexpected on screen and dramatize the life of the performer, and they show what the social interaction film can do as and for cinema. More specifically, these moments dramatize the relationship of the home movie and the social interaction film. Once the kid and the dog come into play in the off-screen space the live stream turns into a home movie, a record of family life, however fleetingly. They dramatize the formal and economic strictures of the performance of self in the social interaction film. We learn about Pinkydoll's real-life situation, see and hear the difference between her character and her social self, and the work of the algorithm that structures her performance continues apace even as she tries the social situation in the off-screen space. And we learn about the logic of "algorithmic authenticity" as the character breaks emphasize the artificiality, but also the sheer artistry of Pinkydoll's performance and render visible the articulation of the human body and the algorithmic process in digital labor. The character breaks dramatize, in other words, all three levels of analysis of the social interaction film proposed in this contribution: form, social interaction, algorithmic process. It is, perhaps, moments such as these that encapsulate the true epistemic promise, and potential, of cinema in the digital space.

Conclusion: If Anything, Seize the Means of Distribution

As Gilles Deleuze reminds us, taxonomies are fun, but only a preliminary step (see Deleuze 2003, 194). The real test of taxonomies is what they allow us to think. For instance, cinema has been described as an emblem of democracy (Badiou 2009), but the history of cinema is haunted by a succession of failed promises of its democratization as an art form, from small-gauge formats to low-budget and independent films to video and digital video technologies. The social interaction film would seem to mark a breakthrough. Finally, a technological nexus is available

at a low cost, which not only allows millions to make films, but also to distribute them to a potentially global audience. And finally we have a type of film that liberates filmmakers from the strictures of generic film forms and their technical standards to turn even minor acts of communication into something that has the potential to resonate with audiences that will demand something very different from presentational films. Satyajit Ray's father Sukumar Ray was a famous author and illustrator, but he also owned a printing press and a publishing enterprise. The combination of video-capable personal devices and platforms and portals would seem to create a condition in which everyone can be in that position. Amazon's self-publishing option for books has already upended the value chain in publishing, as demonstrated by the success of E.L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey*. If there is one continuity between the platform economy and its predecessors, however, it is that it is distribution, not production, that is the key to market control. As Cunningham and Silver write, "power and profitability in screen industries have always resided in distribution" (Cunningham and Silver 2013, 4), or as Douglas Gomery (1984, 69) put it, distribution, the least glamorous branch of the film industry, is the key to market control. The social interaction film, too, remains dependent upon infrastructures that its makers do not control, and on revenue streams in which they, at best, only marginally participate. If the essence of democracy, as Tocqueville wrote, is fiscal control at the community level, then the community of social interaction filmmakers is still far from exerting democratic control. In the social interaction film, video's long-standing promise of democratizing cinema has been, at least for the time being, once more deferred.

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DIGITAL LABOR AND ECONOMIES

[6]

Of Fake Apps and Failed Attempts: Holograms on Platforms

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Holograms are hard to grasp. The devices in our hands are unable to fully capture their aesthetic qualities, such as three-dimensionality, spatiality, and transparency. In this article, I consider how "the anachronistic nature of the idea of holography" (De Bruyn 2015, 2/69) has been revisited by the increasing platformization of media since 2008. Holography is an imaging technology that already exists, yet it continues to promise a larger reconfiguration of everyday visual culture in the future.[1] Platforms have become vital spaces for speculation regarding holograms. Imagined and staged as a screen feature of Apple's iPhone or iPad, they have made various appearances on video sharing platforms over the past two decades.[2]

1 Existing holographic technologies, which in some cases overlap with the imagined, have been thoroughly studied by historians of science and media theorists such as Sean F. Johnston (2006, 2016) and Jens Schröter (2014), as well as by art historians such as Taylor Walsh (2020).

2 See for example the YouTube videos *iPad 2 Hologram Setting* (2011) posted by user FinalCutKing or *iHolo* (2022) by Sozo Bear Films. These videos use 3D animation and motion tracking to simulate a working holographic display on Apple's iPad and iPhone. The creators play with claims of authenticity. Part

This presence of holograms highlights the relationship between emerging technologies and the platforms through which they are mediated and envisioned. In short, performative strategies involving the use of social media platforms meet neoliberal entrepreneurship in the technology sector where platformed devices are designed, produced, and marketed. As I will argue, the hologram's malleability from idea to thing and from video to crowdfunding platforms exposes it as both a gimmick (Ngai 2020) and as a speculative device that requires failure in order to continuously capitalize on the technology's delayed promise (Appadurai and Alexander 2020).

In August 2008, media artist David O'Reilly shook up the internet with a short video called *iHologram*. The 41-second video claims to show an app that makes a flat moving image playing on the iPhone appear three-dimensional, aka holographic.[3] The video blurs what is real and what is fake, capitalizing on the attention of a curious online community while aiming to formulate a critique of this very process. Tracing the video through the hazy records of the Internet Archive, along with doing a close reading of the events surrounding its production and dissemination, helps us better understand the role of speculation, gimmickry, and delayed promises in platform capitalism—and tells us something about the seductive power of holograms.

Following this lead, I use *iHologram*, comments posted in response to the video, news reports, and blog and social media posts about the video to discuss and theorize some central aspects that relate it to the long history of the promise of three-dimensionality in visual culture. Moreover, by connecting

of the appeal of their videos is that they are relatively direct in their performance of using the hologram display, trying to trick viewers into believing that it is real. However, in a double-structure of trick-and-reveal, they later explain that the hologram effects were manufactured.

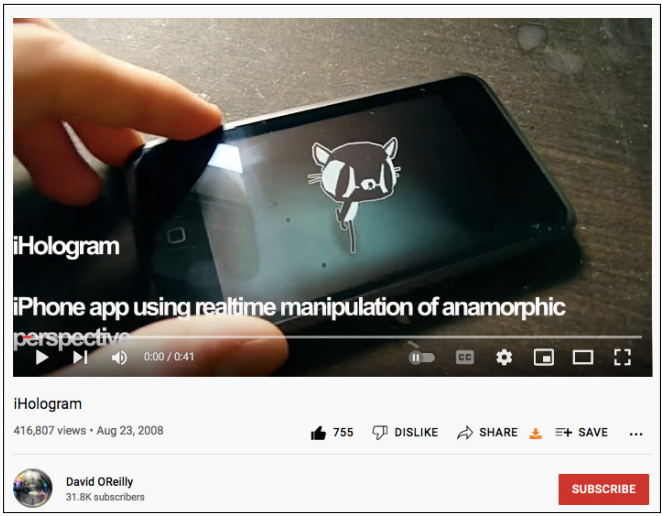
3 While three-dimensionality is only one aesthetic quality of holography, in colloquial uses, the two are often used as synonyms. The broad use of the terms hologram and holography have been detailed by Johnston (2017).

Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki's (2017) notion of "compact cinematics" with Sianne Ngai's (2020) "theory of the gimmick," I will explore why and how we can consider *iHologram* as a *compact cinematic gimmick*, and what its function as such entails. I will demonstrate how *iHologram* required its core idea to fail, so the accumulated attention could be redirected from the idea (an app-based hologram display) to the person (David O'Reilly). *iHologram* tells the story of a conman who played an online community eager to see holograms materialize on their screen devices, and won by delaying the promise. Lastly, I will look at the case of an Italian technology startup, who in 2010 began to develop a line of material products to achieve a similar effect to what *iHologram* had presented. Their strategy, similar to O'Reilly's, was based on gaining online attention—but, unlike O'Reilly, the company ventured to the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter—a space that allowed for a more deliberate financial exploitation of users by the promises of 3D, and that created a tangible backlash in the aftermath of the company's failure to deliver on the promises it had made about its products.

But First, Go Watch the Video

An iPhone sits on a flat, gray surface.[4] A hand carefully moves the device around as an image of a cute, walking cartoon cat seems to pop out of the screen. The hand's movements first slide the phone back and forth on the surface, then the hand begins to interact with the image on screen, using the index finger to seemingly manipulate the cat's gaze from left to right. Finally, the iPhone is picked up and tilted backward and then forward,

4 The original video title on Vimeo includes "iPhone application," but in the accompanying blog post O'Reilly explains using an iPod Touch here. The device in the video, for those not bothering to also read the blog linked below, very likely just passed as an iPhone. At the time, the iPhone was still relatively new on the market and expensive. On the level of hardware, the iPod Touch looked almost exactly the same but had fewer software features.



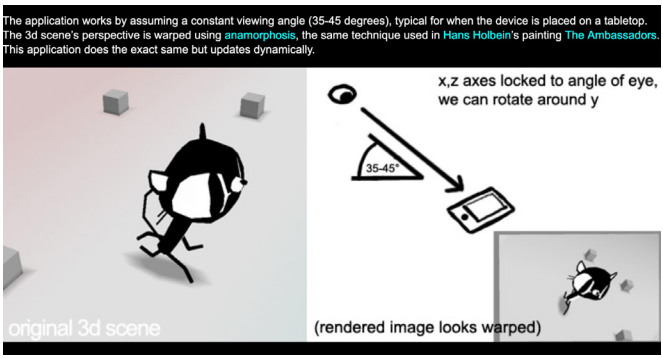
[Figure 1] Screenshot of *iHologram* on YouTube (O'Reilly 2008c).

revealing the handheld digital camera that captured the video itself and its operator in the iPhone's screen reflection (see fig. 1).

The video is short and simple, yet its proposition is powerful. A new, amateur-programmed iPhone app named "iHologram" claims to make a three-dimensional moving image by mere technical sophistication, the "realtime manipulation of anamorphic perspective." The video shows a performance of this visual trick. Casually, the features of the promising hologram app are demonstrated.

A blog post (see fig. 2), linked in the description of the video, pulls back the curtain a little further, explains how the trick was achieved in more detail, and gives viewers something to chew on as they try to make sense of what they are seeing:

> I've just finished coding an application for the iphone/ipod touch. It gives the illusion of a 3d hologram jumping off the screen. … The 3d scene's perspective is warped using anamorphosis, the same technique used in Hans Holbein's



[Figure 2] Screenshot of original blog post from August 9, 2008; now deleted and retrieved via WayBack machine.

> painting The Ambassadors. This application does the exact same but updates dynamically. The software uses the ipod's built-in gyroscope to calculate rotation on the y-axis, so we can look around the environment … by turning the device, there are also controls for manual rotation with a slider on the left hand side of the screen. My programming knowledge is limited, if any iphone developers want to collaborate on this stuff please get in touch! (O'Reilly 2008a)

The video was posted to Vimeo on August 9, 2008. The same day, the blog post went online. Later, on August 23, 2008, it was also posted to YouTube, where it remains online today.

Hesselberth and Poulaki refer to such "short, compressed, and miniature (audio)visual artifacts, forms, and practices that circulate in our everyday multimedia environment" as "compact cinematics" (2017, 2). They argue that these are both the result and product of an "economy of attention" that is fitted to "late-capitalist conditions of time, space, and energy distribution" (2017, 4). In this economic context, particularly time in which no attention is paid to anything specific does not pay off. Rather it creates a void because it is considered unutilized or unproductive time. These "bits and pieces" of moving image content,

 like *iHologram*, fuel an attention economy because they "allow for the (potentially seamless) filling up of voids, thus recharging the interaction that sustains the system" (2017, 7).

Over the course of less than two weeks, the video garnered massive attention online and generated hype about the iPhone's potential ability to (re)produce holographic images. Apple's iPhone had been around for more than a year at the time, with its first version ceremoniously released in the summer of 2007. As discussed in the *New York Times* a few years later, it was only in 2008 that Apple shifted from a "product strategy" to a "platform strategy," allowing outside developers to create applications for their products. This shift resulted in Apple becoming "a platform player," since they were now "offering users not just cool gadgets but also the software that glues together their digital lives computing, online information gathering and entertainment" (Lohr 2011). David O'Reilly posted *iHologram* at exactly this moment.

The use of video sharing platforms was nothing new for O'Reilly. Beginning in March 2008, in the guise of a little boy, he uploaded an animated video series to the YouTube channel RANDYPETERS1.[5] Until releasing the fifth and final video in early September 2008, O'Reilly did not make his involvement transparent, but on September 8, 2008 he eventually revealed on his blog "there's no 9-year-old kid in Chicago named Randy Peters" (O'Reilly 2008e). He then added, "I'm sure I'll be accused of misleading people again, but I won't apologize for that" (O'Reilly 2008e). Shortly before this revelation, in early August 2008, O'Reilly had already misled the internet with *iHologram*—only,

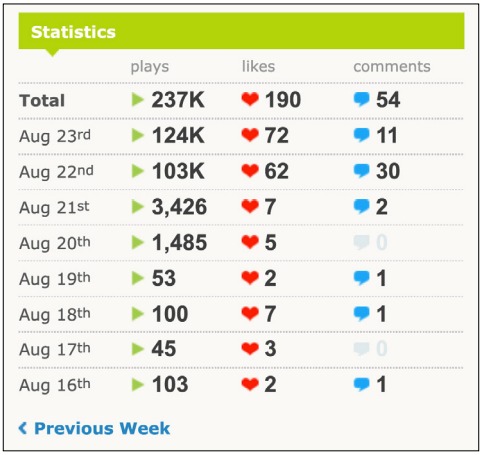
5 Said uploads are today also known as the five-part animation series *Octocat Adventure* (2008), later incorporated into O'Reilly's work *Compression Reel* (2008). William Brown and Meetali Kutty mention the films in an article on "datamoshing," which they define as "a practice whereby audiovisual artists actively downgrade the quality of digital images in order to render a more 'raw' aesthetic on screen." (Brown and Kutty 2012, 165 and 170).

at this time he had his real name attached to the video from the beginning.

Initially, viewers on Vimeo complimented O'Reilly on his work, saying, "This is genius. Well done man …" or "Very cool" (O'Reilly 2008b). The video slowly spread among tech enthusiasts, and not long afterwards blogs and smaller news outlets picked it up and began covering the story of the promising new hologram app extensively. The writers did not hold back their enthusiasm. Brian X. Chen, writing for WIRED's "Gadget Lab," praised O'Reilly for "tak[ing] iPhone-app coding beyond what was imaginable" (Chen 2008). Another blogger noted that O'Reilly had created "a stunning iPhone app that makes the screen look like a window to a real, parallel dimension" (Diaz 2008). On August 22, 2008, twelve days after O'Reilly posted *iHologram*, a commenter first challenged the video maker: "great video, but definitely a fake," setting off a back-and-forth between optimistic believers and cautious skeptics in the comment section (O'Reilly 2008b).

When looking at the retrieved Vimeo page today, a little table on the right-hand side reveals statistics on plays (today more commonly referred to as views), likes, and comments correlating with every day from 16 to 23 August, that is, the second week of *iHologram* existing online. From August 19 to 20 the views went up from a few hundred to a few thousand. Then, from August 21 to 22, the video went somewhat viral, accumulating 100,000 views within one day (see fig. 3).

In an Instagram post from 2021, O'Reilly reflected on the days when *iHologram* went viral (see fig. 4). He writes that after tech blogs and news outlets reported on the video, his personal website, which he had linked to with the explanatory blog post, first "crashed," then created "a massive bill," and finally caused him to "freak[] out" (O'Reilly 2021). His video, as he was forced to admit at the culmination of events, was in fact "great but definitely a fake," the illustration of an idea that seemed plausible enough even though it did not functionally exist. After



Statistics

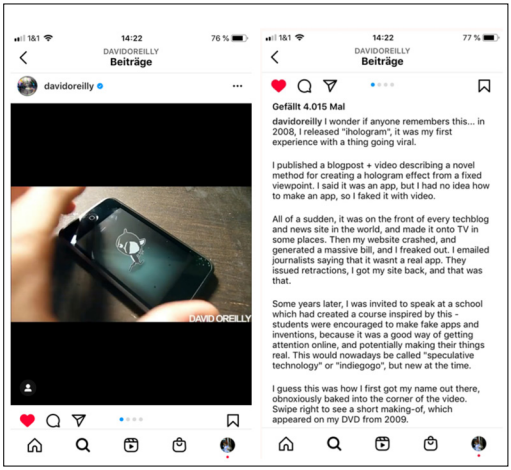
	plays	likes	comments
Total	237K	190	54
Aug 23rd	124K	72	11
Aug 22nd	103K	62	30
Aug 21st	3,426	7	2
Aug 20th	1,485	5	0
Aug 19th	53	2	1
Aug 18th	100	7	1
Aug 17th	45	3	0
Aug 16th	103	2	1

‹ Previous Week

[Figure 3] Screenshot of *iHologram—iPhone application* on Vimeo, now deleted and retrieved via WayBack machine.

O'Reilly got his website back, he came clean in a follow-up blog post dated August 24, 2008: "The iHologram app was not real. … Unfortunately I'm just an ideas person, and I can show how things should look, but I'm no hardcore programmer" (O'Reilly 2008d). O'Reilly may have failed to keep up the charade of being a "hardcore programmer," but he succeeded in being recognized as an "ideas person" nonetheless. As he admits in this act of self-reflection, "I guess this is how I first got my name out there, obnoxiously baked into the corner of the video" (O'Reilly 2021).

It is telling that O'Reilly starts his retrospective Instagram post in 2021 with the words, "I wonder if anyone remembers this…" (O'Reilly 2021). Perhaps one would not want to be remembered for an embarrassing moment like this and be constantly associated with using deceitful tactics to gain internet notoriety. But it does not seem like O'Reilly was actively trying to hide it either. On the contrary, as I would argue, he quite successfully harnessed the attention on *iHologram* and on him being a nifty conman to advertise himself as an even niftier 3D animation



[Figure 4] Screenshots of a deleted, non-retrievable Instagram post by David O'Reilly, November 9, 2021.

artist. Someone who could pull off a stunt like this was not just a trickster but understood the mechanisms of emerging techno-cultural infrastructures at the time—and, most importantly, how those could be exploited.

For context, O'Reilly's career as an independent animation filmmaker kicked off shortly before *iHologram*, showcasing his shorts at international film festivals since 2007. Concurrently, his *Octocat Adventure* series, promoted through the character Randy Peters, boosted his visibility. Transitioning to TV, he contributed to popular series like *Adventure Time* and *South Park*. Notably, he directed animation for Spike Jonze's sci-fi drama *Her* (2013), featuring a scene reminiscent of *iHologram* but in an expanded immersive gaming set-up. Branching into game development, O'Reilly gained recognition with experimental titles *Mountain* (2014) and *Everything* (2017). His diverse portfolio extends to the art world, evident through involvement in museum exhibitions and biennials.

Learning from his 2021 Instagram post, O'Reilly included a making-of video for *iHologram* in the 2009 DVD release of his award-winning short film *Please Say Something*. The DVD was a limited edition of 100 numbered and signed copies, sold exclusively through the young filmmaker's personal online shop, where it sold out within one week (O'Reilly 2010). O'Reilly added a short clip of this making-of to his Instagram post, sharing his methods of trickery as part of his strategy to gain attention as an emerging filmmaker. He also mentions how in years to come he was invited to speak to students about how "to make fake apps and inventions" as "a good way of getting attention online," and "potentially making their things real" (O'Reilly 2021). Thus, the success of *iHologram* manifested in O'Reilly's method rather than his idea.

What matters here is that the promise of the hologram as "a window to a real, parallel dimension" (Diaz 2008) and its "anachronistic nature" (De Bruyn 2015, 2/69) are what O'Reilly understood could be exploited to generate this hype, and that hype is not unilateral but can be redirected. In addition to that, a parallel storyline emerges in which the idea and desire for a hologram display on the iPhone did not fade away but resurged in later years as a DIY trend and product sold through online platforms like Amazon and Kickstarter.

The Promises of 3D

"In general I try to find ideas which justify being in 3D animation," O'Reilly once said in an interview (Rourke 2013). The idea of 3D as a necessary triumph over 2D, an inevitable spatial turn reserved for the future, emerges as the central promise *iHologram* delivered on in relation to the iPhone. Miriam Ross, writing on 3D cinema, explains that there have been two different critical positions toward the presumed teleological necessity of "flat cinema" becoming 3D. On the one hand, there are the patiently waiting optimists, who find that "we are still in the nascent stages of a

technological breakthrough that will eventually reach maturation and surpass the flat format" (Ross 2015, 4). On the other hand, there are pessimists, cynics, and purists who argue "3D cinema can never be more than a passing fad and, by insinuation, suggest … that it is somehow not true cinema" (Ross 2015, 4).

Although reflecting on these positions has merit, it is flawed to assume that 3D cinema must be seamless and fully illusionistic to compete with the norm of 2D cinema. More often than not, as Elisa Linseisen argues, the use of 3D is not triumphant or even functional at all. It is rather about "documenting the dysfunction," a means of visualizing a failure within the very concept of 3D (2014, 101). Linseisen finds evidence for her argument by looking at the use of 3D in avant-garde art. She notes that 3D has historically always had a certain potential to disturb, disrupt, and irritate, and, I would argue, this is exactly what O'Reilly exploits, even if in the case of *iHologram* the aesthetics aim for a seamless illusion (Linseisen 2014, 102).

When it was revealed that there was no hologram app, the attention initially garnered by the suggestion of a new and amateur-programmed hologram app turned into recognition of O'Reilly as a skilled 3D animator and someone who knew how to pull off a trick so skillfully that even tech experts were fooled by it. *iHologram* reveals something about the workings of the attention economy and its temporal regime of hype cycles that can and will lead to moments of crisis. Although the crisis was personal, maybe even purely performative for O'Reilly, the parallel between the global financial crisis and the timing of *iHologram* is worth noting.

As Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander put it in their book *Failure*,

> what collapsed in 2007–8 was a house of words made of contracts, each contract consisting of an agonistic pair of promises, together composing a performative chain as well as a performative mountain generated by the accrual of

> money value by the multiplication of wagers on uncertain future prices. (2020, 107)

This performative strategy to make a promise believable and trustworthy is what O'Reilly used in *iHologram* and the accompanying blog post. He took holography, a complex and exciting-sounding thing, and made it look easy and doable from his own home. At the same time, he presented himself as confident in the performance of the promise made, grounding it in art history and not overstating it. That was enough for a trend-seeking, techno-optimistic online community to take O'Reilly's bait. In a sense, O'Reilly adopted a global culture of speculation and compressed it into a compact cinematic form.

Thinking further, *iHologram* also evokes a long history of financial failure as it pertains to 3D becoming an economically viable screen format. Katharina Loew, for instance, highlights the German film industry's crisis in the early twentieth century, leading to the emergence of the multiple-reel feature film by 1910 (2013, 91). Seeking competitive advantage, the so-called Alabastra and Kinoplastikon were created by combining film projection with a reflection trick named Pepper's Ghost, which uses a transparent screen to heighten the illusion of physical presence all the while minimizing the visibility of the apparatus. Despite its potential, however, these ventures proved complex and financially unsustainable. Loew connects these efforts globally, emphasizing their response to overproduction crises. The early 1910s marked a brief era of 3D cinema aiming to create niche markets with higher admission prices. This underscores 3D's intersection with business strategies in cultural experiences (Loew 2013, 92–95).

The 1950s, as Thomas Elsaesser recalls, was the first decade in which 3D cinema was revived in an attempt to reenchant audiences with the magic of cinema.[6] Elsaesser situates the

6 This rhetoric of technology and magic reverberates through some of the blog posts reporting on *iHologram* too. For instance, Jesus Diaz's post on Gizmodo, uses the tag "magic" for his post and states: "While it seems like

revivification of 3D in this moment as a response to the economic crisis cinema was experiencing due to the popularization of television (2013, 219). Though this coping strategy from the past is a failed one, he continues, it has been revisited in the past decade as a result of Hollywood's perceived threat from streaming platforms. As Elsaesser more thoroughly explains,

> Hollywood had to come up with a new gimmick—a special effect—and to hype a new attraction. The new gimmick in fact turned out to be an old gimmick that had already been short-lived the first time around, but because Hollywood does not have a memory, or is out of fresh ideas, 3-D tried again and failed again. (Elsaesser 2013, 219)

The idea of 3D as a savior from financial ruin seems to persist even on digital platforms. It therefore makes sense that O'Reilly fell back on it too, and by extension the promise of holography as the form 3D would take as a medium of the future. Whether or not O'Reilly's intention at the time was to jump-start a career in the film and media industry is beside the point, but it is noteworthy that he seems to have understood something about how gimmicks work.

A Gimmick Made to Fail

Sianne Ngai's *Theory of the Gimmick* finds that, sitting within the deep structures of capitalism, we can find many things that are gimmicks. Ngai claims that the gimmick is first of all a judgment of a "false claim to value" in that a gimmick is often seen as a cheap trick—something of "low" value claiming "high," or high*er*, value (2020, 225). This basic understanding of the term appears in the blog post by Chen, who notes that "at first glance, this

magic, it uses anamorphosis, a very simple painting technique that has been used by old masters since the 15th century, mixed with the technology in the JesusPhone. Created by David O'Reilly, iHologram combines anamorphosis and the iPhone's gyroscopes to achieve this awesome visual magic trick" (Diaz 2008).

 [*iHologram*] looks like it'd *just* have gimmicky applications to show off your iPhone at social gatherings" (Chen 2008, my emphasis). Something "gimmicky," as Chen implies, would be flashy enough to attract attention but have no actual value or function beyond that.

According to Ngai, the gimmick also has a special relationship to time, encapsulating both the "new" and the "old." Among her examples are "comically outdated" special effects that no longer convince us (2020, 2). In the case of *iHologram*, this manifests in the way O'Reilly, evoking Holbein, claims to use the age-old, high-art technique of anamorphosis to create a futuristic holographic effect, when in fact he uses 3D animation as a workaround. But it is important for *iHologram* to connect to traditions of the past and thereby elicit a claim to high cultural value.

Finally, and this relates to the techniques of production, Ngai notes that the gimmick always says something about the labor it embodies. A thing seems gimmicky in the way it shows the transformation of an idea into a thing, which is a form of labor encoded in an object (2020, 52–60). In the case of *iHologram*, this turned out to be a performative labor of make-believe. The labor viewers were meant to decode from seeing the video was "hardcore programming," while in fact it was—though probably just as laborious—3D animation made to look like hardcore programming. The way in which the gimmick appears, its own performativity, makes us believe that more labor went into it than was actually the case. This makes for a significant imbalance. The fake app *iHologram* seeks its niche in a neoliberal culture and economy that tries to turn not only an idea into a thing, but an idea into a hot commodity. But O'Reilly does so all the while critiquing this exact process, hinting at how the mechanisms of so-called "platform capitalism" (Srnicek 2017) work by showing us how easily we are lured in by a gimmick.

Gimmicks have an attractive and seductive power, but they are also repulsive and deceptive. Ngai explains how this places

the gimmick in the uncomfortable space of epistemic friction between knowing and not-knowing:

> Calling something a gimmick is a distancing judgment, a way to apotropaically ward off the trick's attractions by proclaiming ourselves unconvinced by them. At the same time the gimmick enables us to indirectly acknowledge this power to enchant, as one to which others, if not ourselves, are susceptible. In this elliptical fashion, the gimmick can be found amusing or even cute; indeed, it often takes the form of a miniaturized machine. (Ngai 2020, 55–6)

Ngai's reference to the gimmick often taking the form of a "miniaturized machine" describes well what *iHologram* is supposed to be—and not to forget the cute, big-eyed cartoon cat. The video makes the fake app appear in a credible form, but it overstates its qualities by being merely representational. This instability of the gimmick—as something we want to believe is true, but also something we might be embarrassed to admit we want to be true—says a lot about the gimmick's role in social exchanges. The comment section below the Vimeo upload is an excellent testimony to this instability of the gimmick. Praise is followed by skepticism, gratitude by disillusion. When one commenter reveals themselves to be excited for the app, another one comes with an almost forensic analysis to debunk their assessment (O'Reilly 2008b).

The fact that *iHologram* is presented as an app is important to note, too. The app and the gimmick as capitalist forms have a close relationship. Apps can grant access to platforms, such as those associated with the gig economy, like Uber, Airbnb, or TaskRabbit. All these examples are both apps and platforms. But apps are also products that are sold as tools to be used within platform infrastructures (Srnicek 2017, 43–45). The idea of *iHologram* would fall into the latter category. It is an application that is meant as a software feature to be used on hardware devices that belong to the platformed infrastructure of Apple. In

 any case, either type of app shares features with gimmicks in the way Ngai defines them.

Apps promise to reduce labor by making things easier and more convenient for us, and they often fail to live up to the expectation created by their gimmicky appearance and overpromising sales pitches. For example, so-called "productivity apps" promise to streamline work processes. However, they often fail by offering an excessive array of functions that require significant user maintenance. Despite their intentions, such apps can ironically create more tasks in the effort to organize existing ones (Quora 2015). These apps, akin to gimmicks, not only promise to reduce labor but also obscure labor, sometimes masking it as leisure activity (see also Pitre's essay in this book).

The way in which gimmick, app, and hologram were combined into one hyper-promising entity that could be called a *compact cinematic gimmick* fits neatly it into what Hanna Kuusela (2016) has called a "promise economy." Although holography as a technology has existed since the mid-twentieth century, fictional and imaginary representations of holographic imaging technologies remain a popular figuration of the future and something that incites anticipation. In particular, science fiction films and series have fueled this technological imaginary over many decades.

In the field of science and technology studies, Douglas K. R. Robinson et al. explain that technological futures are very much produced by such visions and stories, which are stabilized by "regimes of promising" (2021, 814). The authors argue that promising constitutes the dominant rhetorical form in the context of all emerging techno-science. The constant repetition of promises and the creation of indefinite and possibly delayed waiting periods, in their words, "structure the ways societies connect to the future" (Robinson et al. 2021, 815). The hologram from the get-go, and especially through its various playful and spectacular film representations, is embedded in a complex promise economy. Kuusela defines "promise economy" as "a cultural economy that

is based, or dependent, on certain promises that are inscribed in collaborative cultural practices ..., whose dynamics urge participants to create ever-higher expectations for the final product often before the process of creation has even started" (2016, 65).

This phenomenon is not new, but is a repetition of dynamics seen throughout film history. The promise of 3D created its own promise economy, not only manifested from the actual screenings of 3D films, but even more so by marketing and promotional materials that shaped and repeated the promise. Expectations on what 3D experiences are like were built up over time. Loew details enthusiastic newspaper articles that promoted the Alabastra and Kinoplastikon internationally as testimony to how the promise of 3D was stabilized in the 1910s (Loew 2013, 95). Ross notes that during the 1950s heyday of 3D cinema "posters ... advertised, action 'comes off the screen right at you'" (Ross 2015, 8). It is possible that these overpromising promotions played a part in why 3D came and failed, came back and failed again. The promises may not have matched what audiences expected from the more creative, embellished, and speculative marketing materials they had previously encountered.

In the case of the hologram, and specifically hologram displays as a consumer technology, this means speculative visualizations are key as well. Short form moving image content like tech demos, promotion reels, or video tutorials have become increasingly popular. These formats are no longer only meant to visualize an idea, like a poster or a detailed personal account in written form would. They very much partake in processes of creating demands for potential future products, even if these products are nowhere close to existing in the near future.

Crossing Platforms

In the years following *iHologram*, the idea of a hologram display for the iPhone went quiet for a bit on video platforms. Notably, Apple Inc. filed a patent for an "Interactive Holographic Display

Device" in 2011 and is an active patent holder since 2014 (Krah and Apple Inc. 2014).[7] The fact that this has not yet gone into production, but is rather kept as a speculative security for ownership of an idea in an unknown future, says something about the hologram display lingering as a potential investment in a non-defined future. Appadurai and Alexander have described a more proactive version of this tactical stalling in the technology and startup industries as the "delayed promise," which is "a promise made by a company or a person who knows full well that they cannot meet the necessary conditions for its fulfillment, and who therefore endlessly delays its lifespan" (2020, 39). David O'Reilly's *iHologram* is a speculative strategy that both bridges and exposes this constructed waiting gap. This, as Ngai reminds us, is necessary because "the gimmicks are too weak to complete the job they begin" (2020, 29).

The gimmick may be too weak to complete the job it began, but arguably, completing anything was never its job to begin with. In the meantime, other strategies to make a hologram display have emerged, showing a parallel in the way technological promises are made and capitalized on. The idea of an app, like in *iHologram*, and the much more complex apparatus in Apple's patent, were cut short with illusionistic tricks, first and foremost, the hologram pyramid.

Made from transparent plastic, the hologram pyramid is a reflection device that updates and miniaturizes the stage trick Pepper's Ghost, which in popular discourse has often been

7 The technical details of that patent are fairly complex, but the description at least sounds like this is supposed to be something in the fashion of what *iHologram* pretended to be: "A display apparatus configured to produce an interactive three-dimensional holographic image … The display apparatus can include one or more coherent light sources configured to produce one or more beams, based on obtained image data of an object to display, and a lens assembly configured to direct the one or more beams to form a holographic image of the object" (Krah and Apple Inc. 2014).

referred to as holographic.[8] By playing specific videos that show an image or object rotated four times by 90 degrees, isolated in front of a black background, when the pyramid is placed on the screen, a reflection of the object in the video appears within the pyramid—a hologram effect. This trick began to circulate as a do-it-yourself project on YouTube in the early 2010s and continued to be a popular video tutorial template for years to come. The material contraption of the plastic pyramid surely affects the claims of immediacy and immateriality that were so prominently staged by O'Reilly's earlier video, but the ease of recreating the trick by yourself and the visual effect's attractive quality quickly popularized it. Although the hologram pyramid thrived as a DIY project, it soon also became a product to be sold, ultimately allowing users to skip the effort of doing it themselves.

One of the companies that produces and sells hologram pyramids (and similar products) is Cospe SAS, based in the outskirts of Milan, Italy (Cospe SAS n.d.). Their product line, called "HOLHO collection," consists of professionally designed screens and pyramids, which can be attached to smartphones or tablets in order to create the holographic effect (Cospe SAS 2024). While these products would traditionally be exhibited at technology trade shows, Cospe SAS's advertising strategy from the beginning involved YouTube as a platform to promote them beyond special interest customers, by means of visual demonstrations in video clips and reels.

In 2013 they launched their first of three crowdfunding campaigns on the platform Kickstarter, which they accompanied with video demos of their products. Although crowdfunding is usually meant to allow for the development of a certain project or event, Cospe SAS used Kickstarter more as a marketplace to sell their products

8 Johnston considers Pepper's Ghost as a "faux" or "misidentified" hologram, but acknowledges that the use of the word hologram has "irretrievably broadened" to label many technologies that are not holographic in the strict technical sense (2017, 497).

to customers who pay for them in advance of their production. As shown in their crowdfunding video presentation, HOLHO products include not only the pyramid contraptions but also an app to produce videos in the required format to be viewed through the pyramid. The HOLHO products, in that sense, split up what *iHologram* had imagined to be one closed circuit of hardware and software. Moving the idea of a hologram display to a crowdfunding platform raises the stakes for the technology to deliver on its promise.

Crowdfunding platforms were initially meant to have a non-corporate appeal to the projects available for funding. Much like other social media platforms, the crowdfunding platform rests on the promise (and sometimes illusion) of being community effort rather than an inherently unstable venture capitalist corporation. The temporal structure of crowdfunding campaigns is ideally linear, with the passage of time and the flow of capital producing the same line at the same rate. The progress bar that usually sits on every crowdfunding campaign's main page, a one-dimensional line that does not take into account moving up or down, is a visual manifestation of this ideal forward-moving temporality. In addition to that, statements of urgency often accompany crowdfunding campaigns. Cospe SAS end their campaign video with a large text insert reading: "This project will disappear without your precious help… Holho is not only a dream! Make it true and pledge" (HOLHO Collection 2013, 3:15-20). In the case of Cospe SAS, this aspirational message was later contradicted by funders' frustrated comments posted to the Kickstarter campaign. The comment section of the three HOLHO Kickstarter campaigns are messy. Funders share their frustration about not receiving orders and being unable to make the contraptions work with their devices despite the company's promise that all smartphone and tablets can be used with their products.

The first campaign (Aug 5, 2013–Sep 24, 2013) was canceled in mid-September 2013, as the company likely realized that they had set their target too high at 58,000 USD, of which they only

achieved 26,943 USD before canceling (Kickstarter 2013a). The second campaign, shortly afterwards, failed on October 30, 2013, having achieved only a little more than half of its target of 30,000 USD (Kickstarter 2013b). When they launched their third and final campaign in 2017, they set the target even lower (5,200 USD), and this time it was surpassed. The final campaign was the only successful one, making the company 14,744 USD (Kickstarter 2017a). However, this campaign's comment section specifically is filled with warnings and first-hand accounts of people who have either not received their orders or are dissatisfied with the product.

The skepticism in the initial comments to O'Reilly's *iHologram* ("great but definitely a fake") reverberates in the comments calling out the company behind the crowdfunding campaigns. On Vimeo the revelation that the app *iHologram* was not real was a disappointment to many, but at least nobody lost their money (except maybe O'Reilly because of the website crash he was billed for). On Kickstarter, users paid actual money to get a product they were made to believe performs something of great value to them, and when the company failed to deliver what was promised, they got upset and let everyone know about it. The top comment on the final campaign reads: "Fucking Scam!!!" (Kickstarter 2017b). Another user, further below, writes in more depth, "I have recieved [sic] the package. But I am very disappointed with the product. There are air bubbles a little part. [sic] The quality of the application is very poor. I am really disappointed" (Kickstarter 2017b). This disappointment about the product is ultimately an indication that the product overperformed in its advertising yet underperforms in its intended use. This brings us back to Ngai's notion of the gimmick as systematically slipping between trick, wonder, and thing (2020, 6). The disappointed user, who references air bubbles in the material and overall poor quality as opposed to the slick advertising images, might best describe the HOLHO collection with Ngai's preferred dialectical label for the gimmick: "extravagantly impoverished" (2020, 1, 7, 35, 144,

 170, 228, 247, 292, and 297). Nowadays, the company sells their products through their own online store, which does not have a comment section (Cospe SAS 2024).

Thoughts to Dwell On

Holograms thrive on video sharing platforms (speculative spaces for ideas, concepts, and demos), but fail on crowdfunding platforms (speculative spaces for cultural and/or capital investment). Both types of platforms exist in what I have defined as an attention and promise economy. By incorporating the same strategy that works to harness attention and create hype on a video sharing platform, the stakes are heightened on a crowdfunding platform due to the entanglement with financial speculation. On crowdfunding platforms there is a real goal and a promise to deliver a product attached to the performative labor of make-believe by *compact cinematic gimmicks* like David O'Reilly's *iHologram* or the campaign video for HOLHO collection. The question remains as to whether platforms in general are flawed spaces for imagining technological futures. As exemplified by the cases I have discussed here, both video sharing and crowdfunding platforms are prone to staging techno-optimistic endeavors and by extension to using gimmicks.

David O'Reilly's *iHologram* carved out a waiting space, making room for playful speculation and experimentation about a hologram display, while at the same time disrupting the waiting phase by claiming to offer a solution. By jumping over and short-circuiting the tiring stages of ritualized waiting, both O'Reilly and Cospe SAS initiated cycles of anticipation and hype, turning the platforms they used into waiting spaces ready to be commodified. While O'Reilly was able to retract the initial claims he made with *iHologram*, he redirected the attention onto himself as a skilled animator. Trying to make the idea of a hologram display happen, Cospe SAS seem to have speculated less on the technology's functionality than on its potential economic value. Hologram

displays revived the vast promises of 3D. In platform capitalism, this manifests first and foremost as a method and business strategy.

In thinking about how the idea of the hologram display crossed from video sharing platforms to crowdfunding platforms, the performative role of Apple's platformed devices cannot be stressed enough. Wolfgang Hagen has spoken about the associative power of the "I" within Apple's "opaquely closed 'I' computer world," where we are no longer supposed to understand the medium, but rather become the medium, in the sense of a "genetic epistemology" (2017, 76). *iHologram* fits neatly into this "closed circuit thinking," as Hagen calls it.[9] It both continues the genealogy of Apple's product line and comments on it, exposing the absurdity of each technological update becoming absorbed into the world of the "I," and thus us becoming the product. This is what crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter propose as well, inviting creators to identify with their projects or products. But Apple, the idea of an app, and crowdfunding as a social practice got lost when the hologram crossed from idea to thing—when the gimmick kicked back.

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9 The original quotes from Hagen's text were translated with DeepL.

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Twitch and the Political Economy of Cultural Production

Jake Pitre

The so-called creator economy has rapidly come to dominate discussion about platform work, with a growing emphasis on "the centrality of community development and maintenance as the core work in creator culture," as Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (2021, 9) put it. As platforms like Twitch, OnlyFans, Patreon, and Substack have attracted millions, creators have found themselves in apparent control of a multiplatform existence that is, for most, defined by precarity, harassment, and exhaustion. I argue that these platforms are developing, narrativizing, and enacting a vision of the future where the mode of production is dictated by these firms and their parent companies, where platform workers like streamers, camgirls, artists, and content creators are all exploited in the name of entrepreneurial self-management. As Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy (2021, 85) write, "platforms simultaneously open up new opportunities for cultural producers, while also minutely controlling how these complementors can create, distribute, market, and monetize content and services." This balance of opportunity and control is specific to each platform, but this structure inevitably

defines what is created and how it is seen and interpreted, and too often these distinctive rules, regulations, and norms are conflated. Moreover, patron-focused platforms challenge us to critically engage with parameters set on creators and how they work within them or push them to their limits.

Drawing from critical future studies and heeding Devon Powers' (2020) call for cultural studies to become more pointedly futurist in response to the decisions being made about the future without our input, this paper conducts material-semiotic and discourse analysis to capture the "full rhetorical situation" (David 2001, 218) of the model of futurity put forward by these creator-fueled platforms, which requires an engagement with interface, design, governance, and usage in parallel with the stories of work crafted by the companies themselves, the industry, and the press. With a focus on Twitch, this paper examines the company's press releases, marketing, patents, and "Creator Camp" material for new streamers. This will help make sense of this as a *temporal mode of technopolitics*, where we can see how a creator economy within these limits is being carefully manifested through a corporate political economy of cultural production. I draw on these secondary sources, language from the Twitch website and public material, and other discursive media to develop the forms of work, or rather modes of work, that Twitch materializes, via a move away from "what is labour" to "when is labour"—I am concerned with the temporality of money within a platform economy, which will allow me to argue that work happens when you are paid. Amid debates over the future of work and questions of what is work in digital media studies, I adopt this pragmatic formulation of work in order to understand when work on platforms happens. These corporate futures are narrativized and disseminated with the purpose of foreclosing on alternatives that could challenge the status quo of the platform economy, such as creator-led collectives on non-corporate cooperative platforms, and for that reason creators have become the discursive nexus of this project.

A temporal mode of technopolitics, then, refers to strategies and methods undertaken by these corporate actors to "seize the means of imaginative production" (Vizoso and Byrnes 2023), or in other words, to exert control (or the appearance of it) over temporality itself. This recalls Brian Massumi's concept of *ontopower*, the power to pre-shape reality and the future, as entwined with neoliberal financial capitalism. Originating from his analysis of military doctrine in the United States moving from Cold War-era deterrence to modern pre-emption, ontopower is likewise applicable on a wider societal scale. As Massumi explains in a later interview:

> I said earlier that the economy has become a regime of power in its own right. What I meant is that the capitalist process has made itself an ontopower … I try to look at some of the consequences of the way in which capitalism's ontopower extends to the production of the very capitalized individuals, the capital life-forms, that populate its field. The fact that capitalism has found ways to productively access matrices of emergence means that it now increasingly functions at the *infra-individual* level wherever capital flows—which is everywhere. Capital seeps down to the affective level of felt potential, before life potentials have concretized in a determinate form of life, where life is as-yet emergent. (2017, 13–14)

It is my contention, then, that it is the platform economy and the institutions that form it that wield this temporal power over the "felt potential" of digital labor futures.

This inquiry must be further situated within existing studies of platforms used by content creators, from the challenges of platform governance and regulation to the political programmability of their algorithms to the tools available for cultural production to be created and shared. This research contributes to the growing body of scholarship devoted to understanding what is distinct and "new" about platform or digital capitalism. Many scholars,

such as Nick Srnicek (2016) and Susanna Paasonen (2021), have written compellingly about platforms as deeply meaningful for shifts in the global economy and for changes in cultural behavior. However, there are too few examples of analysis within platform studies or similar fields that critically examine Big Tech rhetoric in the historical context of futurity as a philosophical or ideological concept, instead normally opting to focus specifically on the economic consequences of these visions. Here, I bring these theoretical strands together to account for the specific temporal and technopolitical impact of these stories.

As Fredric Jameson (2005, xii) has noted, this all occurs within a sociocultural neoliberal environment dominated by "the universal belief … that no other socioeconomic system is conceivable, let alone practically available." The Utopian form, as he argues, has been fundamentally defined by a radical difference, but "our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production" (Jameson 2005, xiii). In an age where the mode of production is dictated by platform capitalism, then, the project for this paper becomes one of reclaiming the future, or more precisely, of gathering the narrative data espoused by these tech companies (and the rhetorical complex that surrounds them) in order to understand the dimensions of the technopolitics of temporality that structures our digital lives. Kyle Stine and Axel Volmar (2021) refer to how media technologies not only constitute material infrastructures but also temporal infrastructures, architectures, and systems, where the result is *temporal regimes*, "the guiding principles of ordering time in a given locality or epoch," which are nevertheless "flexible and open to reconfiguration" (12).

My objective here, then, is to meaningfully contribute to the scholarship on the political economy of digital platforms and cultural production. More to the point, by focusing on this element of platform labor, this paper aims to reframe these discourses toward an analysis of how these platforms enforce and maintain temporal regimes of futurity, which must be known intimately if there is any hope of reconfiguration.

Work at Play

Cultural production has long been theorized in the context of limitation and constraint. Fundamentally, the inquiry begins: how is art created within a commercialized marketplace and the parameters it enforces? Indeed, in their book *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, authors Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (2009, 2) point out the "now staid phrase for explaining media production as 'creativity within constraints,'" whereby media workers are described as "the creators of popular culture and as functionaries in the service of capitalism." Even before the gig and creator economies overtook narratives of modern work, they noted: "Production studies need to conceptualize practices within the political economy of labor, markets, and policy. The convergence of media might open productive potentials for users, but they also introduce anxiety and uncertainty into the work worlds of those charged with making those interactive and 'empowering' media" (Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell 2009, 3–4). Much of this work, then, has taken place within media production studies, and it is useful to recognize how the creator economy, as dictated and shaped by platform companies, has seemingly studied this history and has been keen to repeat it. My analysis will highlight some of these historical similarities, as well as some differences, including an intensified notion of worker *pleasure as compromise*.

A leader in the creator economy, Twitch is a livestreaming platform launched in 2011 that is primarily used for gaming livestreams, but over time it has increasingly become a home for all kinds of streamers, with talk shows, game shows, cooking, sports commentary, vlogs, hot tub streamers, live music, and much more—indeed, the "Just Chatting" category has become the most popular. My analysis here is less about the content of Twitch's streams than it is about how these streams are monetized and the relationship these streamers have to discourses of the future of work as *shaped and dictated by these platforms*. According to

some estimates, Twitch has between 67% and 73% of the market for live-streaming (May 2021; Stream Scheme 2023). The average Twitch user is between the ages of 16 and 24 (41%) or 25 and 34 (32%), and as of 2019, 65% of users identified as male (Kavanaugh 2019), though Statista (2023) suggests that by 2022 the figure of male users was at 80%. The platform boasts over 7 million active streamers, though the vast majority do not make any meaningful income. For instance, as of September 2022, only 52,000 streamers were signed up as "Twitch Partners," creators who are granted a verified badge, priority customer service with Twitch, payout fees covered by Twitch (regular streamers and Twitch affiliates pay these fees themselves), interface priority, greater opportunities for monetization, and other benefits (Stream Scheme 2023). According to Variety VIP+, "Amazon's Twitch livestreaming service dominates the creator economy, where streamers make bank on showing merchandise and devoting entire streams to new products," (Bridge et al. 2023) further noting that Twitch has the highest average cost per paid social post in 2022 as compared to Instagram, TikTok, and other social platforms. The Variety report also highlights how many platforms are "starting to take [a] greater share of revenue splits from creators" (Bridge et al. 2023).

With this focus on platform monetization in mind, Twitch and livestreaming *as labor* remains under-theorized. Even T.L. Taylor, in her excellent landmark book *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (2018), fails to fully capture the platform's relationship to work and how this work is being narrativized by the streamers, viewers, press, and by Twitch itself. Taylor writes of Twitch streaming as a form of *labor as play*, concluding her book by arguing against "simple work/play dichotomies," because "the work of play is often deeply transformative, filled with difficult pleasures, enjoyable instrumentality, and complex negotiations between system, self, and others" (2018, 261–62). In other words, there is a way to see this labor as an interweaving of self, community, and platform based in a logic of play, cautioning

against such simple distinctions between how we think of the concepts of work and play in this context.

While there is certainly great truth to this analysis, it remains a troubling conclusion for me. I would argue that this idea of avoiding simple work/play dichotomies *is* playing into the economic and cultural interests of the platform rather than the streamers. As Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell (2009, 4) argued (about the pre-platform era): "The paradox of the media worker is that the promise of autonomy, creativity, fame, or wealth still oversupplies the labor market, allowing media industries to control the mise-en-scène (setting and action) of production narratives." This resonates strongly with what seems to be occurring within the platform economy today. Somewhat bizarrely (if understandably, considering the influence of her book), Taylor's model of avoiding simple work/play dichotomies—thereby playing into platform company interests—has become a common stance among scholars of Twitch and livestreaming. For instance, Nicholas-Brie Guarriello (2019) developed the concept of *personalized media economies* to describe how live streamers "are building the intimate space that allows them to capitalize on their labor and life events, while still working within the corporate social media economy," (1762) and he concludes, "although this pleasurable and personalized space might fall within the realm of exploitation under neoliberalism, it is imperative to move beyond a dichotomy of pleasure and exploitation for game live streaming" (1765). As with Taylor, I think we ought to ask why it is so imperative that we move beyond this distinction of pleasure and exploitation specifically, it seems, in the case of livestreaming.

Of course, this form of work is ideally situated to exploit romanticized notions of "loving what you do," being your own boss, and other promises made by neoliberal proponents of *passionate work*, as theorized by Renyi Hong. Hong argues that this affective narrative consequently results in workers accepting greater precarities and underemployment. Aligning with Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, Hong (2022) writes,

> the affective structure of passionate work is contextualized within this particular milieu as a form of *repair and reassurance*. Addressed to the postrecessionary realities of joblessness, class anxiety, and precarity, passionate work nonetheless maintains that work can lead to some kind of a good life. (9, emphasis added)

In other words, the idea of avoiding simple work/play dichotomies in these models of digital labor is inherently vulnerable to this story of repair and reassurance, for workers to compromise on job security and other benefits in favor of what gets called passionate work. Indeed, as Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt already saw, writing in 2008, "A fuller understanding needs to grasp both pleasure and pain, and their relation to forms of exploitation that increasingly work through dispersed disciplinary modalities and technologies of subjecthood" (21). The streamers who take on this work do not lack agency under these conditions, and there is a wide range of attitudes among them about the nature of what they do, as documented by scholars such as Mark R. Johnson (2021). The point is that they nevertheless exist within this affective structure, as Hong argued, which engenders insecure compromises in their labor.

Life of the Stream

In 2018, Twitch CEO Emmett Shear specifically likened the donation model of the platform, by which viewers show their appreciation through donations to their favorite streamers, to PBS, the Public Broadcasting Service. "I think streamers are their own mini-public broadcasting station where you've got this public service that you're doing by bringing this community together. Twitch has brought a scale to that" (Pei 2018). A few years after being bought by Amazon, it is important to take note of Twitch's rhetoric in this growth period, reflecting an increasing awareness of how the company's continued success will inevitably mean greater scrutiny for how broadcasters, and what it is they do, are

perceived by viewers, investors, the press, and others. Of course, by specifically and deliberately aligning Twitch streamers with PBS, Shear describes a model that is famously supported by the donations of *viewers like you*, a community-based public service that the platform simply gives users the tools to make use of.

Twitch is known for accommodating endless niches, with each streamer hoping to find what makes them stand out enough to be able to earn a living "doing what they love." Most mainstream press coverage is content to focus on the winners, usually with a sentence or two granted to the precarity of most streamers. For instance, in a 2021 article from The Globe and Mail called "Dream job 2.0: Seeking an alternative to the nine-to-five, Twitch streamers game for a living," the writer Stacey McLachlan (2021) refers briefly to the precarity of this work, and then concludes: "But while there may be no floor to catch you, there isn't a ceiling holding you back either." Again, this is on Twitch's terms, where the focus is almost invariably on the major streamers who have hit it big because still, even in 2021, it is covered as a trend piece rather than critically looking at the business of the platform.

More work has been done in recent years on the labor of livestreaming from a variety of perspectives, as scholars such as Mark R. Johnson, Jamie Woodcock, Christine Tran, and others have documented the monetization and professionalization of this labor as Twitch has rapidly expanded into the mainstream. Beyond them, though, the creator economy has often been theorized through, for example, the portmanteau of "playbor," which was first introduced by Julian Kücklich in 2005 to describe "play that is highly profitable for the entertainment industries, yet is seldom remunerated" (Goggin 2011, 358). As Goggin explains in her article on play and work, it was the poststructuralists who began to argue in favor of deconstructing the binary opposition between these two concepts, to bring together theories of convergence culture with the fears of the Italian autonomists like Maurizio Lazzarato (1996, 146), who warned about how "creativity,

 communication, emotion, cooperation, and values" are being "put to work."

Notably, there is some conceptual flexibility with the notion of playbor, which may also be used to emphasize or put new language to new forms of exploitation, perhaps most glaringly via the commodification of cultural or creative practices which were once considered as a complement to work, but have been more thoroughly co-opted by the market.[1] My contention on that point, though, would be that this nevertheless captures the limiting nature of the concept, which, as I will proceed to demonstrate, is insufficient for taking account of how this supposed duality of cultural practice is likewise co-opted by the platforms as a measure of their temporal and material power over worker self-knowledge, autonomy, and future success. In other words, these practices are not *only* co-opted by the market when the platform *creates the market*. I argue, then, that framing labor within the creator economy within this notion of playbor has the (perhaps unintended) added effect of trivializing and even undermining the actual labor involved, both in front of and behind the camera. Most simply, there is an element of risk for all creative labor that makes it intrinsically precarious, and platforms like Twitch tend to exacerbate these precarities by selling itself as a space of individual possibility, and on a structural level there are very few pathways to longevity or material support from the company (recall the small number of Twitch Partners as compared to the number of streamers). We also know that the top 1% of streamers make more than half of the revenue on Twitch (Bentley and Kim 2021). Even the Financial Times seems unable to ignore the reality of this donation-based platform economy, as Elaine Moore wrote in 2021: "For social media companies, tipping is not just a way for users to show their appreciation, it is a way to outsource payment altogether."

1 My thanks to Reviewer 2 for highlighting this point.

As noted above, many streamers view their activities on the platform as work. Some scholars have done crucial ethnographic work on how streamers are paid and how they think about their labor. First, it is no surprise that streamers have developed many strategies within the affordances of the platform to effectively monetize their streams. Max Sjöblom, Maria Törhönen, Juho Hamari, and Joseph Macey (2019, 23–24) introduce *revenue affordances* to describe "the practices that afford direct revenue in relation to specific behaviors and interactions within the stream," such as celebrating "subscribers and donors, in order to encourage further purchasing behaviour in the community through social pressure, togetherness or even competition." Elsewhere, Törhönen, Sjöblom, and Hamari, with Lobna Hassan (2019, 2562) found that streamers who think of what they do *as work* tend to spend the most time on content creation and tend to earn the most income. On the other hand, "it is the group that considers the activity equally as work and play, or playbor, who gains the least amount of income from their activities" (Törhönen et al. 2019, 2563)—they tend to earn even less than the "hobbyists" who consider what they do to be simply play. Interestingly, the authors suggest that it could be argued "we are trying to workify play, where this type of leisure activity is taking on characteristics of work, but not altering the way the activity itself is perceived or the gratifications derived from it" (Törhönen et al. 2019, 2564). First, one may ask: who is "we" in this conception? Further, the same authors elsewhere (2020) argue that "the apparent playfulness in this type of playbour might obscure the labour involved in creating a career and income," (179) which thereby "gives the video sharing platforms power over large creative efforts and therefore the responsibility for fair and justified treatment of the content and the content creators" (181). If anything, then, I would argue that it is the platforms, like Twitch, that are trying to *playify work*. My claim, then, is that this distinction matters. To suggest that "we" are trying to workify play still accepts the fundamental premise that, at its base, this is play which is somehow being redressed as work, when in fact the platform has organized a

space to work under the guise of play—as the playfulness of the work involved obscures the mechanics of this platformized economy, so the platform is de facto granted power over what is considered justifiable treatment of these creators. Put simply: while playbor is limited to an understanding of play taking on characteristics of work, to playify work, as Twitch and similar platforms seek to do, is to set the conditions by which money is made through play.

As an instructive example, consider Twitch's Creator Camp, which is designed to help aspirational streamers learn the basics of being a successful creator. The most interesting section, of course, is on how to monetize your content. Even the simple wording helps reveal the platform's ideology: "Earning on Twitch is the *icing on the cake*" (Twitch 2021)—in other words, it's a bonus, a perk, and certainly not what thousands of people do to sustain themselves. Moreover, the creation of Bits, which is how viewers make donations to their favorite streamers, was a specific response to the use of third parties, since at that point Twitch wouldn't get a cut! The creation of Bits is a clear example of platform enclosure, and they say as much within the Creator Camp, arguing that "Bits are also more reliable than third party donation methods because as a streamer, you're protected against chargebacks or any other potential payment issues. It's all handled within Twitch, so you can rest easy and focus on entertaining your community" (Twitch n.d.). The Creator Camp also includes a handy list of Dos and Don'ts, which includes a point about viewers feeling "disengaged if the primary focus of your content is generating revenue" (Twitch n.d.), which may seem disingenuous to wannabe streamers aware of how much revenue is generated for the platform based on what they create and perform. Moreover, as with any social platform, its rules and community guidelines are always shifting, and broadcasters must also work to keep up, lest their account be suspended for engaging in a practice that was previously allowed, not to mention the extremely nuanced regulations for streaming copyright-protected

content like music or television shows. Twitch refers to its own community guidelines as a "living document" that is constantly updated, so the onus is on streamers to be up to date on the latest changes that will determine the shape of their content and the ever-shifting limits on its monetization.

As full-time Twitch streamer Karvey (2023) explained to The Spinoff, "I don't get paid a salary, or even paid hourly by Twitch. You get paid through ad revenue, or through subscribers who can choose to pay $10 a month. You also can get paid through tips and donations and custom emotes. I get paid based on if people liked me, or if they enjoyed the content. The harder I work and the more I make people happy, the more I'll get paid." Therefore, if she isn't feeling up to it, she won't stream because "I don't like to project negativity"—a classic example of emotional labor. She then details her typical day, which includes "editing for a few hours," streaming for "five to six hours," and another couple hours of editing. This long day seems better than what many other streamers have reported. Twitch streamer Jamie Brausen told The Wall Street Journal in 2021 about brutal 12-hour streams: "I woke up the next day with no voice, puffy eyes and my whole body was sore. I wouldn't want to do anything else, but there's more work that goes into it than people might know or see" (Needleman 2021). Many popular streamers also employ editors and others to assist in their content creation, though, as reported by PC Gamer in 2022, they "have little individual power to negotiate their rates, whether it's because the streamer doesn't make much on their own or because they're so successful that it feels like they could find anyone to make videos for them" (Colp 2022). Significantly, all these aspects of monetization—subscriptions, Bits, stream length, editing, ads—are ultimately controlled by Twitch, from how much revenue streamers receive from each subscription to how many ads are expected within a stream. As Mark R. Johnson and Jamie Woodcock (2019) have argued, Twitch streaming relies on a "neoliberal subjectivity," which equates success through hard work with the number of hours streamed,

regardless of the physical and/or emotional toll. Still, Twitch seeks to playify, or rather mask, this labor, with monetization as icing on an ever-shrinking or cruelly evasive cake—neoliberal, yes, but also something beyond. As Arwid Lund (2015) writes in his critique of playbor, "The notion of playbour pretends to point at a higher unity of play and labour within the capitalist mode of (value) production and as such it is a highly ideological concept," (63–64) one that is "erroneous" (68).

Conclusion

In his book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013), Jonathan Crary argues that we live in a non-social 24/7 always-on environment, defined by continuous functioning, making it possible to work without pause or limit on a global scale: "As the opportunity for electronic transactions of all kinds becomes omnipresent, there is no vestige of what used to be everyday life beyond the reach of corporate intrusion" (75). For Crary, *sleep* is the only thing that escapes this intrusion, the only time we can step outside of networked privatized patterns of living—it's the only source of hope we have. In 2013, Twitch was only just emerging as a platform, and Crary couldn't have known that our everyday sleep has now become monetized as well, as many streamers have hosted "subathons," especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, where they will stream for 24, 48, 72, or more hours in a row, often with breaks for sleep that viewers can watch, too, all to attract attention and new subscribers. Twitch's precursor, Justin.tv, was created by Justin Kan, who began his livestreaming experiment in the late 2000s by streaming himself sleeping, so Twitch's ability to privatize and monetize Crary's last remaining shred of hope, our sleep, has been baked into the platform from the very beginning.

In 2022, Twitch CEO Emmett Shear acknowledged labor problems with the platform, but called on the US government to take care of it. Streaming, he said, is

> not quite a W-2 job and it's not quite a contracting job. I think we could really use legislation that created a third option that was appropriate for the gig economy and the creator economy. One of the fundamental dynamics of the creator economy is that tech companies aren't used to the level at which creators rely on them for their business. A rapid change to how a product works isn't just a matter of, 'This person didn't get as many views on their video,' but rather, 'This person can't make rent this month.' (D'Anastasio 2022)

Here, Shear (who has since stepped down as CEO), directly points to how changes on the platform can impact the livelihood of streamers, and yet he passes responsibility onto the government.

Keeping in mind some basic fundamentals—the authority of the platform and the information it holds outside the reach of its users, the disjunction between revenue generation for the platform and its workers, the rhetorical influence of playbor and the focus even among scholars on avoiding or transcending the binary of play and labor—suggests that the platform's framework of playbor is increasingly dominant as a model or *the* model of platform work, and that this is a technopolitical future being codified through this kind of rhetorical slippage. A possible alternative future comes into view if this slippage is meaningfully corrected, as streamers might come to see what they do differently, bringing into sharper relief the conditions of work mandated by the platform and its strategies of obfuscation. While some attempts thus far at collectivizing platform or streaming-based workers have faced numerous challenges, overcoming the rhetorical power and influence of the platforms, and the temporal regime of what the future of work will be that they cultivate, would be a crucial step to cooperating on ways to resist platform exploitation and carve out stronger protections for streamers moving forward. At the very least, we certainly cannot continue to choose to play by the rules set by commercialized platforms, because it's not play at all—it's work.

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[8]

The Neglected Extraction: Netflix's Pandemic Branding and the Crisis of Social Reproduction

Sam Thompson

Crises occur when the social formation can no longer be reproduced on the basis of the preexisting system of social relations.
Stuart Hall and Bill Schwartz (1988)

A word like "dataveillance" conjures images of shadowy corporations following our consumer habits, profiting from selling our information to third parties. However, recent literature highlights a more beneficent side to this process: the datafication of everyday life allows for forms of "quotidian caring at a distance" (Hjorth et al. 2020, 27). It is possible to entertain both notions; the centrality of data for media companies is at once extractive and useful. Exchange value and use value are produced; the process posits abstract labor and concrete labor. This chapter follows this dialectic—this "unity of the diverse" (Marx 1993, 101)—as it figures in the useful and extractive elements of platform screen media. Extraction and utility are not only co-present in domestic media

consumption, but each aspect is carried within the other. In order to escape the neat division between utility and extraction, this chapter investigates their co-constitution in the distribution and consumption of screen media. This argument unfolds through a discussion of platformization as a response to the crisis of social reproduction and a discursive analysis of how Netflix presents its products as both a useful and extractive response to this crisis. Investigating the place of "screen time" within the company's investment and promotional materials reveals a vision of profitability inextricably linked to their role in the reproduction of everyday life, and a vision of reproduction inextricably linked to profit.

The Dual Character of the "Fix"

In the words of the Endnotes Collective, "at no time does a labour-power roll off an assembly line" (Gonzalez and Neton 2013, 60). Instead, this commodity is made and remade via "the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally" (Laslett and Brenner 1989, 382). This "maintenance" process is social reproduction: cooking, cleaning, caring, and innumerable other varied and complex forms of labor. The capitalist regime of social reproduction reifies the divide between the private, reproductive sphere and the public, productive sphere. Gender roles are constructed through the distribution of labor across these spaces; social reproduction is reduced to "women's work," which is largely unremunerated in the home and "naturalized into nonexistence" (Bhattacharya 2017, 2). The truth of how value is produced explodes this neat dichotomy: capitalism has always been parasitically dependent on the reproduction of labor-power, and, in contemporary capitalism, profit extraction is increasingly dependent on activity within the home, as capital searches for new frontiers in the ongoing shift from the production of commodities towards the "becoming-rent of profit" (Marazzi 2010, 37). Likewise, capitalist

production is the very condition for social reproduction: the wage is used to buy commodities, and commodities are consumed in order to reproduce life. In other words, the "reproduction of social life and that of capital's abstract forms are … mutually imbricated" (Rey-Araújo 2023, 11).

The erosion of working-class people's capacities to maintain labor-power, social relations, and life-giving institutions constitutes a crisis of social reproduction (see Gimenez 2018, 300; Mohandesi and Teitelman 2017, 62–63). The crisis, in its current North American form, was precipitated by a confluence of secular economic decline (leading to stagnating wages and longer working weeks), neoliberal policy commitments (diminished trade union density, the withdrawal of state welfare, and divestment from state infrastructure), and endogenous factors (chiefly, demographic ageing). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this scenario by simultaneously pushing more labor into the home and, after initial moments of state investment, doubling down on austerity, debt, and privatization, leading Alessansdra Mezzadri to delineate our current moment as "pandemic neoliberalism" (2022). The crisis is experienced disproportionately along the lines of race, immigration status, gender, sexuality, and disability, through several aspects of social life: diminished access to a gate-kept private healthcare system; poor working conditions, leaving less time and capacity available for social reproduction; threadbare federal and state welfare provision, which fails to meet individuals' and families' needs in line with rising inflation and population growth, fails to effectively administer its meagre mandate, and succeeds in dovetailing with racist state violence and surveillance (see Roberts 2022); and an ageing citizenry, which is straining an underfunded (and increasingly privatized) system of elder-care services.

Following Angela Mitropoulos's (2013) prescient analysis, the state and capital respond to crises and the radical contingency that they entail through the necessity of the contract. The contract is often located in the heteronormative domestic space founded

on the twin covenants of property ownership and marriage. The logic of the family home—the *oikos*—becomes the locus of concern, value, and political and economic policy. In this context, queer and trans life is abandoned, ignored, or consigned to irrelevance. The only protection against the proliferation of contagion through the unpredictable multitude is the indivisibility of the family form. In the US state response to COVID-19, single-person households and single parents were disproportionately negatively affected (Kowal et al. 2020; Yavorsky, Qian, and Sargent 2021). The family became the semiotic surrogate for everything the system was trying to preserve when fighting the virus. In this sense, the pandemic merely intensified the child-centric political logic of heteronormative capitalism that endlessly marginalizes suffering in the present to honor those yet-born future generations (for the canonical expression of this thesis, see Edelman 2006).

While the contemporary conservative worldview favors the family form on ideological and practical grounds (see Cooper 2017), policymakers and commentators were responding to a genuine crisis in domestic family life during the COVID-19 pandemic: an intensification of the "permanent" crisis of social reproduction (Federici 2013) that saw parents forced to take on greater caring responsibilities and a pronounced spike in domestic violence. Nancy Fraser (2016) argues that care crises express one of capitalism's constitutive contradictions: the drive towards greater profitability, requiring the expenditure of more labor-time, systematically undermines workers' capacity to reproduce themselves as healthy individuals capable of performing this necessary labor-time. This tendency causes regular periods of care deficit: increased extraction of labor-time at work decreases the amount of time available for social reproduction, leading to inadequate mutual support between workers and inadequate provisions for the elderly, disabled people, and children.

Capitalism responds to crises with "fixes" that heighten extant features of capitalism, rather than alter, abolish, or transform

its dynamics. David Harvey (2001) theorized the importance of outsourcing production to the Global South ("the spatial fix") and maximally automating the production process ("the technological fix") as responses to the crises that beset capitalism from the 1970s onwards. Fraser suggests that there is, in fact, a "technological fix" to the crisis of social reproduction that involves the increasing prevalence of egg freezing and high-tech breast pumps (2016, 34–35), although this is still a trend mostly located amongst affluent workers in the Global North.

Platformization, as a process of organizational, technological, and socio-political transformation, should be understood, in part, as a response to the crisis of social reproduction—a shift in the "system of social relations" à la the Stuart Hall epigraph above. Many of the most successful platform companies provide basic reproductive services, such as transportation, food preparation and delivery, and cleaning. Even housing provision undergoes a form of platformization, as short-term rental companies such as Airbnb increasingly function as "housing-based welfare," subsidizing rising living costs in urban areas (Van Doorn 2022, 12). This has led commentators to designate the platform economy as the "internet of things your mom won't do for you" (Fisman and Sullivan 2016) and the "massification of the servant tasks" (Collier, Dubal, and Carter 2017, 9). The telling invocation of mothers and servants in these phrases summons the history of gendered and racialized domination present in North American social reproduction (Hartman 2016). As such, we should understand the proliferation of platforms as an "innovation of racial capitalism" in the way that it reconfigures the urban workforce, along the lines of race, citizenship, and migration status (Gebrial 2022). Platformization is not only a shift in the organization of firms, the mode of value extraction, and the forces of production and distribution; it also constitutes new social relations around the built environment and the home, altering the matrix of gender, race, and class.

Niels Van Doorn goes as far as describing the proliferation of these reproductive services as a "platform fix" to the crisis of

social reproduction (2022, 4)—capital's strategic post-welfare state lifeline for an ailing economic system. The "platform fix" has two seemingly opposing features: it meaningfully addresses some symptoms of the crisis of social reproduction, while simultaneously exploiting neoliberal labor relations and crisis tendencies to extract huge profits (Piletić 2022). This duality of the fix corresponds to the "dual character" of labor under capitalism (Marx 1990, 136). Labor is always both concrete and abstract: concrete labor produces use value, and abstract labor produces exchange value. Similarly, the platform fix is both useful and extractive. Current thinking about the platform fix often siloes these features; instead, we should try to understand the ways that the drive to profit is contained within the platform's utility, and utility embedded in some of its extractive tendencies.

The platform fix houses a more specific response to the crisis of social reproduction: the "screen fix." The screen fix encompasses the multiple ways that screens, most notably through streaming platforms, increasingly perform as care surrogates, pedagogic tools, and resources for social reproduction. We can think of this fix as an amalgam of the technical and spatial fixes: distinctive technologies are exploited to facilitate a shift towards reproductive space as a terrain of value extraction. Unlike most of the platform "servant tasks," streaming platforms are widely accessed by the mass of people in the Global North (and increasingly the Global South), and they are a legitimate form of "useful media" (Morley 1986; Acland and Wasson 2011). The domestic utility of streaming platforms illuminates a longer history of media's relationship to social reproduction. Amy Holdsworth draws on personal experiences of living with disabled family members to argue for television as a "technology of care," detailing the ways that it enriches extant caring networks while liberating the caregiver to perform other reproductive tasks (2021, 25). She demonstrates that, through their usefulness, media forms expand the zone of value extraction. The increased extraction of value via greater reproductive activity is a temporal

form of extraction along the same lines as debt or incarceration (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 18). Under this logic, a future, deferred value will be generated from consumers by reproducing the conditions of life in the present. We do not need to accept the idea that social reproduction produces value per se—as in, produces exchange value, as well as use value—to argue for the fact that, just as waged labor puts conditions on reproduction, the configuration of domestic life puts certain conditions on the ways that value is extracted elsewhere. Changes in the distribution and intensity of social reproduction can, therefore, facilitate greater value extraction in the directly productive economy.

There are at least two camps in media studies that are engaged in thinking through the relationship between platform ascendency and social reproduction: media and technology scholars oriented towards political economy, who emphasize the extractive tendencies of these new technologies (see Sadowski 2020), and media sociologists and ethnographers, who highlight the utility of the media forms. In Hjorth et al.'s discussion of the intergenerational caring capacities of locative media, they propose "digital kinship" as a way of thinking through the "intimate mundane co-presence" that digital technologies are able to create (2020, 16). In this analysis, datafication and dataveillance are not only processes of extraction; they also allow for the proliferation of useful domestic panopticons, what the authors term "care at a distance" (27; see Pols 2012). Social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp are used by families to strengthen affective ties, especially in the context of migratory dislocation (Hjorth et al. 2020, 180). As is prevalent in discussions of social reproduction and digitality, the focus here is on the circulation of immaterial goods such as emotions, rather than the material infrastructures of social reproduction as they relate to broader political economy (see, for example, Wilson and Yochim 2017; Thorburn 2016).

One way of thinking through the dialectic of utility and extraction is to consider how streaming platforms narrativize their relationship to the crisis of social reproduction. The pandemic was a

moment in which many of the major streaming services became more fundamental to social reproduction, and this intensification led to a degree of self-awareness about their functional role in domestic spaces. YouTube accelerated their YouTube Learning project, offering a wealth of free educational videos for children during lockdown, and Amazon made a slew of children's content available for free. These are clearly exercises in public relations—vital for companies that have loud and angry detractors—but they also reflect a pressure to recognize how key screens have become in the web of social reproduction. Among the streaming platforms, Netflix has been the most adept at discursively exploiting the intertwined useful and extractive dimensions of their product.

The Dual Character of "Screen Time"

Among the streaming services, Netflix is particularly dependent on communicating a bloated image to its subscribers and investors. This was key during their long period of unprofitability, and it continues to be vital during the current period of uncertainty and falling subscriber numbers. One element in this marketing strategy is their vision of domestic space: the Netflix home is at once a place of collective family care and individual self-care (Maly-Bowie 2019, 222). The home that Netflix promotes is always a mobile one, encapsulated in their company slogan: "See what's next. Watch anywhere. Cancel anytime." But, as Chuck Tryon notes, even the bespoke capacities of device multiplicity and platform mobility are often presented as "device[s] for reinforcing family harmony … [and] getting families to connect in front of the main television set" (2013, 69). The fantasy of family harmony, in other words, is still contained in the expanded possibilities of a siloed (but self-sufficient) home life. Netflix unifies these two competing visions of the idealized domestic space—self-care and family harmony—through the figure of the parental spectator. In promotional material from 2017, Netflix used survey data from subscribers to connect the streaming

platform with various strategies of maternal self-care. One image shows the reasons why mothers value Netflix, with "Take a Break from Daily Routine" in the top spot, below a header stating that "Sneaking in Stream Time is Much Needed Me-Time for Moms." Another graphic shows all the activities that Netflix accompanies, including playing with the kids, doing laundry, making dinner, and walking the dog. These images were promoted through Netflix's StreamTeam bloggers, giving the campaign an intimate, mother-to-mother authenticity (Chapman 2017; Gagen 2017).

Netflix coheres this image of the idealized home as both isolated and intimate by recognizing that both aspects constitute the home as a site of social reproduction, and that their product is equally as implicated in domestic labor as it is in recreation. Recognizing social reproduction as increasingly a form of "flexible labor," Netflix responds by promoting the virtues of the flexible spectatorship that attends multi-device mobility and on-demand streaming (Tryon 2013, 221). "Flexible labor" here is a euphemism for precarity, where the disruption of the Fordist working week leads to a disruption of the social reproduction that was integrated into this routine. In the context of the pandemic and the return of many school-aged children to the home, multi-device mobility became an increasingly key message in Netflix's marketing strategy. Netflix endeavored to upgrade its status within the family ecosystem, from a "metabolic" force to a "moment" in the chain of social reproduction. In other words, it sought to present itself not only as affectively regulating the relationship between different family members and their environment but also as an input in the domestic labor process that contributes materially to social reproduction. The Netflix blog Tudum gives an insight into this self-conception. In March 2023, the site published an article encouraging families to have an "Earth Week Themed Watch Party" (Tudum Staff 2023). In the article they link to an activity book, which simulates a school schedule with games, nature walks, and recipes, all linked to content available to watch as a family. Here, Netflix projects

itself as part of the reproductive infrastructure of everyday life. Netflix has also sought to promote this infrastructural status by shifting the rhetoric around binge-watching, from psychic and physical malady to a vital pandemic resource of self-care (Horeck 2021). Neta Alexander (2021) calls this watching mode "survivorship," acknowledging that bingeing can be communal, caring, and genuinely useful to the reproduction of daily life, while also recognizing the ways that this image is used by streaming companies to sell their brand. She argues that, in the context of a global health emergency, survivorship "combats uncertainty with causality" (Alexander 2021, 54): each episode reliably, necessarily, follows the last. This is a vivid instantiation of Mitropoulos's argument about how capitalism responds to crisis and contingency, as the home becomes a site of comforting necessity in the face of the aleatory dangers of public space.

Netflix frames their "screen fix" to the crisis of social reproduction by repurposing the semiotic referent of "screen time." Screen time is a popular way that caregivers quantify and limit access to screens, including phones, TVs, tablets, games consoles, and laptops. The concept functions as a conservative response to cyclical "moral panics" about the developmental, social, and spiritual effects of excessive media consumption, permitting caregivers with surplus capacity to police their children's consuming habits, while designating those without surplus labor time as negligent and feckless. In recent years, Netflix has mobilized two seemingly antipodal notions of screen time to communicate a message about how the company produces value. Analyzing these communications reveals the dialectical place of media—as both useful and extractive—within the context of reproductive crises.

Starting in December 2021, during one of the most devastating COVID-19 spikes, Tudum hosted a blog series called "Screen Time," written by "Dad Blogger of the Year" Clint Edwards (Edwards 2021). The series aims to counter the dominant narratives around children's screen time, which emphasize the adverse social and

developmental effects of excessive watching and promote the need for televisual rationing. Edwards identifies four benefits that screen time provides. First, it is a space of psychological and physical safety. Second, it is a pedagogic resource for the children (Edwards 2022a; Edwards 2022d). Third, screen time is an opportunity for family intimacy. For Edwards's family, even the often-dreaded task of collaborative scrolling to choose the film becomes a chance for familial intimacy (Edwards 2022b). Fourth, screen time facilitates moments of parental self-care.

Nothing from Edwards's screen time basket of goods is a novel contribution of platform streaming. Most of these resources were identified under the rubric of the "social function of television" in media studies scholarship in the 1980s. David Morley's treatise on the "family use of television" draws on ethnographic research to generate a theory of media's domestic usefulness (1986, 12–16). TV regulates and organizes the family dynamic, providing opportunities for intimacy and communication, while also acting to establish and stabilize family roles and tasks. Edwards is thus right to identify streaming platforms as a key resource for caregivers in the domestic sphere. However, like much of the canonical writing on media's social utility, his posts pointedly efface the reproductive realm as a space of labor and value extraction. The closest he comes to this fact is acknowledging that caregivers are tired and therefore require moments of self-care and rest. The manifold psychic benefits of screen time, in both Morley's and Edwards's accounts, work to diminish the key material advantages of screen time: screen time liberates time for social reproduction. One of Morley's interview subjects pithily articulates this fact—taped children's TV shows are a "godsend if I'm trying to do the washing or something"—but this is never folded into the wider argument (84). PR executives for TV studios have long sought to make this link explicit by marketing their program's content, form, and scheduling as part of an integrated circuit with the rhythms of the homemaker's routine (see Spigel 1992).

Netflix's more inward-facing investor materials are also founded on aggrandizement, but they seek to directly translate "speculative narratives of … capital investment, exchange, and return" and "fantasies of scale" into real-world future profits (Crawford 2021, 35). Screen time, under this logic, is divested of any moral or developmental associations and becomes purely an index of market share and potential profitability. This becomes apparent in the company's investor relations communications. In 2019, one of the directors lamented that they still had less than 10% of the US population's "screen time"; in the most recent investor report, perhaps in an attempt to alleviate concerns about falling membership and falling profits, they boast of having 7.7% of America's "screen time." Here, screen time is the quantifiable amount of time spent by the population watching the platform. This number—either as a global percentage or a cumulative total—is not a direct indication of profit. Netflix's business model still rests mostly on subscriptions. Subscribers watching more Netflix or more users accessing a single Netflix account will increase their percentage of screen time, but it will not directly impact their accumulation of profits. So, why is screen time an important metric for Netflix? In part, screen time does indirectly contribute to income generation. The more time spent watching, the better Netflix can hone their algorithm that, in turn, will attract future subscribers, and Netflix's recent turn towards advertising constitutes screen time as a new frontier of data collection. Screen time also contributes to Netflix's network effect, by increasing the possibility that users will engage with the Netflix brand outside of watching time and will talk to their friends about Netflix products. Arguably more salient, however, are the ways this data communicates a "fantasy of scale," a vision of cultural hegemony and market dominance that buoys users, investors, and the wider market. Embedded in this fantasy is the idea that Netflix is an increasingly integral infrastructure in users' everyday lives. In other words, Netflix's projected image is of centrality to social reproduction.

Long before Netflix's interventions, scholars and care professionals were warning against the concept of screen time, arguing that any quantifying measure cannot account for the ways that screens have embedded themselves in the infrastructure of everyday life. Meredith Bak (2020) argues for reorienting screen-enabled care away from the restrictive concept of screen time and towards the more flexible and spontaneous concept of "stretchy time." "Stretchy time" prioritizes children's capacity to transform their experience with screen media through engagement, play, and collaboration. Those who oppose screen time are invested in a debate about the dominant temporal regime that governs our historical moment. In more general terms, these thinkers are gesturing towards the opposition between "abstract time" and "concrete time." In his re-interpretation of Marx's social critique, Moishe Postone posits that the "abstract form of social domination intrinsic to capitalism's fundamental form of social mediation is the domination of people by time" (2005, 75). This domination involves the supplanting of concrete time—the time of lived experience, activity, and events—by abstract time, which functions purely as a measure of productivity. In presenting the unified whole of utility and extraction within its responses to the crisis of social reproduction, Netflix subtly acknowledges some of the ways that value is produced but effaces its participation in a process of domination—a domination that happens in the home as well as the factory. Media studies has investigated the extraction of greater value from workers at the immediate point of platform production, the extraction of environmental resources implicit in the material infrastructures undergirding platforms, and the extraction of value from platform consumers through data harvesting. The "neglected extraction" is the extraction of value via the facilitation of greater social reproduction in the domestic sphere. Analyzing the ways that media's useful and extractive properties work in a dialectical motion to create value—and sustain the capitalist logic of value—is one way of attending to this neglected extraction.

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[9]

IMDb and the Privatization of the Digital Commons

Isadora Campregher Paiva

Make a list of factual information. Accept submissions from users. Watch it grow. Then partner with a large company to sell products. And sell licenses to the data for $15K/year. (Give the top contributers [sic] a "free" membership to something to keep them from suing you.) Yeah, that could work.
"Hacker News" poster (10101010101 2011)

Introduction

In the decades since its inception in 1990, the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) has established itself as the go-to online source for film-related information. Not only is it the most popular film-related database in the world, with around 500 million visitors per month (Similarweb 2024) it is also the largest, with over 19 million titles, 676,123 of which are classified as "movies" (IMDb

2024) This extensive coverage was achieved due to the site's crowdsourcing data model, which relies on a large and diverse community of contributors—many of whom come from inside the film industry (IMDb 2023a).

IMDb's particular combination of the power of crowdsourcing with editorial supervision (user-generated information is vetted before it appears online) gained it the respect of the film industry. The site has become the de-facto public record of film activity, working, for instance, with the Screen Actor's Guild (SAG-AFTRA 2022) and having their every step reported by the main industry publications (Ben Fritz 2008; Alexander 2011; Lang 2021; Kilkenny 2022).

Academia has been less openly welcoming to IMDb. While the website is widely used by scholars, it is often seen with skepticism and has received little academic attention as an object of study in its own right. In this chapter, I will trace the history of IMDb, focusing on the ways in which its data sharing practices have changed as a result of its ownership structure, from a commons-based organization running on volunteer labor and hosted on university servers to a commercial website owned by one of the world's largest companies, Amazon. IMDb thus functions as an excellent case study of the privatization of the digital commons, a wider and ongoing process in which digital goods that had been commonly owned or even seen to be outside of the property system altogether become privatized. By exploring the historical context of the platform's transition to a for-profit entity, as well as its impact on the platform's user community, I aim to provide insights into the ways in which digital enclosures can shape the production and circulation of knowledge.

Previous Scholarly Work on IMDb

There is no shortage of research that uses data from IMDb. Curiously, the majority of this comes not from film scholars, but from STEM fields, using the website's treasure trove of data

quantitatively. This has taken the form of, for instance, sentiment analysis of user reviews (Keerthi Kumar, Harish, and Darshan 2019; Topal and Ozsoyoglu 2016), film connections to establish chains of influence (Bioglio and Pensa 2018; Wasserman 2015; Wasserman, Zeng, and Amaral 2015), and network analysis (Batagelj et al. 2005; Fatemi and Tokarchuk 2012; Gallos et al. 2013). A smaller number of film and media scholars have undertaken research in a similar vein, particularly in the realm of film connections and networks (Repiso and Marfil-Carmona 2011; Canet, Valero, and Codina 2016; Ehrich et al. 2022).

Comparatively few studies have engaged with IMDb as a platform worth investigating in a qualitative sense. In Vivian Sobchack's "Why I (love) IMDb" (2013) she argues that the reviews contributed by IMDb users are an important resource for film scholars to gauge audience reception, for they offer direct access to "ordinary" viewers' thoughts. Curiously, when Sobchack does use IMDb reviews in her research, she does not treat them as a typical source worthy of proper citation, quoting them without ever naming the individual users nor linking to the specific review (Sobchack 2011, 2012). It is worth noting that even her impassioned defense of IMDb is littered with caveats:

> Very few of my university colleagues share my enthusiasm. Indeed, the site is generally viewed in scholarly circles with the same suspicion and snobbery leveled at the similarly democratic (and hence often misinformed) Wikipedia. Although it is used in academic circles, IMDb is not considered a resource for "serious" research. … While I occasionally use the site to see what surprising titles show up in a search of a given genre, for significant information I'm much better off searching the online AFI Catalog of Feature Films. … Although I certainly use IMDb for quick reference, I do not value it as a conventional or reliable research tool through which to find out "facts." (Sobchack 2013, 38)

In my experience, this level of distrust for the website's collection of "facts" continues to be commonplace among film scholars. Sobchack's affirmation that she resorts to archives for such data is ironic; at a recent conference, the head of a film archive admitted to me that people working on archives often take metadata from IMDb. Indeed, the skepticism about IMDb is nowhere to be found in the writings of librarians and information scientists. These scholars were some of the first to write about the site (Naun and Elhard 2005, 41) and were not only positive about it, but saw in it much to inspire traditional resources: IMDb "can teach a lesson or two about interface design and authority control to any high-priced library automation software" (Jacsó 2000, 56). In a review of IMDb and IMDbPro for librarians, Brunning (2015, 18) calls it "hands down the internet authority for answering factual questions," adding that "library vendors could strive to emulate the abundance of data fields and match this with a useable Web interface, which IMDB accomplishes." In the most comprehensive analysis of the website's cataloguing practices, Naun and Elhard (2005, 41) compare the organizational principles of IMDb to traditional library standards, concluding that "librarians can look to the IMDb, not only as an effective reference tool, but also as a compelling reference point to inform the evolution of cataloguing practice in response to new technologies and new conventions for information storage and retrieval."

What none of the academic articles on IMDb do is engage with the website's history in more than a couple of paragraphs. As we shall see, the absence of references to primary sources has led scholars to adopt the website's own individualistic mythology about its origins.

Sources and Methodology

Tracing the development of internet sources through time is a particularly difficult endeavor given the ephemerality of such

entities. Despite their aura of permanence and constant accessibility—encapsulated by the famous line from *The Social Network* (2010): "The Internet's not written in pencil ..., it's written in ink"—internet documents are easily and constantly erased. In 1997, Brewster Kahle, founder of the Internet Archive, estimated the average lifetime for a URL at 44 days (Kahle 1997, 83). While subsequent estimations suggested the number is somewhat higher, it still typically hovers around a couple of months (Taylor 2011).

Even when a page's *location* is stable, its *contents* may well change. This is a good reason for scholars to be wary of citing purely online sources, since subsequent readers may view material that diverges substantially from what the writer saw when the citation was made. The typical manner of academic citation for websites, adding a date in which the source was accessed, is a feeble acknowledgement of this problem while offering no solution. What should it matter when the author accessed the source, if the reader cannot see it as it was then? Archiving online resources, as is the intent of the Internet Archive through its "Wayback Machine," is the only true solution to this problem, and scholars should take an active role in archiving their sources on the website. I did so whenever possible when citing online sources for this paper.[1]

While a solution to the problem of academic citations, this does not quite solve the general issue of the ephemerality of internet sources. The Internet Archive uses a combination of web crawlers and user submissions to archive webpages, making it so that frequently visited pages might be archived several times a day, while others are never archived at all. Still, for a commonly accessed platform like IMDb, the Wayback Machine was an invaluable source to investigate the site's changes through time.

1 In the references, I used archive links whenever possible and date of archival in lieu of date of access. Since the full original link is contained inside the archived link, adding both seemed unnecessary.

In the case of IMDb, another issue is that the first years of the website are lost since it preceded the Internet Archive's own establishment in 1996. Indeed, IMDb is positively ancient by internet standards: its origins can be traced back to 1989, in a series of posts to a Usenet group called "rec.arts.movies." Usenet is an early non-centralized computer network that predates the World Wide Web; though still alive today, its importance has been steadily diminishing since the mid-1990s. Usenet's newsgroups were a predecessor to online forums like reddit, primarily used for discussing particular topics and sharing files. Thankfully, much of Usenet has been archived through Google Groups. The collection is sadly incomplete and has been ill maintained, with the advanced search no longer functioning—an unhappy irony lampooned by journalist Matthew Braga in his article "Google, a Search Company, Has Made Its Internet Archive Impossible to Search" (2015).

Despite these limitations, having access to the Usenet archive and the Wayback Machine has been vital, allowing me to write what Richard Rogers (2013, 66) has called "a website biography." This approach is particularly suited, as Rogers points out, to the Internet Archive's organization, which is accessed through individual links. This allows one to study the evolution of a single page over time, reading and comparing the snapshots from the dates in which a page has been indexed. Since my analysis is primarily concerned with IMDb's privatization, my focus will be on two specific parts: (1) The IMDb History page and Usenet archive to determine the origins of IMDb; (2) the copyright page of IMDb to show the changes in data sharing.

The History of IMDb

In the majority of articles that cursorily go over the history of IMDb, it is told as follows: IMDb started as the *personal* (this word is used a lot) project of movie geek Col Needham, who was soon joined by other (invariably unnamed) likeminded people to form

a fledgling online movie database, which became a commercial website in 1996. A minority of sources go on to mention that the site was sold to Amazon in 1998.

These summaries are often littered with slight divergences and inaccuracies, but what they all have in common is the predominant role given to Col Needham as IMDb's founder and acting CEO, a position he holds to this day. In these short origin stories, often no sources are cited at all (Silver 1996, 72; Marfil-Carmona and Repiso 2011, 1211; Verhoeven 2012, 2) or they draw exclusively from journalistic pieces (Blom and Strauven 2006, 4; Cooper 2019, 406)—their respective sources are an LA Weekly article "Do You IMDB? How a fanatic helped put Hollywood under one big tent" (Finke 2004) and the Los Angeles Times's "Col Needham created IMDb" (2013), both of which draw on interviews with Needham. Naun and Elhard (2005, 25) have by far the most judicious and accurate account of IMDb's early history in the academic literature; their sole source for this portion is the IMDb History page, which is no longer live, but has been archived by the Wayback Machine (IMDb 2003).

Pre-history: Usenet

The Usenet archives are a fascinating window into the early years of the internet. At the time, most of Usenet's users were connected through universities and used their real names, facilitating citation. As can be seen from these names, the user base of rec.arts.movies skewed heavily male, in accordance with the rest of Usenet (Sutton 1994). Perhaps unsurprisingly given that demographic, the most popular early dataset that started circulating in the group was a list of actresses and their filmographies, the popularity of which can be attested to by the fact that it was simply known as "THE LIST" (Scher 1990).[2]

2 The origin story of this list was debated inside rec.arts.movies. One poster affirmed that "It seemed to start as a list of actreses [sic] with nice eyes. For a while, the subject line was "Those Eyes." … It now functions, in part,

These early posts reveal much more dispersed origins to the "rec.arts.movies database" than what is portrayed in the usual IMDb history. Though Col Needham's paramount importance in shepherding the database cannot be denied, contrary to most sources, he was not the first to compile credit listings in the group. Already in 1989, there were lists with movie ratings voted on by the group's members (Musciano 1989) and the aforementioned list of female actresses (Driskill 1989) in circulation. A system developed in which an individual was in charge of maintaining a list, recording additions and corrections emailed to them by other users and posting updated versions of the list at regular intervals. When the person in charge of a list would step down or disappear without notice, others would take up the mantel, which is how Andrew Krieg became the manager of the actresses' list from 1990 (Krieg 1990). Needham's first real contribution to this system was made in August 1990, when he created the (male) "ACTORS LIST," crediting Krieg's female one as his template (Needham 1990b). In the same month, David Knight created the director's list (Knight 1990). Since the actresses' and actors' lists only covered people who were still alive at that point, Needham created a new (gender-neutral) list dedicated to dead actors (Needham 1990c).

The birthdate of IMDb is typically seen as October 17, 1990, when Colin Needham reportedly[3] posted a collection of Unix shell scripts that could be used by anyone to search those four lists

as a sort of trivia quiz: can you think of a missing entry? It also allows various people who think it's silly (or worse) to feel politically and morally superior" (Dalton 1990). The arguable sexism of the list seems to have been a commonly debated question in the group, with an FAQ post from February 1990 stating that "This list has been described as 'Actresses I'd most like to pork'" (Scher 1990). These origins share a certain similarity with the genesis of Facebook as a rating system for women, a commonality which invites further study.

3 While I could not find a post by Needham on the archive on that date, there is one from October 7, already with a crude version of the Unix code, which he supplies in answer to a poster's question (Needham 1990a).

(IMDb 2003). This history page is no longer accessible on IMDb.com, and no equivalent page has taken its place. Thankfully, it has been indexed multiple times on the Wayback Machine, and its changes through the years reveal a curious scenario. The bulk of the text remains unchanged throughout the years it was up (IMDb 2003, 2010). On that last snapshot before the history text disappeared, it was accompanied by a preamble with a birthday message, written by Colin Needham, celebrating IMDb's 20th anniversary. In the next snapshot of the page, the entire history is gone, and only the preamble remains (IMDb 2011). This anniversary commemoration was barely changed for the remaining years in which the page was live (the last archived page is in 2017), making it amusingly inaccurate: not only is IMDb frozen at 20 years old in the message, but the line "below this open letter is a bit more history about the site, for those interested" feels like a mockery given there is nothing there.

Move to the Web

IMDb was an early migrant to the World Wide Web: its website was first made available in August 1993 (Hartill 1993). To get a sense of just how early that was, in June of 1993 there were only 130 websites in existence (Gray 1996). Like Usenet, the World Wide Web was usually connected to universities. Not coincidentally, the "rec.arts.movies database" first became a website through a university. The driver of that change was computer programmer Robert Hartill, who managed to get his institution, Cardiff University, to host the site (Hartill 1993). The site became increasingly prominent outside of Usenet circles, to the point that it became widely known as "the Cardiff movie database" (Cardiff University 2013; Chapman 1995).

The Web traffic soon overwhelmed Cardiff's server capacity, making it necessary for mirror sites to be established (IMDb 2003; Finke 2004). By 1995, there were mirrors, mostly attached to universities, in the US, Australia, Germany, Japan, South Korea, and South Africa (Chapman 1995). The broad geographical coverage

 helped serve international costumers. To reflect these changes, the name of the database was officially changed to the Internet Movie Database, or IMDB, in 1995 (Chapman 1995).

The Commercialization of IMDb

The turning point for IMDb to a private company came in late 1995. As the internet took off, so did the site, with traffic doubling every couple of weeks (Finke 2004). This rapid growth left the volunteers in charge of what were now multiple lists unable to cope with the amount of data they were being sent; it also overwhelmed the servers and internet bandwidth its institutional supporters were willing and/or able to donate (IMDb 2003).

"So we were faced with this very difficult decision. Do we give up and say it was a fun five years? Or do we see if we can make a business out of this?" (Needham, cited in Finke 2004). They chose the second route, and in January 1996, the database was launched as a commercial website: imdb.com. The company was incorporated in the UK, where Needham is still based, and its revenue was generated through advertising and sponsors.

It would be naïve to see this merely as a process of cynically "selling out" by the site's founders. Hosting a website with such high traffic demands is, after all, not free. With the internet still in its infancy in the 1990s, other ways of financing such an endeavor were hard to even conceptualize. Even Wikipedia, the most well-known commons-based internet organization, was founded in 2001 as a for-profit venture funded by advertising, only becoming an ad-free non-profit in 2003 under the umbrella of the newly-created Wikimedia Foundation (Meyer 2013, 56).

According to IMDb's (now deleted) official history, the decision to incorporate was not taken lightly:

> Because of its growth out of the Usenet community, the mission statement to provide it for free to the users of the internet, and the strong anti-commercial sentiments as more

> corporate traffic and advertising moved online, deciding to turn the IMDb into a business was a very tough and debated decision. … Despite fears expressed in the internal debates about incorporating, that they would suffer a huge anti-commercial backlash, there were surprisingly few complaints (IMDb 2003).

My perusal of rec.arts.movies posts confirms this characterization. I could not find a single post referring to the change in the website's commercial status, negative or otherwise. The lack of open discontent was likely due to a combination of factors. First of all, those who were deeply engaged with the building of the database were invited to join the company—the names in the new company's registry of shareholders (GOV.UK 1997) are largely the same as those most active on the Usenet lists.[4] In contrast, those users who were just sporadically supplying data seemingly did not begrudge the more active volunteers a chance to make a living out of what had been, for years, unpaid labor. Perhaps most importantly, to more passive users who simply wanted a reliable resource to find film data, the shift to a commercial enterprise went largely unnoticed, and was potentially even welcome, given the trade-off of a better functioning website under a single banner (Chapman 1995).

An Amazon.com Company

Two years after the incorporation, the site's team was still largely made up of volunteers (Needham 1997). This would only change in April of 1998, when the company was purchased by Amazon (Needham 1998). IMDb continued to operate as an independent subsidiary, with Needham as CEO. At that point, Amazon was far from the behemoth it is now—it sold nothing but books and was still confined to the US. Perhaps for that reason, this change in

4 Thank you to Joachim Polzer, one of the founders of IMDb, for pointing me to this source in an email correspondence.

 ownership also seems to have generated no backlash in the community rec.arts.movies users.

The synergy potential with Amazon, which was looking to expand its business into video and DVDs, was obvious. If a user looked up a film on IMDb, the site could easily link to the Amazon page where that film could be purchased. In addition to this, IMDb's community of users had generated copious amounts of data that would be useful for Amazon. By that time, IMDb provided a database of almost 400,000 movies, television shows, and video games, about 1.4 million industry cast and crew members (Finke 2004), which would certainly be helpful for Amazon to build its catalogue. IMDb also had more than 18 million visitors a month by then, making it one of the most popular websites in the world (Finke 2004). Data on this internet-savvy community of users—user email accounts, film ratings, the popularity of certain films and stars—was certainly valuable as well to an online retailer looking to establish itself in the video business.

In the intervening years, IMDb's synergies with its parent company have only grown. Amazon is now not just a retailer, but also a streaming platform that is increasingly producing its own content. One of the clearest examples of how IMDb's catalog is continuously used in new ways by Amazon is X-Ray, an exclusive feature on Amazon Prime Video that displays information (e.g. who are the actors in a scene, what song is playing, etc.) in real time overlaid on top of the action (Wolfberg 2018).

Since the Amazon purchase, IMDb has developed new revenue streams. Its subscription service, IMDbPro, was launched in 2002 and is aimed at entertainment professionals. It provides a variety of services including displaying contact details for industry members and information on films still in development. The service currently costs US$150 a year and is highly rated: "A comment much repeated in entertainment industry journals and blogs is 'if you are not in IMDB Pro, you are not in the industry'" (Brunning

2015, 16). The top 300 contributors to the database currently receive free access to IMDbPro Premium (Needham 2023).

IMDb's foothold in the industry was strengthened in 2008, when it acquired two other companies that provided important industry services: Box Office Mojo and Withoutabox. Box Office Mojo brought box office data to the public site and granular box office breakdowns to IMDbPro (Ali 2008). The festival submission platform Withoutabox had a stranglehold on most major festivals submissions for many years, though it became widely hated (Follows 2013, 2016) and was eventually shut down by IMDb in 2018 (Ng 2018).

IMDb's least successful ventures have been its several attempts to establish an ad-supported streaming service as part of site. This was done first in 2008 in the form of a "Watch It" button on a film's page (Hoffman 2008). In January 2019 the idea resurrected as "FreeDive" (Mehta 2019), rebranded to "IMDbTV" a mere six months later (Humphries 2019) and again as "Freevee" in 2022 (Andreeva 2022).

While the incorporation and sale to Amazon generated practically no backlash, several changes to the website later on were very unpopular. A commonly voiced criticism is that the website's *raison d'être* as a database has been increasingly undermined, with film metadata being visually obscured, placed behind paywalls and even removed. Some information that was previously openly available was pushed to the paywalled IMDbPro (metalzones 2017). In a post entitled "The UI Destruction of IMDb" Paul Coogan (2021) analyzes the website's interface through the ages, showing how metadata was steadily pushed aside in favor of ads and trailers, forcing users to scroll down and click obscured text boxes to access what had previously been clearly displayed. In a viral Twitter post, journalist Adam Davidson (2021) stated: "I would definitely read the story about how Amazon ruined imdb. One of the most clear, easy sites on the web transformed into a 1990s hellscape of popup ads and awful design." In response,

 former IMDb employee Chris Alef (2021) blamed these changes on Google, whose introduction of feature snippets in 2014 started to display IMDb information directly on its results pages. This made users less likely to click on the IMDb site, which reacted by sacrificing the customer experience to preserve revenue.

By far the most criticized move by IMDb among their user-base was the decision to shut down its message boards, which existed between 1999 and 2017 and were extremely active. The justification for this was that the forums had become too toxic (Spangler 2017); presumably, they were not easily monetizable and too expensive to moderate. IMDb announced this decision less than three weeks before it implemented it, and sadly only a small minority of posts have been archived on Filmboards.com; the discussions continue there, and there is even a Chrome extension that artificially places them on their relevant IMDb pages (filmboards-com 2017). The elimination of this space was seen as a betrayal of the community aspect of the website, particularly egregious given the site's origins as a fan-operated forum (for an archive of the backlash, see theblah95 2017). Their decommission likely opened the doors for Letterboxd, which has become increasingly popular in recent years by leaning into its social network aspect for cinephiles (Marsh 2021).

Shifts in Data Sharing

In the early years of IMDb.com, despite the website being a for-profit enterprise, its terms of use were still rather liberal. The entire dataset was available for free download in several formats, and sharing of the data was "positively encouraged," so long as the files were left entirely unaltered and no fees were charged. Furthermore, the database files could not be used to construct another online database, and CD-ROM distribution required written permission. This basic text remained unchanged from its first archived appearance on the Wayback Machine (IMDb 1996)

until as late as December 6th, 2000, over two years after the purchase by Amazon (IMDb 2000).

The next archived version of the Copyright page is on October 16, 2002, by which time this message had been substantially altered (IMDb 2002). In addition to generally more restrictive terms, users were now only allowed "to quote small subsets (less than 20 names/titles) of filmography or title related data" (IMDb 2002). The site's owners saw fit to add the following caveat about the rights to "User Posted Material":

> If you do post content or submit material, and unless we indicate otherwise, you grant IMDb.com and its affiliates a nonexclusive, royalty-free, perpetual, irrevocable, and fully sublicensable right to use, reproduce, modify, adapt, publish, translate, create derivative works from, distribute, and display such content throughout the world in any media. (IMDb 2002)

In other words: users essentially abdicate the rights to the material they contribute but are not allowed to use and share the database freely. The data that had been contributed by users before this warning was added, that is, by users who could not in any way be construed to have consented to such unfavorable terms, was presumably treated as if covered by them—a questionable legal approach.

In the intervening years, the copyright statement has become more and more restrictive—banning, for instance, web scraping except with express written consent (IMDb 2023b). While subsets of IMDb data are available for access for personal and non-commercial use (IMDb 2023c), this is far from the totality of data accessible through their website.

For many years, IMDb showed no signs of providing an Application Programming Interface (API), which would allow users to directly query its data. This changed sometime in 2020, when IMDb's "developer" page appeared for the first time, with

a notice about their API (IMDb 2020). It is clear from the ad copy that this service is not meant for researchers or amateurs, but for commercial purposes only, urging the reader to "bring the world's most complete entertainment data to your service" and bragging about how "our data powers investment decisions, sentiment analysis and content acquisition strategies" (IMDb 2020). The price tags for the use of IMDb's API are astonishing: the most complete service costs 400,000 US dollars for 12 months, plus additional costs according to the number of requests (AWS Marketplace 2022). The contrast to other movie databases like The Movie Database (TMDB) or the Open Movie Database (OMDb) is stark—these provide APIs free of charge, with the latter charging token amounts for calls that go above 1,000 per day (TMBD 2023; Brian Fritz 2023).

In fairness, the site seems remarkably lax about actually enforcing its strict terms and conditions. Their robots.txt file is surprisingly permissive (IMDb 2023d), and indeed this is what has allowed me to access its archived pages through the Wayback Machine, which has scraped it liberally.[5] The bulk of research using IMDb data (see "Literature Review" section) is likely scraping the site directly or indirectly, and tutorials on how to scrape IMDb are scattered throughout the internet, with no discernable move from IMDb to take them down.

Digital Enclosures

What happened to IMDb is a particularly stark example of what law scholar James Boyle (2023) has dubbed "the second enclosure movement." The first enclosure movement was a long process starting in the 13th century, and intensifying between 1750 and 1850, by which communal lands in England were systematically fenced off and privatized (Rosenman 2012). The second enclosure

5 Compare this, for instance, to the robots.txt file of Quora, which explicitly disallows the Wayback Machine's crawler (Quora n.d.).

movement is, in contrast, aimed at exploiting "the intangible commons of the mind" (Boyle 2003, 37). In both cases, things that were formerly thought to be common property, or even outside of the property system altogether, were turned into private property (Boyle 2003, 34).

Boyle showed particular concern for the encroaching of copyright law over databases in the 1990s, since compilations of facts had previously been seen as inherently uncopyrightable. The prime example of this is The European Database Directive (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 1996), which granted copyright protection to "databases which, by reason of the selection or arrangement of their contents, constitute the author's own intellectual creation" (Article 3, Paragraph 1). But this begs the question: what constitutes "the author" of a crowdsourced database? Clearly, in practice, the majority of contributors to IMDb have not been granted ownership even if they were contributors before the database went private. If Boyle finds the extension of copyright to *any* compilations of facts "troubling" (2003, 39), that extension to crowdsourced databases should be especially concerning.

In a time where "data is the new oil," collections of well-organized data seemingly become too valuable to be left in the hands of the commons. IMDb's example is especially clear-cut because its status as an early-mover on the internet meant that it operated for years as a decentralized collective before it ever became a private company. In 1990, when the Usenet lists first got started, the commercial potential of the internet was far from clear. The usage of university infrastructures for IMDb's first forays into the World Wide Web is a testament to that. Later crowdsources databases, such as the music-dedicated Discogs (founded in 2000) were privately owned from the beginning. Discogs's sole creator, Kevin Lewandowski (apud Kahle 2020), credits the site's success to the fact that it started with a strong community, which led to high quality data, and only later did the website add the marketplace, which is now the force behind its revenue. Like

IMDb, the site has received increasing wrath from its users for its clunky redesigns that seem to be at odds with the needs of the community (slang238 2023) and escalating fees, with the site currently receiving a 9% cut of all sales (briefrocka 2024). An even starker example of a community that turned against the increasing profit-motive of its owners is that of Couchsurfing, a hospitality exchange service which was formed in 2003 as a nonprofit and which became a for-profit company in 2011, to the revolt of many of its members (Lapowsky 2012). Adding insult to injury, the website started charging subscriptions in 2020, meaning that people were being asked to pay to host others in their home for free (_Aspekt_ 2022).

The process of transferring the fruits of collective free labor into the private ownership of enterprises that subsequently restrict the access and purpose of those previously shared goods is a recurring one in the history of the internet. One could well argue that all Web 2.0 platforms are doing this to a certain extent—users generate content for free, which is then monetized. This monetization typically happens in stages, with the platform initially focusing on community building, and only later introducing ads, paywalls, restrictive licenses, and tiered subscriptions, effectively fencing off what was once freely available.

The term "accumulation by dispossession," put forth by Marxist economic geographer David Harvey, is helpful to understand this process's perennial importance in the history of capitalism. The term is a modification of Marx's "primitive accumulation," which plays a pivotal role in his account of the origins of capitalism, the original enclosures being his primary example (Marx 1999). Harvey takes issue with the word "primitive" in "primitive accumulation," arguing that it leads to a false understanding that this type of accumulation is relegated to an early, transitory phase of capitalism, rather than a feature of the system which reoccurs again and again (Harvey 2003, 144).

A new wave of accumulation by dispossession seems to be currently taking place, further arguing in favor of Harvey's timeless terminology. The rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in the early 2020s has seen text, image, video, and sound generation models that are trained on copious amounts of data on the internet, regardless of copyright status and consent from creators. In the words of sociologist Jenna Burrell (2023), "it's a Marxist nightmare: the work of millions accruing to a few capitalist owners who pay nothing at all for that labor." GenAI is a testament to just how comfortable tech companies have become with plundering collectively produced data—copyrighted material is treated as if it were part of the commons, and is then regurgitated with no reference to the original. The companies in charge of such tech then charge for its usage, profiting from this large-scale theft. Ironically, IMDb itself has been a victim of this process, first with the above-mentioned introduction of Google's featured snippets, and now through its data being used to feed such models as ChatGPT.

Conclusion

In many ways, the history of IMDb is a familiar one. As I have argued, its move from a commons-based initiative to an increasingly walled off asset of a major corporation is but one example of the broader trend toward privatization of the digital commons. In its specifics, however, IMDb's history is less familiar. Despite being the most popular source of film-related data in the world, it has been underexplored in academic research. This study aims to bridge this gap, offering a foundation for future research on IMDb and contributing to the broader field of internet histories.

In light of the challenges posed by the ephemeral nature of digital content, documenting and preserving internet history becomes increasingly vital. This study not only highlights the privatization of a key digital resource but also underscores the need for diligent historical work to maintain the integrity and

 collective memory of the digital commons. IMDb's own erasure of its history page, the individualized creation myth of the platform around the figure of Colin Needham, the little-known contribution of universities worldwide to the website in its early stages, all contribute to obscure the commons-based foundation of the database. Particularly given ongoing developments in GenAI that display a further emboldening of accumulation by dispossession in the digital realm, it is crucial to intensify our efforts to document and understand these histories.

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[1 0]

KaraGarga: The Antinomies of a Private Torrenting Network

Sudipto Basu

Piracy as Strategic Sovereign: A Program for Piracy Studies

Platform studies as a subfield deals mostly with corporate platforms and their techno-cultural logics, economies, and policy debates. My essay focuses instead on online cinephilic piracy networks as competing models of organizing a global cultural economy. Specifically, I will attend to the configurations of labor and convenience in KaraGarga (henceforth, KG), a peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing community based on the BitTorrent protocol, closed to the public internet. Before discussing KaraGarga in detail, however, I want to clarify its larger stakes. Why study a phenomenon like piracy, which many see as a parasitic response to mainstream, legal media cultures? Does piracy say something about contemporary platform cultures?

As many scholars have argued, an analytic focus on piracy underlines the oppositional but also often complementary relations between informal and formal media economies—whereby

informal, gray circuits extend and supplement media production and circulation beyond formal markets; often paving the way for market capture by sensing and cultivating new demands, protocols, and territories (Sundaram 2010; Lobato 2012; Lindtner 2020). Pirate networks often precede a formal media economy or service, even as they depend on older (formal or informal) economies of circulation to create a demanding public or to source raw materials.

Pirate P2P protocols like BitTorrent used to distribute video and music, which predate the cultural turn towards commercial streaming, may have shaped the formation of that industry by home-delivering films and TV series directly to the end-user via the internet—bypassing physical formats like CDs and DVDs. The media scholar Abigail de Kosnik argued in 2010 that piracy would define the future of internet-delivered TV. In the early days of streaming, de Kosnik suggested, illegal downloading offered the "most usable and feature-rich service" and had the best potential to cultivate new forms of audience engagement (de Kosnik 2010, 2). For example, early streaming services like Apple iTunes and Amazon Video on Demand tied down users to proprietary formats and exclusive media players to implement Digital Rights Management (DRM)—creating portability issues across media devices and OS platforms. On the other hand, video downloaded via Pirate Bay used standardized DRM-free hardware and software substrates that integrated easily with the existing media habits of most net users. Pirate services like The Pirate Bay (henceforth, TPB) also covered a great deal more content than any legal service under the 'same roof' (file directory). Torrenting therefore offered a vision of user-end convenience that streaming platforms sought to replicate.

However, streaming has not necessarily won the battle with piracy. A recent anti-piracy study notes that around 60% of respondents to a YouGov poll admitted to pirating TV and film content that was available on a legal streaming service (Cohen 2023, 2). Valued at $2.34 billion a year, film/TV piracy is no mere

parasitic externality to the low-cost convenience offered by streaming services. It is a well-organized economy that demands to be studied as what the media scholar Jonas Andersson calls "strategic sovereigns." While most mainstream commentaries frame piracy as reactive and residual within today's dominant media configurations, something to be defeated, Andersson (2009, 64) argues that pirate actors "increasingly set the terms with regard to establishing not only technical protocols for distribution but also codes of behaviour and discursive norms. The entertainment industry is then forced to react to these terms." Pirate actors act as strategic sovereigns by articulating alternative economies of labor and infrastructure, ideological rhetoric justifying their actions, and their own visions of the internet as a space of free exchange.

Therefore, I argue, we need to move beyond the familiar terrain of ethical and political questions about the legitimacy of piracy familiar to humanists—beyond even the grand critiques of intellectual property regimes and radical histories of piracy (Barbrook 1998; Burkart 2014; Liang 2011). Along the lines suggested by de Kosnik and Andersson, we need to ask more pragmatic questions about their techno-politics of sharing: How do pirate networks sustain themselves over time? How do pirates imagine themselves as consumers or producers? How do they address the shortcomings of existing infrastructures? What divergent desires, affordances, and tendencies permeate pirate networks? Obviously, trading bootleg tapes or discs is not the same as swapping hard drives full of media files or sharing RapidShare or MEGA links, nor is it the same as seeding torrents or hosting videos on pirate streamers. These configurations entail different expectations of quality, quantity, and variety of content; speeds of circulation; distributions of labor, access, and convenience; degrees of exposure to law enforcement; kinds of reciprocity between peers, and so on. Scholars must be able to account for this internal differentiation: trace their tensions, limits, and interdependencies.

Karagarga in a Comparative Matrix: A Methodology

My analysis centers on a private, members-only torrent tracker, Karagarga, dedicated mostly to arthouse, cult, classic, alternative, international, and rare cinemas. In the spirit of comparison outlined, my close reading of KG contrasts it with the differential affordances and configurations of access, labor, and convenience offered by public torrent trackers like TPB, mainstream platforms like Netflix, and boutique streamers like MUBI. (These are emblematic cases.) Along the lines suggested by Andersson, I am interested in KG's organization of the infrastructure of media distribution, its logics of governance and rules, its barriers to entry, built-in norms of access, idealized social forms, organization of labor, interface design, tech-literacy, and so on. I am influenced here by the walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2016), since it gives me a heuristic for the user-end study of digital apps and platforms in situations where one cannot interview designers and executives or just open up the blackbox. Because KG's designers are unknown and there is no record of its evolution as a tracker, I am partly adapting the walkthrough method—which sketches "an app's environment of expected use by identifying and describing its vision, operating model and modes of governance"—to trace KG's embedded affordances, norms of behavior, and social imaginations. Fortunately, the KG manifesto and rules give us a proxy for authorial intent, and thereby a starting point for our analysis.[1]

A Distribution Technology, Not a Platform

Before I proceed, I also want to make a conceptual distinction between platforms and distribution technologies that may be

1 Since KG pages are not publicly visible, I have uploaded PDF versions of the manifesto here: https://pdfhost.io/v/Zjo~RxPMw_The_KaraGarga_Manifesto.

relevant for this edited collection. I address KG here not as a platform, but as a tracker (in its technical function) or a p2p file sharing community (its social role). Platforms, I believe, carry specific connotations of modular, monetizing, expansionist, and ambient technological surrounds that mediate an increasing number of everyday activities. So much so that we associate the activity habitually with the platform: that is, shopping on Amazon, watching films/TV on Netflix, payments on Venmo, searching for information on Google, etc. As a number of scholars have argued, platform discourse in media industries carries out a particular kind of ideological or discursive work (Gillespie 2010; Nieborg and Poell 2018). It normalizes oligopolistic business practices, invasive surveillance, and the often violent restructuring of entire economies and ecologies in the name of one-stop convenience and optimized user experience. Platformization hinges on the creation of standardized substrates that can be repurposed for a wide variety of use cases and the mediation of multi-sided markets (Steinberg 2022). While KG shares some infrastructural substrates with (streaming) platforms—an internet network built on packet switching protocols, dynamic indexing systems for files and users, standard formats of file compression and encoding, etc.—it nonetheless entails diverging imaginations of the underlying social form, demarcations of labor, leisure, and responsibility, and distributions of material internet infrastructure. Despite showing some tendencies of platforms (modularity, standardization, and convenience), KG's rigid social form, non-monetary purpose, narrow functionality, limited interoperability, and barriers to entry therefore inhibit it from becoming a platform. On the other hand, distribution technology (Lotz 2017) is a more appropriate if modest description of KG. While KG shapes global film production and consumption—allowing low-budget and experimental filmmakers to directly share their work for example (as KG Artists), and molding the contours of global, high-cinephilia and film archiving—it does not exert the strong monopolizing force that platforms exert on markets and audiences.

"Blessed Are the Seeders, for They Shall Inherit the Ratio": KG Negotiates the P2P Archival Problem

With a base of around 16,000 users, KG is well known among cinephile, archivist, and scholarly circles for its careful user-driven curation of an expansive, robust archive of international cinema/video, and relatively high rate of file sustainability. Its value as a shadow archive has been acknowledged in mainstream news outlets (National Post 2015; Jáuregui 2019) as well as cultural blogs (Lacey-Hughes 2022; Schindel 2022). Created around 2005 as a niche arthouse tracker to address the limits of public trackers like The Pirate Bay as long-term digital archives, its remit has since expanded to include video art and some literature and music. KG's cultural mandate of creating a holistic digital film archive is, in fact, a precursor of more formal endeavors such as the Missing Movies project recently formed by film professionals, which aims to make a diverse, richer version of film history available for streaming platforms through the legal work of rights clearances, restorations, licensing agreements, and so on.[2]

Yet peer-to-peer (P2P) protocols like torrents have an inherent flaw as archiving technologies: the actual files are shared directly between peers; the tracker merely indexes torrent metadata and coordinates the transfers. Durability requires the presence

2 Another relevant comparison might be with UBUweb, the online archive curated and maintained by the artist and writer Kenneth Goldsmith. Dedicated to officially public-domain modernist works in the categories Film & Video, Sound, Dance, Visual Poetry, Conceptual Writing, and more broadly Arts and Letters, UBUweb has an overlap with KG in terms of its cultural mission of modernist archiving. Yet it differs from KG in that it has a narrower North American and European-centric vision of modernist culture worth preserving. On the other hand, because of its curation and archiving being managed by a small curatorial team headed by Goldsmith, and because it shares films as stable video streaming links, UBU does not raise the questions regarding digital labor, availability, and exclusivity that a private, community-oriented and collectively-sustained p2p archive like KG does.

of peers in a torrent swarm. On TPB and public trackers, the availability of film history is narrow and fickle because content uploading is largely handled by organized release groups called warez scenes that compete to source and release recent films, games, and music albums not long after (or even before) their official launches (Maigret and Roszkowska 2015, Ch. 2). TPB users are largely looking to circumvent the costs and uneven availability of mainstream content. Speedy circulation of files tied to hype cycles around the latest releases trumps any long-term sustainability of files or older and marginal content. Since a large volume of files have to be continuously released by warez scenes to stay in the game, these produce frenetic cycles of sharing, followed by sudden drops in circulation. Once warez scene seeders leave a swarm, lay users have to keep the torrent alive: which usually produces a fragile archive. A librarian's 2016 quantitative study on TPB's file-sustainability calls it a "vast content graveyard" of dead files (Martin III 2016, 5). Searching for alternative or non-western cinema on TPB, one might also be tempted to also call it a desert: many titles have never been indexed.

KG's manifesto likens itself to, variously, a municipal library, research library, and archive—asking members to "remain civil, protect the collection, return items as required." Given its dedication to non-mainstream cinema, P2P's inherent fragility poses a problem that it must negotiate. While Henri Langlois believed in keeping film history alive through regular exhibition at the Cinémathèque Française—famously saying that "films have to breathe, if you don't project them regularly, they will die" (Jacobs 2020)—KG's manifesto valorizes *archiving through constant circulation*. The more files are shared, the more copies exist across the world with users, the better chance a film has of surviving and being seen. So just as municipal libraries regulate timely returns with registrations and fines, KG addresses file-sustainability by restrictive user entry policies (cinephiles can invite only a few "responsible" friends, there is no open signup) and by rewarding users through a ratio and bonus system for contributing to the

commons (i.e. uploading new rare material, making subtitles, or even seeding regularly). If a user does not abide by minimum ratio requirements, download access is automatically curtailed until they have fulfilled it. The moral economy of torrents implied in the use of seeding/leeching metaphors for uploading/downloading—which Jonas Andersson (2012) has likened to blood donation—is made starker in KG's regulation of user behaviors through ratio. Ratio is the keystone of KG's very economy: its social organization of labor and responsibility.

While public torrents sometimes request users to seed up to 1:1, KG internalizes this obligation into its algorithm, which tracks each user's data usage. Put simply, a user's ratio is the total volume of data uploaded (plus bonuses), divided by total download volume, across their entire activity on the tracker. By enforcing ratio requirements, KG intends to deter the unequal distribution of pirate labor so pervasive in public torrents, where most uploading is done by warez scenes while other users merely leech. Ratio thereby gamifies desirable behavior to maintain a certain degree of social reciprocity, preventing users from becoming mere leechers. While KG is resolutely non-monetary (trading for money is prohibited), ratio functions as a kind of inside currency and a "labor incentive" (Russell n.d.), segmenting users into ranks like Power User, Luminary, VIP, etc. As labor incentive, a high ratio allows a user the freedom to download more files, request specific content or subtitles, etc.

KG's Social Imagination: A Cinephilic Workers' Society

But ratio also gives anonymous users prestige and faciality in the community. A user's profile tellingly shows their upload and download volume, share ratios, bonuses, and user class, underlining the labor-centric ethos of the tracker. Ratio also rewards user labor by a greater say in the forum where decisions are made, since recognizable usernames and higher ranks are given

more importance. While KG may be understood as an online gifting community, reciprocity is mediated not directly by interpersonal obligations but by a technological protocol. BitTorrent communities concerned with large user populations cannot be based on one-to-one mutual reciprocity; they are made of weak social ties. What matters in a torrent network are population scale probabilities; the failure of individual peers does not matter so long as there are other peers to route and seed data. As a "gifting technology" (McGee and Skågeby 2004), ratio thereby guarantees the p2p archive's sustainability, while also concretizing the social obligations, norms, and privileges embedded in KG's inherently social form of file sharing. It reveals the social form idealized by KG: a cinephilic workers' society whose norms of belonging are tied to what I call the *cinephilic labor of engagement*.

KG's valorization of cinephilic labor resonates in a sense with the pride that earlier generations of film society activists took in organizing screenings, editing journals, or carrying film cans around. The pleasure and privilege of seeing films is here intimately tied to the labor of fostering an alternative film culture, which is at odds with a consumerist imagination of the film viewer common to all streaming platforms. KG's model of cinephilia therefore starkly contrasts with the paradigmatic model of convenience offered by Netflix, whose user is imagined as a neoliberal *homo economicus* demanding a seamless, optimized, and convenient experience (Alexander 2017). Whereas Netflix relies on the disavowed cognitive labor of users and, more importantly, the hidden labor of a vast underclass of data cleaners and taggers—not to mention coders and designers—to produce this seamless experience, in KG the demands on user labor are all-too transparent (Finn 2017). KG's labor-centric social form is therefore also a departure from the canonical analysis of digital 'free labor' or 'playbor' offered by media theorists like Tiziana Terranova (2000) and Julian Kücklich (2005). Whereas those analyses predicted the dynamics of platformization—the commercial exploitation of disavowed, unwaged user data and labor by tech corporations—KG

 presents a non-monetary social configuration that arrests the seemingly inexorable slide of turn-of-the-millennium digital community spaces towards commercial platforms (a tendency apparent in Isadora Campregher Paiva's analysis of IMDb in this volume).

KG's Interface Design: The Active, Communal User

This communal, labor-centric social imagination of KG is also writ large in the database aesthetic of its interface, which is modeled on the ranked search lists and bulletin board systems of the early internet. Unlike the Netflix scroll, KG's interface is open about its reliance on the database as a symbolic form (Manovich 2007). Lev Manovich opposes database as a symbolic form to narrative; while the first represents the world as only a provisionally ordered list of items open to manipulation, the second implies a causal ordering of the world according to events (2007, 44). While databases are the substrate of digital cultures, most digital objects are not experienced by users in the 'raw' form of databases, but through their rendering as interfaces, which allow some degree of 'interactive narrativity.' If database and narrativity constitute a spectrum, KG and Netflix occupy its opposite poles.

Netflix's famous endless scroll is rendered by a complex multivariable algorithm by synthesizing a bewildering range of datasets, including live user behavior (when one pauses, how many minutes of what film/shows have been seen, how users navigate, etc.) and input from "Hollywood and global film industries, licensing agreements, genre expectations, star power, and many other factors" (Finn 2017, 91–97). In KG, on the other hand, there is no thorough separation of a user frontend from the algorithmic backend, mediated by a personalized interface. While KG uses simple algorithms to manage torrent metadata, order search lists, aggregate trending torrents, track ratios,

etc.—generating a frontend for users—it makes no attempt to narrativize these data flows into an intuitive, virtual silo customized for individual users, which the user might inattentively (or mindlessly) browse. Using KG to share films requires active user attention and decision making.

Reading and obeying rules is, for example, a key part of navigating KG's interface—yet another example of KG's required labor of engagement and community obligations. While streaming platforms are designed to be intuitive GUIs whose terms and conditions end users can skip, and while public trackers like TPB enforce no rules (thereby placing no obligations), KG is practically unusable without its rules.[3] They cover everything from the terms of user engagement, kinds of content allowed on the tracker, quality of uploads, and ratio requirements. Periodically updated by discussion on KG forums according to changing necessities or peer consensus, these rules are considered best practices to sustain the archive. A volunteer team of moderators enforce them, banning users for repeated violations, deleting duplicates, flagging upgrades, and so on.

The emblematic distinction between Netflix and KG's interface design is perhaps better understood by grasping the interface's function in contemporary platform economies. For Alexander Galloway (2012) and Branden Hookway (2014), the interface is a *mode of mediation* or *form of relation* between the cybernetic system, the digital subject and the world at large. Interfaces mediate relations between the user and the complex networks of capital, labor, land, energy, and infrastructure that subtend computational processes (which in turn act upon the world). Interfaces modulate between relations of opacity and transparency, immersivity and hypermediacy, interactivity and passivity. They toggle between being a tool (that one consciously uses) and a media environment (that one forgets about). They are at the heart of how platforms interpellate users as individuals

3 PDF print of KG rules here: https://pdfhost.io/v/hyafhlb1W_Karagarga_Rules.

and manage them as populations. The Netflix interface disavows the big data substrate of algorithmic culture—the user's entanglement in the actions of a massive population of fellow consumers—through an intimate narrativized address which revolves around a "you." As Wendy Chun (2018) would put it, Netflix addresses itself to a multitude of "YOUsers," artificially separated, without any obligations to other peers in the network. The irony here is that while Netflix's algorithmic culture is at its base composed of divergent data aggregates and multitudes of users (with their different desires, viewing habits, etc.), its narrativized address imposes a form of sameness while trying to address each singular YOUser: 'viewers like you have also liked this,' 'We think you will love this,' 'Top picks for you.' As Chun has pointed out, this creation of artificial network neighborhoods of likeness between users produces homophily: a hatred of difference laundered as a love of the same. In terms of cultural consumption, this entails a redoubling of the most myopic kinds of mainstream-popular bias, and a consequent denigration of the marginal, the experimental, the Global South, the different, etc. This cultural homophily is precisely what a tracker like KG hopes to redress. Here, we can see the political function of KG's database-like interface. By preventing the siloing of user tastes, the database form encourages active user engagement and decision-making: the KG user is exposed to a much wider range of offerings to choose from, has to navigate and order search lists according to their own preferences. KG's database-like interface also insists on visibilizing the labor of users: each upload or custom-made sub mentions the user who uploaded or fulfilled a request, who is often thanked personally by other users in comments. Contrary to Netflix's disavowed sociality, KG's labor-centric social design partitions the distinction between the user as an individual consumer and a node/peer in a large population (i.e. a community member or citizen) rather differently, by individualizing responsibility through the ratio system. The user is made acutely aware of their personal obligation to others through mechanisms like ratio and the database-like interface.

The Temporality of User Experience

This distinction between Netflix and KG also carries over into the temporality of their user experiences. In a way, the pastoral metaphors of streaming and torrenting conjure similar visions of networked convenience and the availability of a huge content library at hand. But, as Neta Alexander (2017) has shown, the affective economy of streaming is geared towards seamless flow, quick response, and constant connectivity. Buffering and waiting is a constant source of anxiety, interrupting the self-possessed, always-optimizing temporality of the neoliberal subject. To ease this anxiety, the Netflix algorithm constantly optimizes for resolution according to bandwidth, processing power, and screen size. On the other hand, while KG promises a smoother browsing experience than TPB (cutting out its spammy clutter), waiting is built as an expectation into the very nature of its viewing experience. One must not just wait for a film to be downloaded (true of all torrenting), ratio requirements compel a KG user to 'buy' their leisure time with prior labor. Simply put, there is no Karagarga and chill. Unlike the simple press-and-play of commercial streaming, several kinds of labor and investment are required of the KG user to enjoy films. They must choose which rips to download, buy hard drives to store films, learn how to make rips and subtitles, source rare films, etc. It is this very messy materiality and tacit knowhow of being a pirate-cinephile that is redistributed away from the user in streaming platforms in the name of convenience.

MUBI vs. Karagarga: Two Diverging Paths

KG's social form is also its constitutive difference from its closest streaming alternative, MUBI. While MUBI, like KG, was also initially centered around an online forum for cinephiles, it junked Social (the community forums) while transitioning fully into a boutique arthouse streamer circa 2015. As Jennifer Hessler (2018) has shown, when MUBI was founded in 2007, its founding platform strategy was to tap into and cultivate an audience base

centered around digital 'new cinephilia' through open dialogue on its support and community forums between users and employees. It allowed two-tiered access: subscription to streaming, and free registration to the social network where one could log film ratings/reviews, make lists, discuss films, etc. In 2013, only a third of MUBI's 6.5 million users paid for subscriptions. In its first eight years, Hessler (2018, 4) argues, MUBI's platform strategy had to negotiate "the challenges of maintaining subscribers, the need to manage a variety of corporate partnerships, the difficulties of acquiring content streaming licenses, and the unmet ideals of content ubiquity." This was complicated since digital new cinephilia has been shaped by ethical norms that prioritize availability of rare films over legality of distribution—it embraces the ubiquity offered by piracy and values its cultural autonomy over commercial statutes (Campbell 2009).

MUBI Social forums were the site of this negotiation, where the platform's early commercial self-fashioning was dialogically cultivated. The closing down of the Social forums in 2015 consolidated MUBI's complete shift to a curation model founded on a "new logic of artistic patronage and corporate partnership." Now it offers a curatorial model which combines a staff-picked film-a-day (which stay for exactly one month) and themed selections, retrospectives, festival spotlights, etc., leading to the creation of a somewhat long-term (even if still partially transient) content library. Instead of its early dialogic, relatively horizontal business model (which did not prove successful), MUBI has embraced the role of being the signature tastemaker of arthouse audiences for the streaming market. While this is a different logic of curating content and making profits than, say, Netflix, for a cinephile, MUBI offers somewhat similar ideals of convenience and content library. One enjoys quality cinema for a subscription fee sans obligations.

For KG, on the other hand, its forums are the public sphere where most decisions are made: rule changes debated, upcoming MOM (master-of-the-month) themes voted upon, technical tips/guides

for making rips or subtitles shared, themed collections curated, and so on. The difficult tension between commercial imperatives and the "unmet ideals of content ubiquity" (the demand that rare cinemas be available anytime, anywhere), which, Hessler notes, led to MUBI's transition from the dialogic mode, is here bypassed. Questions of balancing subscription models, territorial licensing agreements, and consumer desires simply do not hold on KG. As a pirate network, KG is therefore much more aligned with the anti-commercial desires/ethics animating new cinephilia.

The key question for KG is, instead, how to ensure the expansion of its film library; how to get more rare films (especially from non-dominant film cultures and territories) shared on the tracker, how to get subtitles made or translated. KG's MOM curatorial model, coupled with the ratio and bonus system discussed before, ensures this archival expansion. The themed MOMs, which typically target niches in film history under-represented on the tracker, invite users to add new material. While uploaders are rewarded with bonuses, MOMs also act as a form of weak recommendation or curation for cinephiles to discuss in the forum. Certain films are also selectively designated for wider sharing and circulation as Featured Torrents and Temporary Freeleeches; their download volumes are not counted in one's ratio. Even with the absence of strong recommendation or curation systems (like Netflix or MUBI), KG's interlocking system of incentives ensure both its sustenance and continuous user engagement.

To summarize, while KG and MUBI both emerged from cinephile community spaces, they exhibit diverging trajectories. While MUBI had to negotiate the commercial and pragmatic constraints of being an arthouse streamer and, in the process, abandon its community origins, KG's labor-centric social form has made it navigate a very different set of questions and tensions: How to ensure archival sustainability and expansion? How easy should it be for users to maintain ratios? How to make KG more or less open to outsiders, while ensuring that its founding ethos is not betrayed? The most notable changes on KG over the years have

not been in its interface or social design, but in the fine nitty gritties of ratio requirements (which were relaxed in 2018), bonus/pot systems for requesting new material and subtitles, the criteria/frequency for freeleeches, invite policies, and so on. The tradeoffs for KG are between: labor vs. leisure, freedom for users vs. archival sustainability (if ratio is relaxed too much, torrents may go dead).

The Exclusions of Karagarga's Social Form

Despite these attempts to allow more freedom to its users, KG's labor-centric social form, I argue, raises the question of implicit hierarchies and exclusions baked into its imagination of the ideal user type. First, the very restrictive nature of KG signups limits access to cinephilic in-groups on the internet. But KG's labor demands also begs the questions: Who has the necessary leisure time, computing and energy resources to seed continuously? Who has the tacit knowhow to source rare material, to make rips or subtitles, and so on? Though no overt markers of race, class, gender, caste, or geographic location shape entry and social mobility on KG, it is obviously not made for certain user types: those without access to stable broadband internet and a PC (mobile-only and limited data users), those having busy work schedules and family/caregiving duties, the casual or non-tech savvy user, etc. The actual demographics of KG's user base are hard to determine since statistics on this are not collated. However, the figure of the dedicated, tech-savvy cinephile-pirate looms large in its social imaginary. There is also an implicit bias favoring user in the Global North, since they have greater computing resources, knowhow, and most importantly access to rare content (as DVD/BluRay releases, or institutional subscriptions) necessary to maintain a consistently high ratio. While users exist on KG in the Global South, these are usually tech-savvy cinephiles well-connected to both their local film scenes and international piracy networks. Lastly, there is little downstream sharing of KG content through, say, neighborhood

kiosks or other, more easily accessible pirate networks. While its manifesto encourages wider circulation, these currently take place mostly between already existing in-groups of cinephiles through hard drive transfers or transient MEGA links (Schindel 2022). KG's paradox is that its very means to create a sustainable, robust, and international film archive through a pirate commons preempts wider circulation, arresting film history in implicit hierarchies of taste and tiered access. KG's community is therefore predicated on the problematic exclusion of the "non-serious" or casual cinephile.

Conclusion

I have tried to show how KG acts as a strategic sovereign: organizing a global P2P film archive and distribution economy through norms derived in a sense to avert the failures of other pirate systems (public trackers like TPB), and in contrast with its emblematic streaming alternatives. In the process, a technological protocol—ratio—is created that models an idealized social form (a cinephilic workers' society), in turn producing communal affordances and habits. All the same, KG reveals the limitations of a social form valorizing a certain exclusionary elitism and labor, which paradoxically segments its user population along implicit lines of geography (Global North/South), tech literacy, and class-based access. Can we design a more open-ended but equally robust p2p archive of film culture? Or does the pursuit of high-modernist cinephilia in online pirate cultures necessarily end up reproducing walled gardens in the KG mold?

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INFRASTRUCTURES AND USAGES

[1 1]

Platform Television and the Streaming Wars

Jana Zündel

Television's global infrastructure relies heavily on streaming platforms nowadays, be it in production, distribution, or reception. Ever since its broadcasts, most notably serial formats, moved online and became staples of streaming content (both licensed and original), television has been "in crisis." However, the medium had already ceased to be consistent, considering the varying broadcasting and business models (network, basic cable or premium cable; public service, or commercial; advertising-financed or subscription-based) and desynchronized viewing modes enabled by digital devices (DVR, DVD). Therefore, Netflix, Prime Video, or Disney+ might just be a logical step in the process of diversifying the industry. On the one hand, streaming platforms do not introduce new business models, rather building on established publishing and financing strategies (cf. Lotz 2017). On the other hand, platform television has expanded, complicated, or simply unsettled current perceptions of television:

> ... the internet era has expanded television at the level of technology and cultural form, increasing the *complexity of TV as a medium*. Once a medium of broadcasting, television

> can now be experienced in multiple ways ... the internet era can be understood as a period of particular volatility for television. (Johnson 2019, 158–59)

In particular, the deviation from linear programming seems to be a decisive break.[1] In this regard, television may have split into traditional broadcasting and online content delivery via platforms. However, previously formed industrial and commercial ties nevertheless persist in the latter (cf. Lotz 2017) and determine streaming platforms' televisual offerings.

This paper first discusses the affinities and dependencies of platform television as it both complements and competes with "regular" broadcast television. Streaming services produce an almost unmanageable range of televisual, specifically serial, content, and inform our understanding of this current "TV IV" era (Jenner 2018, 18). Following TV I, II, and III, stylized as the "era of scarcity," "era of availability," and "era of abundance," respectively (Ellis 2000, 39, 61, and 162), TV IV seems to be yet another significant shift in the ongoing transformation of the medium. Reshaping the availability and overall abundance of TV contents previously gained in TV II and III, the platformization in TV IV further diversifies global and local infrastructures of television delivery—to the point of non-transparent economic entanglements. Second, platform television has become a highly competitive industry in itself, popularly dubbed as the "streaming wars." The term refers to the competition among a growing number of on-demand platforms, all of which require a separate subscription. TV content as a first-order consumer good and payment in regular installments seem to be the norm nowadays, fully in line with neoliberal business and audience models. Following this, platformized TV undermines the traditional conception of television as a "mass medium." This paper seeks to sketch out the role of streaming platforms in today's global media and television infrastructure.

1 See Uricchio (2009), Newman (2012) and Quico (2019), among others.

Introducing TV IV

The phases TV I, TV II, and TV III (see Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves 2002; Pearson 2011) describe the historical change of television as a broadcasting medium. They refer mostly to the US market, but also prove to be exemplary for the international television landscape, because they describe the transition from broadcasting to narrowcasting and non-casting business models (see Medhurst 2009, 123). At the same time, TV I to III also hint at the ontological shift from a service for the public to a fully commercialized industry. The first phase of TV I (1948–1975, see Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves 2002, 43) is called the "era of scarcity" (Ellis 2000), "broadcast era" (Uricchio 2009) or "network era" (Lotz 2007, 7). It roughly parallels Casetti and Odin's (2002) notion of "paleo-television," which refers to European television history. Only a few broadcasting stations served the audience in this era, addressing it as a national collective. Serving the public (interest) primarily meant that the TV program was the "least objectionable," featuring "consensus narratives" (Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves 2002, 43, 46) that were suitable for an anonymous, undifferentiated mass audience. This changed with TV II (1975–1995, see Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves 2002, 43), the new "era of availability" (Ellis 2000, 61) or "multi-channel transition era" (1980–1990, Haggins and Himberg 2018), which rapidly expanded television's offerings due to state deregulation, new reception technologies, and broadcasting stations. Several technological and programming policy developments acted as transformative forces in this gradual but lasting change towards an international, multilateral television industry: the introduction of cable and expansion of broadcasting networks, the remote control, and various recording devices such as the VCR. Through these developments, a "one-size-fits-all-product" gradually turned into one that aimed at specific target audiences and that was individually manageable. The focus on so-called "quality demographics" (Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves 2002, 44), that is, affluent, sophisticated audiences, intensified during TV III (from 1995, see Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves 2002,

43). Its synonyms "era of abundance" (Ellis 2000), "post-network era" (Lotz 2007), "post-broadcast era" (Turner and Tay 2009), or even "post-television era" (Buckley, Ott, and Leverette 2008) refer to the diversification of production, distribution, and reception of TV offerings, resulting in the oversupply of programs we know today. TV III featured a significant change in business strategy. From second-order consumer goods in TV I and II, pre-selected by TV broadcasters and advertisers and paid for by ratings, TV formats in pay-TV became first-order consumer goods for which financial or censorship requirements no longer apply and viewers pay directly (Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves 2002, 46–47). This commercial reframing continues in the current streaming era, with consumers now paying for exclusive online access to television content.

From a culture-industrial point of view, a key characteristic of TV IV is that video on demand is exploited as the dominant way for distributing and consuming television/serial content. As such, commercial television resumes under the neoliberal conditions of "platform capitalism" (Srnicek 2017). However, platform television features economic ambiguities resulting from the competing technologies and business models of broadcasting and streaming. The now "wider range of industrial practices, norms of viewing, and even distinct television industries" (Lotz 2018, 178) creates significant dichotomies that can be summed up as follows and are briefly outlined below: centralization vs. decentralization; bundling vs. unbundling; flow vs. publication model; push vs. pull communication; audience empowerment vs. audience control; exclusion vs. inclusion.

In view of tele-serial content being published and even produced outside of its original broadcasting and through a variety of streaming services—addressing different audiences in parallel—the argument of a "decentralized" and "unbundled" television model can be raised. However, those very platforms that supposedly lure audiences away from centralized TV channels belong, for the most part, to the same media conglomerates as

traditional TV channels do (cf. Bruun 2020, 109; Bottomley 2019, 153–54). Furthermore, the individual streaming platforms strive to aggregate as much exclusive content as possible in order to gain several micro-monopolies within the television industry. Platforms may have been *unbundling* the original, vertically accumulated TV broadcasts (see Marshall 2009, 43), seemingly distributing in several directions and as individual commodities in an "itemized economy" (Bennett and Brown 2009, 7). At the same time though, they have been *re-bundling* both old and new televisual formats from a wide variety of sources, now mostly making them only accessible on one platform at a time. In contrast to broadcast television, platform television accumulates horizontally, but nonetheless centrally. To further complicate, or better yet: centralize things, platforms are never completely exempt from linear broadcasting. Therefore, television and platform logics of accumulation, bundling, and centralization are playing off each other. This also affects the competition or combination of the flow and publication model in online TV.

The publication model used on streaming platforms is generally associated with abundance, the flow model,[2] implemented by classic television, with "artificial scarcity" (Johnson 2019, 101). However, since the dissolution of the network oligopoly in TV II, broadcasts have been "scarce" only through time-bound reception. Observed laterally, however, television has been abundant for several decades now (Buonanno 2008). Compared

2 In his monograph *The Capitalization of Cultural Production* (1989), Bernard Miège discusses three basic competing business models of cultural production and distribution: the "press model," the "publication model," and the "flow model." Whereas classic television primarily follows the flow model to this day, releasing cultural products (e.g. TV series) in recurring instances (episodes) according to fixed time schedule and in a continuous "flow," Streaming Video on Demand (SVoD) generally resorts to the publication model, making TV shows available in "full volumes" (seasons). Even though several streaming services (e.g. Prime Video, Hulu, Disney+, Paramount+, HBO Max) release new series episodically and on a weekly schedule, reception is no longer bound to a specific date and time, and, after the original release is completed, full seasons can be watched at any point.

to that, platform TV's abundance now not only refers to the breadth of the offerings in total, but to the individual format as well. The publication model releases TV content in larger units to be consumed more flexibly and quickly. It thus serves Netflix and others as an argument of more "freedom" and "self-determination." Where the publishing model takes hold, it reinforces a key narrative of TV IV, namely that online television pursues a "pull strategy"—as opposed to broadcast television, which relies on "push" communication:

> Broadcasting is ... a cultural form where audio-visual material is disseminated ... in a continuous, sequential form—a flow—from some central unit to a varying number of anonymous people who receive the same material at the same time .... In other words, broadcasting is a 'push'-type form of communication, not a 'pull': it does not deliver discrete items on demand to specific individual subscribers when they order them. (Gripsrud 2010, 9)

Contrasting with the broadcasting model, platform television allows users to determine what, when, and how they watch "programs," seemingly having "unlimited" TV content available at all times. However, a clear push-pull distinction is hardly possible as both broadcast and web providers now use platforms to "push" their production to users. Streaming platforms are hardly pull media, since users never determine what ends up on them, only what they want to watch of it. Nevertheless, the choices have increased considerably, which is why the "pushing" is less prominent now and realized in a different fashion. Johnson (2019, 153) argues that online TV providers reframe and redirect our supposedly "self-controlled" media experience. The push model of broadcasting now incorporates several pull elements, meaning that they grant liberties in viewing television without ever dissolving the power constellations between audiences and industry (Johnson 2019, 9). Even so, streaming platforms promote "user empowerment" (Jennes, Pierson, and van den Broek 2014) as a unique selling point over broadcast television ("TV anytime"/"TV

everywhere"). Audience control and commodification measures become increasingly opaque, obscured by platform TV's alleged "user specificity" (Lotz 2017). This term refers primarily to the way in which platforms *address* the viewer (as opposed to fulfill their actual wishes). With their systematic recording and evaluation of streaming activities, streaming services seek to predict and control future reception behavior. The algorithmically calculated suggestions never truly reflect (all) individual tastes (see Alexander 2016, 82–83). However, they quietly "nudge" specific target or interest groups to pre-calculated viewing decisions (see below).

TV IV has continued the extensive shift from TV III, with platform TV focusing on exclusivity and higher-earning audiences. The multiplied financial hurdles undermine both the inclusivity of broadcast television (meaning broad access to cultural productions more or less regardless of income) and its functioning of a "cultural forum," as described by Newcomb and Hirsch (2009). They frame television as a producer of cultural meaning. In addition to creating harmony and coherence, the TV program includes contradictions, dissonances, and inconsistencies, leaving room for discussion and diverse presentations of reality. By addressing and commenting on a variety of cultural and socio-political phenomena, television confronts its audience with multiple, perhaps conflicting, notions and ideologies (Newcomb and Hirsch 2009, 186–87). The cultural forum arises from the numerous choices and possible combinations of channels and programs that a viewer can use. Ironically, the variety of topics and representations that viewers can conceive through television has only increased with streaming platforms. Their originals contribute to the diversity and heterogeneity of cultural production, thus doubling down on broadcast TV's capacities to combine multiple differing ideas (Newcomb and Hirsch 2009, 188). Platforms undermine this potential for an expanded cultural forum, however, since their recommendation systems favor similarity over diversity. Users are not exactly encouraged to 'edit' their programming suggestions and thus contradict the algorithm.

 Platforms will only assign users to small, monothematic micro-forums that remain firmly in their sphere of influence (see below). The aggregation of diverse content does not mean the inclusion of viewers in one large, miscellaneous forum.

In TV IV, we are currently dealing with the coexistence of traditional and hybrid television models, which have formed cross-platform connections and synergies. Linear programming and scheduled releases are not simply disappearing from platform television, remaining relevant to catch-up services, scheduling platforms such as Hulu or Disney+ (see Sanson and Steirer 2019) and binge-publishing platforms such as Netflix (due to licensing agreements). At the same time, more viewing options are competing with each other, with streaming platforms successively imposing certain business models and modes of viewing that reshape television—as both an industry and a cultural institution.

Platforming vs. Broadcasting

Platform television features interactions between classic linear channels, which seek to defend their industrial position, and on-demand services that seek to replace them (see Jenner 2018, 18–19). Similar to cable TV, online TV distribution began as a *supplement* before positioning itself as a *substitute.* On-demand offerings partially still represent an extended arm of established TV channels. In some ways, broadcasters and platforms have a symbiotic relationship. Firstly, streaming services still need popular TV shows (*legacy television*) to attract users. Secondly, SVoD platforms are a crucial new sales market for TV broadcasters (see Lotz 2018, 114). However, the marketing narratives of an allegedly inferior, old television whose shortcomings (commercial breaks, rigid program structures) are eliminated by on-demand models (Lotz 2018, 113) have resulted in successive "cord-cutting," that is, the cancelation of (cable) television services and subscriptions in favor of web-based TV offerings (see Tefertiller 2018, 390 and

401). There are even some user groups that do not have a TV connection or cable service to begin with ("cord-nevers," Burroughs 2019, 12), thus accessing television exclusively online. Still, broadcast and platform TV remain relevant to each other to this day, continuously adapting business strategies and distribution practices (cf. Lotz 2018, 173). The most significant break is that streaming services have also become first-hand providers as well as producers of television content. Platforms frequently secure first broadcasting and exclusive distribution rights to certain programs, such as Prime Video with Champions League soccer matches. Amazon, AppleTV+, Disney+, and Netflix saturate the international markets with their original series. In many cases, platform TV is the first link in the utilization process rather than a secondary outlet. It has also already encompassed the bulk of TV content. There are hardly any programs left exclusively for linear broadcasting, though it is important to note that many platform offerings stem from traditional media and television TV networks, such as Hulu, Paramount+ (formerly CBS All Access), or Peacock (formerly NBCUniversal). Viewed as a whole, then, platform television offers itself as a comprehensive *substitute* for broadcast television, encompassing all online TV offerings. Catherine Johnson (2019, 75) differentiates them according to their business models, industrial connection and their intersection with the IT industry:

1. TV natives that operate according to the rules of the traditional television market and additionally distribute their content online. This includes SVoD platforms of individual broadcasters (e.g. HBO Max) as well as joint ventures from various broadcasters or media companies (Hulu).
2. Online natives, that is, data-centric platforms and services that distribute TV content merely in addition to their core business. These are the streaming offers of e-commerce, telecommunication, or tech companies (Amazon, AppleTV, MagentaTV/Telekom), social media (Facebook Watch), or search engines (Google Play, YouTube Premium).

3. Content natives, that is, original web services whose core business has always been the distribution of media content (Netflix).

In contrast, Mareike Jenner (2015, 7) only roughly distinguishes between a) catch-up services, meaning the generally open media libraries of TV channels that publish already broadcast programs or episodes for limited periods of time, and b) subscription streaming services with long-term availability and original content. However, many web offerings are hybrids of both models, with varying accessibilities and availabilities. Meanwhile, Ramon Lobato (2019, 7–8) divides online television by accessibility and financing models into eight different categories, including free (video sharing, live feeds), subscription-based (SVoD), and single-payment offerings (*pay-per-view, transactional video-on-demand*) (Lobato 2019, 7–8).[3] Many streaming services combine subscription and additional payment, ad-including, ad-reduced, or ad-free models (such as Netflix, Prime Video, YouTube, Hulu; see Lindsey 2016; Sanson and Steirer 2019). Due to the countless intersections of industries and business models as well as a dynamic, fast-changing market situation, platform television's infrastructures are arcane and non-transparent to most users.

Streaming Wars, or How Platform TV Competes with Itself

Platform television adapts already established distribution models from regular television. Subscription platforms adopt the pay TV model, while media libraries are in the tradition of free TV. Weekly and time-limited releases of TV episodes on Disney+ or Hulu continue to regulate content availability in accordance

3 Free online distributors often operate in a legal gray area or illegally publish TV content. Moreover, they include third-party advertising in every case. In contrast, the subscription-based and single-payment offerings are usually legitimate and, for the most part, refrain from (third-party) advertising.

with the flow model. In contrast, full-season drops à la Netflix take after the publishing model of DVD boxsets, also called the binge-publishing model. Bundle offers from multiple platforms, like the joint offerings of Disney, Hulu and ESPN on Disney+, are reminiscent of traditional "cable packages" from numerous different TV channels. In turn, platform-internal "channels," such as Starzplay, MGM, or Paramount+ on Amazon, require additional payments within the basic subscription—which mirrors premium channel subscriptions on top of the cable package. For the most part, on-demand and subscription models now dominate the (western) television market, and TV has never been as expensive as it is when platformized.[4] In the supposedly open internet, of all places, even free TV is no longer *free.* Platform TV is always *pay* TV since users at least offer up some personal data or, more desirably, submit to monthly fees.

Through neoliberal sales arguments, emphasis on individual needs, and freedoms in media consumption, platform TV creates new values (see Johnson 2019, 164): Television is reframed as a personalized product. The *nichecasting* strategy, originated in TV II and reinforced in TV III via "brandcasting" (Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves 2002, 44, 48), has now been further narrowed down to a "*slivercasting*" (Uricchio 2014, 75), "*microcasting*" (Chamberlain 2011, 252), or even *singlecasting* approach to television, with platforms generating supposedly individual viewing profiles for each subscriber. Exclusivity and branded content are central values transferred from TV III to TV IV and determining the competition among SVoD providers. Every streaming service must legitimize its subscription fee with exclusive contents, thus positioning themselves as the sole supplier for specific TV shows

4 Even the catch-up services of traditional networks, such as the German private broadcasters Pro7 or RTL, are opting for payments from viewers with their "premium areas," Joyn+ and RTL+ Premium/RTL+ Max, respectively. Those not only comprise new, exclusive content, but also previously broadcasted shows. In order to watch the live streams, a subscription is often required as well.

 (see Johnson 2019, 101). This new "artificial scarcity" (ibid.) affects both original and licensed content. All platforms contain acquired programs from classic television, published simultaneously with, directly or sometime after the initial broadcast, and in-house productions that are not available anywhere else. This way, one streaming service alone, or even just a local version of it, resembles a patchwork quilt and reflects the heterogeneous television landscape on a small scale. The inventory of Netflix Germany, for instance, includes US network and cable shows, German series from public and private television, as well as a great variety of original programming from and for different national TV markets.

The streaming market is not an equal playing field. The majority of SVoD platforms belong to international media groups or multi-tech corporations. *TV natives* obtain large quantities of exclusive content from the TV channels and production companies operating under the same umbrella company. *Online natives*, in turn, balance out the business risk associated with acquiring and producing TV content with their actual core business. From this point of view, most major players[5] seem to have an advantage over *content natives* such as Netflix, which still operates as an "independent" platform. Long-term predictions about this competitive situation are always uncertain, as this assessment from 2016 shows:

> With how ingrained Netflix and online viewing has become in the day-to-day lives of many people, it is hard to imagine a future without them. Looking back, though, Netflix burst onto the media scene quickly, and with all of its competitors, it may disappear just as quickly. Or it may not. Netflix may lead the pack in the new era of internet distribution and online viewing of media as it is doing presently. On the other hand, traditional broadcast and cable television may play a

5 Including Paramount+ (Paramount Global), Prime Video (Amazon), AppleTV+ (Apple), Peacock (NBC Universal), HBO Max (Warner Bros. Discovery), Hulu, and Disney+ (Walt Disney Company).

> larger role in the online viewing market and displace Netflix altogether. (Lindsey 2016, 182)

With an increasing number of *TV* and *online natives* taking back their originals and exclusives from Netflix,[6] it remains to be seen whether the former market leader will be displaced, absorbed into a media conglomerate, or remain afloat amongst its competitors. Its initial dominance, achieved through early expansion on all continents (see Stiegler 2016; Jenner 2018; Lobato 2019),[7] is quickly waning due to the proliferation of platform TV that has begun to take after classic broadcast TV. The already existing "television of a hundred channels" (Dhoest and Simons 2016, 179) is mirrored in a "television of a hundred platforms," a tense market situation, nearing saturation and exhaustion. On the one hand, the "streaming war" over exclusive content rages on, with licensing fees skyrocketing;[8] on the other hand, the platforms keep adding new originals to their portfolio on a regular basis, which, according to Lindsey (2016, 181), will ensure their competitiveness in the long run, especially Netflix's.

The aforementioned infrastructures of platform TV have shown major cracks and consequences in recent years.

- First, the many premature cancellations of streaming originals after one or two seasons make it clear that VoD services

6 For instance the Marvel series that moved to Disney+.

7 This includes the relatively early entry into the European TV markets, including the UK in 2012, and Germany and France in 2014. Compared to the exclusively commercial US TV, the European and especially the German dual-system TV market are developing rather sluggishly due to the strong presence of *public service* TV in the pay-TV sector (see Stiegler 2016, 237–40). In this respect, later internationalized VoD competitors such as Disney+ have the disadvantage that Netflix has already captured a large proportion of potential customers for itself.

8 To this day, the "price war" continues over certain legacy television formats that may attract viewers across generations to a subscription platform. One notable example was the fight for *Friends*, with Netflix (2018–2019, 2021–present), Prime Video (2019–2020), and HBO Max (2020–present) paying triple-digit millions each to add the popular sitcom to their catalog.

cannot maintain their enormous production rates or even keep them profitable. After all, platforms, like TV channels, are always hunting for (more) "eyeballs," that is, as many viewers as possible in a limited period for any format. Instead of audience ratings, it is now access numbers, along with qualitative metadata (viewing history, user evaluations, genre preferences, etc.), that serve as indicators of success. Any executive decisions concerning commission, publication, and cancellation are based on this new "data rationality" (Sim 2016, 193). To complicate matters, there is also the internal competitive situation of any individual streaming service. On a single platform alone, countless formats are fighting for clicks and views simultaneously and at any given time. From this perspective, each platform is its own biggest competitor.

- Second, there is the successive re-integration of commercials into subscription-based streaming despite earlier claims to avoid them (cf. Lindsey 2016, 178; Sanson and Steirer 2019, 1221). By reducing or suspending commercials, streaming platforms initially eliminated an alleged "deficit" of conventional television (see Lotz 2018, 106–107), thereby reinforcing their superiority over broadcasting. Nowadays, additional monetization strategies have taken over on subscription platforms, as the ad-free model no longer seems sustainable.
- Third, as the number of competing VoD services rises, exclusive content that draws subscribers to one particular platform stretches thinner. Recommendation systems thus seek to prevent users from migrating to another platform through seemingly personalized profiles and suggestions. However, the platform algorithms base recommendations on similarity rather than diversity (see below) and frequently repeat them throughout the main interface, suggesting the same titles under different genres. Consequently, users are increasingly under the impression of having already seen "everything" that the platform has to offer. This may have led to the recent drop and overall stunted growth in subscriptions.

Overall, SVoD services severely change the conception of television as a "mass medium" and thus a carrier of traditional "mass communication." Viewed globally, *all* television providers still gather a mass of viewers, albeit collectively, but no individual broadcaster or platform rallies them all (simultaneously) with one particular program. This is because SVoD platforms flip the concept of "mass," now referring to contents instead of spectators. The continuous aggregation of television shows, both old and new, is the central promise of platform television. While SVoD services continue the tradition of mass media accumulating content (see Bottomley 2019, 150 and 154), they reject their principle of "scarcity." In contrast to broadcast television gathering broad audiences through the limited availability of shows, streaming platforms try to reach a variety of viewers through an abundance of "always-available" content. This basic concept of content distribution not only transforms the medium itself, but also reshapes its spectatorship—and therefore society.

Platform Algorithms and the Particularization of the Audience

Platform television does not address definitive, homogenous target groups. This does not mean that demographic characteristics such as age, gender, nationality, or ethnicity cease to be relevant to the conceptualization, production, and distribution of TV content. On the contrary, they do continue to matter for the calculation of potential subscriber groups and the corresponding classification of televisual content. As evidenced by the diversification of localities, ensembles, and sociopolitical themes in TV shows and streaming originals, a platform may only reach a broad usership with an expansive and differentiated supply. SVoD services use small-scale targeting similar to cable and pay TV channels in order to appeal to a heterogeneous mass of users, which, in turn, corresponds to the business model of major TV networks. Television critic James Poniewozik (*New*

 York Times) sums up Netflix's audience model as follows: "Like the old broadcast networks, it aimed to make TV for everyone. But like the niche cable channels, it didn't try to make each individual show appeal to everyone. It was macro and micro, a confederation rather than a monoculture" (Poniewozik 2019). This observation is also productive for platform television in general, which fundamentally oscillates between mass and niche strategies, between the expansion of and the focus on specific target groups. Though their sprawling portfolios aim at a wide-ranging viewership, SVoD platforms do not address their users as an *audience*. They do not target a heterogeneous mass with one particular content, but rather accumulate so much content to offer "something for everyone." The metaphor of a cultural "confederation" then refers to the countless demographic and socio-cultural, but also taste-oriented and themed subgroups of platform users. Besides Poniewozik's socio-political interpretation, these user subgroups primarily serve commercial interests.

Although on-demand services claim to hand over programming and viewing choices to their users, those very choices are regulated and pre-structured. Algorithms assume the role of TV editors, whose selection principles are replaced by what Neta Alexander (2016, 18) describes as the "mathematization of taste." The recommendation process is of course not a neutral one, but central to the success of any SVoD service. It serves to reduce complexity on the one hand and to control customer choices on the other (see Quico 2019, 52). Streaming platforms act as a "walled garden," a closed system that shields its "inhabitants" from the outside world (see Quico 2019, 50). Television's traditionally straightforward request to "stay tuned" thus turns into an implicit coercion to "stay in," that is, within the 'garden' for as long as possible. To this end, Netflix and others 'construct' their subscribers as supposedly individual users—through the creation of personal profiles—and then proceed to sort them into various audience factions. Especially Netflix's recommendation system insinuates that it caters to the 'individual' user's

personal taste in the best possible way. The "Suggestions for you" and "Because you watched xy" sections displayed on the personal interface create an illusion of personalized content (see Alexander 2016, 84 and 86; Pajkovic 2021, 14), when in actuality streaming platforms generate so-called "taste communities" (see Alexander 2016; Novak 2017; Quico 2019; Pajkovic 2021). So-called "microtags"[9] and content categories, alternately dubbed "microgenres," "pseudogenres," or "altgenres" (Alexander 2016, 88),[10] inventorize and sort television formats by stylistic and content-related characteristics. Through altgenres and tags the collaborative filtering system recommends titles that

- titles that share generic or thematic features (item-item matching),
- titles that are similar to those a user has previously watched (user-item matching), or
- titles that other users with similar rating and viewing behavior have watched (user-user matching, see Unternährer 2021, 410–15)—or a combination of all three.

Consequently, the recommendation system sorts each user profile into small "neighborhoods" with those users (Unternährer 2021, 412–415). Put in more economic terms: the pseudogenres create numerous parallel customer universes (see Alexander 2016, 87), most likely to guide selection and usage behavior.

9 Microtags are attributes used to relate and link contents to each other. On Netflix for example, they are visible as three descriptive words per show, referring to the genre, theme, mood, or 'tone' of the format (e.g. "Teen," "Dark Humor," or "Heartbreaking"). If two formats share at least one tag, they are very likely to appear under the same categories and personal recommendations, aka "microgenres."

10 Microgenres are alternative content categories, combining classic genres, thematic or tonal characteristics ("touching," "hilarious"), viewing preferences ("Binge in one week-end") or quality markers ("Critically acclaimed TV Dramas," "Emmy-nominated series," "Highest-ranked on IMDb"). They are displayed throughout the interface of a streaming service – with varying degrees of creativity. The most illustrious pseudogenres are usually found on Netflix: "Series with strong female leads," "Dark Fantasy Series," or "Supernatural Soap Operas," and many more.

 Platform television maximizes the long-term atomization of the audience, using algorithms to capture and calculate individual preferences, just to tie them back together in new "fictional" viewer groups:

> On the one hand, the Netflix algorithm is positioned as the solution to the complications of fragmentation for media industries in an era of globalization. … This discursive positioning of the audience through the algorithm we label the 'algorithmic audience.' … algorithms are tools for imagining audiences, we can add that corporations like Netflix use algorithms to discursively position audiences as consumers. The heart of media industries has always been predicting audiences and their viewing habits. (Burroughs 2019, 10)

Like previous imaginations of viewership through ratings or surveys, "algorithmic audiences" and the "individual user" are fictional figures, a pragmatic illusion for the TV industry (see Ang 1998, 34–35). Any user interaction with a platform factors into this 'audience illusion'; the individual becomes a new "market" through which new, artificial micro-target groups are constructed and exploited. The commercial differentiation of television is peaking due to this continuous capitalization of interests and behaviors.

Conversely, "taste communities" also create invisible "boundaries" between the spectators, as they counteract arbitrary user behavior. The cultural "confederation" may include more nationalities, classes, subcultures, and minorities than ever, often alluding to them with microgenres such as "LGBTQ Teen Series," "Celebrate Black Stories," "Oddballs and Outcasts," "Made in India," "Black and Queer," and many more. From a societal perspective, then, platform TV tends to produce many specialized sub-publics (see Gripsrud 2010, 12), rather than unified, national publics or any kind of world public. Platform audiences are at least partially "de-nationalized" and *possibly* disengaged from socio-political ties, especially if they rely on international

providers and escape their local TV markets. However, national and (geo)political restrictions still take effect, preventing the global reach of Netflix or others (see Lobato 2019, 182) and restricting content access and audience reach.[11] Thus, the "confederation" as well as the sub-publics of platform television have limited global impact at best. At the same time, the neoliberal premises of platform television, pseudo-individualism, and (alleged) consumer choice (see Sim 2016, 192) undermine the consolidation of an actual audience. Taste communities and mono or micro-thematic recommendations are often at odds with social consensus and understanding. In contrast to "classic" mass media, which depend on the construction of user mass[es] (see Stauff 2005, 262) and represent a shared social reality (see van Es 2017, 162), platform television imagines a mass of pseudo-individual users, but without bringing them together in any constitutive manner. Consequently, it fails to commit its audiences to a collectively experienced reality. Like media audiences in general, TV viewers inevitably become more autonomous (see Stiegler 2016, 244) and "mobile": they may switch between local and international platforms, migrate through different sub-publics; they may connect to a national collective and at the same time feel like part of several micro-communities. Platform TV thus completes the ongoing transformation of the medium from a nationally and majority oriented, homogenizing, but also unifying one to a global, more diverse and heterogeneous, but particularized (and possibly detached) one.

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[1 2]

Crowdsourcing Justice: Television as a Platform for Collaborative Crime Solving

Zeynep Tuna

What time is it? I am still trying to solve the secrets of the #palu family, although it is not a secret that two people know; what am I, FBI?[1]

On December 21st, 2018, Turkish TV host Müge Anlı announced a matter in her daily true-crime talk show *Müge Anlı ile Tatlı Sert* that would later be known as "the Palu family case."[2] The case concerned the disappearance of two women in the family—one of them a minor. Even by the standards of exploitative, sensationalist, politically ambiguous, and stereotype-prone reality TV, the Palu case stands out as particularly laden with sensitive subject matter, involving various criminal offenses, including sexual and

1 Twitter post from January 7, 2019 12:02 a.m. All the Turkish posts and dialogues are translated by the author, and grammatical or orthographic mistakes are corrected for better understanding.

2 In this essay, the term "case" possesses a dual meaning as it refers to a case study that is simultaneously a criminal case.

substance abuse, physical and psychological violence, religious exploitation, extortion, and deceit.[3] Over three weeks, the case gradually got ever broader, more puzzling, and more horrific. Through the testimonies of audience members calling in, the show exposed that the entire family had indeed participated in the murder of the two missing women. The gruesome nature of the case and the complexity of the relations of the people involved certainly puzzled the guests, the experts on the show, and the audience. Fan-made graphs on social media, YouTube summary videos, memes, and other community-generated content started circulating across multiple digital platforms, trying to decipher the case.

I will use the Palu family case as an example of how an audience interacts with a show through different platforms and how they create content that expands, summarizes, and supplements the show's narrative. I will then focus on a specific audience activity I refer to as "investigative spectatorship," which draws from the practices and methods of citizen journalism, amateur sleuths, and the concept of "forensic fandom."[4] I start by situating the show's specific format—which I call "true-crime talk

3 Reader's discretion advised: When re-telling and describing the developments of the Palu case in this essay, I sometimes strategically employ the morally questionable, sensationalist treatment of sensitive subject matter used by the show in order to transfer a sense of the communicative mechanics that managed to draw widespread audience attention—as exploitative as they might be. My logic is that one partly needs to engage with the audience's affects towards a certain text in order to better understand and analyze the fascination it engenders. This strategic positioning does not, however, signify that I embrace the exploitative treatment of sensitive topics by the show, or that I lack critical distance. I merely believe that one needs to take various perspectives on and distances from one's object of study in order to grasp it more broadly.

4 "Forensic fandom" can be understood as a mode of television engagement that promotes research, collaboration, analysis, and interpretation among viewers. This concept, as described by Jason Mittell, emphasizes the active involvement of fans in exploring and unraveling the complex narrative logic and transmedia storytelling elements of a television series. It encourages viewers to adopt a forensic approach, meticulously examining and

show"—within television's historical and media landscape before engaging more specifically with the Palu case and the audience interaction.

In this essay, I utilize data gathered from studio visits conducted between 2019 and 2022, along with a content analysis of the television program *Müge Anlı ile Tatlı Sert* (*Sweet and Sour with Müge Anlı*) and an examination of audience activities across various platforms. By mapping the interconnections among these sites, actors, discourses, and practices, I aim to shed light on the underlying patterns that link citizen journalism and the fan-like practices of the show's audience.

Media in Turkey has a long history of political influence, with television playing a significant role in shaping, censoring, and channeling public and political discourse. I understand the true-crime talk shows as products of the contemporary political climate in Turkey—characterized by entrenched political opposition, continuous economic crisis, including heavy inflation and the impoverishment of growing parts of the middle class, and an overarching slide towards ever deeper authoritarian structures of power under the long-ruling government of President Erdoğan and his Islamist-conservative AKP. I argue that television remains a distinct cultural product in its contemporary multi-platform setting, occupying a dynamic intersection between elite and popular, commercial and public, state and citizen.

The Assemblage of True-Crime Talk Shows

Television has undergone various reinventions in the last decades. Lynn Spigel explains that as the various textual resources coexist on the same screen, the television image has grown multi-dimensional and fragmented (see Spigel and Olsson

dissecting the show's content to uncover hidden meanings, connections, and clues (see Mittell 2006, 2009).

 2004, 2 ff.). Whereas the content of television spills into different platforms, "audiences are learning new 'viewing protocols' that allow them to interpret TV images in relation to the textual materials found on the Net and/or on fragmented parts of a single screen" (ibid., 6).

Regarding reality shows, fragmentation is integral to the show's composition. Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn emphasize that modern reality shows combine genres, including dramadoc, direct-to-camera interviews, news and police footage, expert opinion, and dramatic reenactments—as well as criminal investigation, pursuit, and capture scenarios. Most, if not all, of these components have been extracted from other formal contexts and/or genre conventions (such as cop series, procedurals, soap operas, newscasts, political talk shows, and documentaries) and transformed into a "unit of exchange, a little piece of an electronic televisual assembly" (Biressi and Nunn 2005, 120). In true-crime talk shows, this composite character is enhanced by the excessive usage of split-screen arrangements, which combine many "units of exchange" on one screen and permanently recombine a limited number of audiovisual sources.[5]

Müge Anlı ile Tatlı Sert (in the following: MATS) is broadcast weekdays between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. The show generally opens with a summary of ongoing cases, compiled mainly from previous episodes' material. Occasionally, these recaps also introduce new footage from an interview that will be shown in the current episode. Most of the screen time comprises the footage of the guests, the three experts—a lawyer, a forensic expert, and a psychiatrist—and the host Müge Anlı in a talk-show setting.

5 Bressi and Nunn's examination of reality television programs remains relevant, even considering the local/national specificity of shows analyzed here. According to media scholar Ayşe Öncü, the formats of television shows are global, adapting, reconfiguring, and "localizing" elements found elsewhere. She characterizes Turkish television show formats as "an amalgam of forms, formats, and genres, 'borrowed' from the television screens of Europe or the USA and 'translated' into local versions ..." (Öncü 2000, 296).

Depending on the case, there are often live streams of outside reporters interviewing residents of areas related to the cases or visiting potential crime scenes.

The resulting composite audiovisual nature encourages the audience to actively decompose the material later: splitting, re-editing, and analyzing. All these signals with varying temporalities—recaps, stills, graphics, live transmission in and out of the studio—packed into a three-hour episode, five days a week, are later cut into pieces or glued together by the producers as well as the consumers of the show. They share their decompositions on social media, turn them into memes, add them to news programs, repurpose them as a source for other TV formats and newspapers, and re-upload them on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, and video sharing platforms such as YouTube and Dailymotion.[6] This serves as an illustration of an observation made by sociologist Laura Grindstaff: "What we now call television is an inseparable part of media streams that people encounter everyday across a wide variety of contexts" (Grindstaff 2014, 2).

Furthermore, in her 2013 essay on audience participation, Sonia Livingstone argues that:

> Where once people moved in and out of their status as audiences, using media for specific purposes and then doing something else, being someone else, in our present age of continual immersion in media, we are now continually and unavoidably audiences at the same time as being consumers, relatives, workers and—fascinating to many—citizens and publics. (Livingstone 2013, 2)

True-crime talk shows, like soap operas, aim to attract a predominantly female audience. They can be understood as a transformation and development of daytime talk show formats,

6 A recent example on the Palu family case in a true-crime podcast format is available on YouTube (Yenilmez 2022).

specifically the so-called "Women's Voice" shows (see Şanlı 2016). MATS is broadcast from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. weekdays, catering to demographic groups like retirees and homemakers that are not part of the 9-to-5 traditional workforce. This format mirrors the global trend of syndicated talk shows like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (USA 1986–2011), which have historically targeted a female audience. These shows often attracted a dedicated audience by focusing on personal anecdotes, emotional narratives, societal matters, health, and entertainment. True-crime talk shows also address the contemporary role of women in Turkey, questioning traditional gender roles and simultaneously creating a cycle of female self-doubt and self-restriction.

The audience demographic of popular TV shows like MATS is more complex and layered than one might assume at first glance. Various forms of engagement exist with varying temporalities and modes of reception by a diverse set of social groups.[7] For instance individuals unable to keep up with the live transmission can access the complete episodes and excerpts at their convenience through the official YouTube channel or network website. The accessibility of the show also presents the opportunity for audiences to skip to specific passages, fast-forward or rewind, engage in repeat viewings, manipulate and modify the content, and engage in close analysis to discern intricate details.

True-crime talk shows involve a studio audience, recruited through casting agencies and personal connections. Their commitment to the show is evident, with motivations ranging

7 In Turkey, television is frequently utilized as an auditory accompaniment akin to radio, serving as ambient noise while individuals engage in other activities, predominantly labor. In addition, Turkish television programs are consumed in public settings within Turkey and among the Turkish diaspora, particularly in small businesses such as cafes, convenience shops, and bakeries. Occasionally, audience members who call into the show also reveal how they were exposed to the content of the show. In the case of the Palu family, for example, the first caller notes that he watched the broadcast while sitting in a tea house.

from personal interest to maintaining community ties. While their on-screen time is minimal, their presence represents a broader public empowered to unite and solve crimes. However, their role is mainly as observers rather than active participants in the dialogue.

A true-crime talk show such as MATS gains its power by mobilizing its audience and encouraging them to take part in solving the cases investigated in the show. Writing about the crime reality show *Crimewatch UK* (1984–2017), Bressi and Nunn stress that only a tiny fraction of the audience is directly related to a case and has personal knowledge that might be useful while solving that crime. Hence the rest of the audience will need to develop connections of an entirely different nature to maintain their interest in the program (see Biressi and Nunn 2005, 119). While MATS frequently mobilizes the audience living in the area where a given case takes place—those with personal knowledge of and direct or indirect connections to the occurrences under scrutiny—millions of people follow the show with different motivations, which I will expand on in the following pages.

The Palu family case serves as an excellent example of how these phenomena interact—how a program with nationwide reach, propelled by a growing and active general audience into the public limelight, can generate a week-long, multi-locale investigation that engages with people with more direct links to the case, collecting data from multiple locations—more specifically, information on crimes committed all over Turkey. The family, mainly a man called Tuncer Ustael, had engaged in criminal activities such as religious exploitation, fraud, and sexual assault across multiple cities for over a decade. It turned out that the local law enforcement agencies lacked a comprehensive understanding of their family's complex criminal history. However, testimonies shared by audience members during the show provided crucial confirmation of illegal activities that occurred in various cities and at different times, doing "police work," so to speak, and finally allowing the authorities to intervene. To substantiate this

 claim, it is imperative to analyze the development of the case as presented in the show more thoroughly.

Palu Family Case in the Studio

On December 21st, 2018, Müge Anlı presented the Palu family case to the audience. It concerned the disappearance of Meryem Tahnal—born Meryem Palu, daughter of Havva Palu—and her six-year-old daughter Melike a decade before the show's airing. In 2011, some members of the Palu family gave testimonies to law enforcement officials indicating that Tuncer Ustael, the brother-in-law of Meryem, had murdered mother and daughter. However, they retracted their statement afterwards, claiming that they had been coerced to testify against Tuncer by the relatives of Meryem's deceased spouse. According to the Palu family, the Tahnal family collaborated with an organ trafficking network and exploited their daughter Meryem for their nefarious deeds. Havva Palu made extraordinary claims on the show, saying that they were haunted by djinns associated with the Tahnal family.

In the absence of concrete evidence supporting their extravagant allegations of a conspiracy by the Tahnal family, mounting evidence suggested that Meryem and Melike were indeed victims of domestic homicide. The entirety of the family had been either aware or actively involved in their murder. The show treated the case for over three weeks. Callers provided testimony and evidence that revealed sexual and substance abuse, physical and psychological violence, and religious exploitation within the family. Eventually, most family members were taken into custody by the police, sometimes during the show's live recording. Here I will examine the investigative techniques employed by the program to draw comparisons with the audience's participation.

Breakdown of the Investigative Techniques of the Show

The format of Müge Anlı's show primarily consists of guests congregating in a studio setting and engaging in interviews with

the host and the experts and more open conversations that can at times become loud, emotional, and confrontational. The show format is distinguished by its talk-show setting. Unlike other judicial reality shows, such as *Judge Judy* (1996–2021), the absence of a confrontational studio setting is notable. The concave sofa on which the guests, experts, and host are seated disrupts a hierarchy of judge vs. the accused and creates a state of flux in the positioning of each individual vis-à-vis the host, the other guests, and the experts. The presenter of the program, Anlı, assumes multiple roles, including those of a judge, lawyer, and prosecutor, adapting her tone of voice as appropriate.

In general, cases are brought to the show through applications—like a mother looking for a missing daughter or a family seeking justice for having been cheated. Before any case enters the show, however, a production team (internally called the "intelligence"[8]) researches the guests and the background of the case. They check whether there are any ongoing legal processes, whether the claims of the applicant check out, and whether the case has any elements that could invite censorship.[9]

The development of the Palu family case demonstrates that the production team must have had access to legal documents, such as the testimonies of the family members and doctor reports, since Müge Anlı presented those documents as evidence during the show. In the first couple of episodes, Anlı went over the claims of Havva Palu—the mother of the missing Meryem Tahnal—by

8 My knowledge of the pre-production of true-crime talk shows is based on my March 2020 studio visit to the show *Gerçeğin Peşinde* (*In Search of Truth*), where I had the opportunity to observe the work of the intelligence team and conduct interviews. I could only observe the show as a member of the studio audience in MATS. Nevertheless, since the crews of true-crime talk shows often have experiences with other networks and similar talk-show formats, I feel confident in assuming that the workflow of shows with the same format is largely standardized.

9 The intelligence team of *Gerçeğin Peşinde* informed me that they did not possess any written document but had acquired a sense for off-limits topics through their accumulated experience.

presenting a testimony that she had given in 2011, the one she later refuted, allegedly because she gave it under the coercion of the Tanhal family.

In that testimony, Havva Palu claimed that Tuncer Ustael had beaten up and tortured Meryem for trying to go to the police to report his criminal activities,[10] and that she had died shortly after that. Havva went on to claim that Tuncer and Meryem's brother Isa—who was also present in the studio when Anlı recounted the testimony—buried her daughter at the Tütünciftlik shore, in the province of Kocaeli.

Havva Palu concluded the testimony from 2011 with the allegation that thirteen months after killing Meryem, Tuncer Ustael had also killed Meryem's daughter, Havva's granddaughter, who was six years old at the time. Tuncer had allegedly claimed that demons had possessed the girl, and that he had forced her to drink ethyl alcohol and vinegar, after which she died.

The verbal investigation of Anlı and the three experts on the show demonstrated that this earlier testimony was, in fact, more convincing and coherent than Havva Palu's later claims; since she contradicted herself regularly when trying to justify the refutation. But the show achieved something else by analyzing these testimonies on television: it enabled millions of people to fact-check the claims made. There were multiple calls from the audience, old neighbors in different cities, co-workers, victims of the family's scams, and prison mates sharing information on the family members, but mainly on Tuncer Ustael.

10 It is worth noting that during the events surrounding the disappearance of Meryem and Melike, Meryem's father, Harun Palu, had been imprisoned for the murder of Meryem's husband. Havva Palu's testimony occurred immediately after Harun Palu's release from prison. Upon learning about the circumstances regarding his daughter and granddaughter, Harun Palu persuaded his wife and his daughter Ayşe Melek to provide testimonies.

The first testimony came from an anonymous caller claiming to be the Palu family's previous tenant in Kocaeli. He testified that he saw Meryem Tahnal tied to a tree in a park on the Tütünciftlik coast. He said the entire family, including Havva and Meryem's siblings, had been present. The caller also mentioned that Tuncer requested a pick, a shovel, and an axe. When Tuncer returned with the tools the following day, they were all washed and cleaned.

When the expert Arif Verimli asks the caller why he didn't report what he saw to the police, he replies that Tuncer is someone you should avoid conflict with. Plus, Meryem's entire family was with her when she was tied to the tree.

In the recorded show, a portion of his testimony is censored, as is common on Turkish television.[12] Part of the call is muted. Anlı's serious expression while listening to the caller and approvingly shaking her head is the only information shared with the audience.

His and the other neighbors' testimonies highlight a prevalent trend observed in true-crime talk shows and reality programs in general. They reveal that when it comes to matters related to domestic affairs, individuals tend to remain silent. This inclination stems from societal expectations that internal familial issues should be resolved privately within the confines of the

11 In the context of my analysis, the term "testimony" refers to the account provided by a witness who reports on a fact, such as a crime or a historical event, based on their perspective and personal experience.

12 The Turkish Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), as the regulatory body overseeing broadcasting in Turkey, has an impact on self-censorship within the media landscape due to its authority to impose penalties and sanctions on broadcasters for perceived violations of broadcasting standards and content regulations. The majority of television shows, including MATS, employ workers responsible for monitoring the content of live broadcasts and overseeing the censorship of potentially objectionable segments.

family. Berna Yazıcı looks into this phenomenon, exploring how the dynamics of the family unit, social norms, and state policies shape the preference for familial privacy. She examines how the emphasis on family welfare and the political discourse surrounding the family impact the collective inclination to keep domestic matters confidential (see Yazici 2012).[13]

However, the personal affairs of this specific family have been anything but confidential. In fact, the neighbor's testimony also reveals that Tuncer Ustael, together with his wife Emine Ustael, had made an appearance as a guest on a different TV show ten years before—on Esra Ceyhan's show in May 2008. The case in question there was the brief disappearance of their four-year-old son in the courtyard of Eyüp Sultan Mosque in Istanbul. Even though the boy was found after only half an hour, he showed signs of grave psychological trauma. His father Tuncer's claims involving kidnapping, child abuse, and supernatural beings garnered the show's attention. While the case was ongoing on the show, Tuncer and his family suddenly disappeared, evading further contact with the program. They relocated to Kocaeli, effectively concluding the initial chapter of their televisual spectacle.

This public exposure highlights the contradiction between the societal expectation of privacy in domestic matters and the actual public disclosure of intimate family details.[14] However, it also illustrates the unique status television inhabits as a social

13 In her recent book *Ikinci Hayat* (*Second Life*), Nurdan Gürbilek highlights that in addition to "speaking Turkey," there is a silent Turkey that keeps secrets. She explains that the concept of "domestic and national" in Turkey is treated as a family secret, known only to some individuals while remaining hidden from others. Knowing and understanding this secret signifies one's domestic and national identity, while the absence of knowledge or opening a debate about it implies a lack of belonging to the "domestic and national" family (see Gürbilek 2020, 49).

14 The peculiar nature of television can be attributed to its ambiguous position as both a public and private entity. It serves as a media mechanism seamlessly woven into the personal lives and daily routines of countless individuals, thereby creating a blur between these two domains.

technology—as both a public mass media and as part of domestic lives. The couches on daytime talk shows can be described as an extension of the domestic couch in the living room, allowing the viewers to imagine the show's guests as intimate relations by proxy. In MATS, the set is arranged as a "social semi-circle"[15]—with the front side left open to the perspective of the viewer at home, who can fictively inhabit the empty position and "join the conversation." Thinking of the show in this way, one can start to understand how the phenomena of a strong—and for women, often murderous[16]—secluded domestic space can coexist with a highly diversified, chatty televisual space that relishes exposing private drama. The relation is complex, neither contradictory nor complementary.

On Müge Anlı's show, the recapitulation of the 2008 case of the briefly missing son served mainly to illustrate a history of physical and psychological child abuse in Tuncer Ustael's environment. Numerous callers from the audience shared testimonies of witnessing Tuncer Ustael's maltreatment of his own wife and children. One neighbor, residing in a village where the family had temporarily stayed in Kocaeli, provided a testimony pointing to the last known location of six-year-old Melike. According to the neighbor, the little girl was subjected to torture and sexual abuse perpetrated by family members. Moreover, the neighbor portrayed Tuncer Ustael as the sheikh[17] of the family, serving as their spiritual guide, and implied that he was intimidating and exploiting the entire family.

15 See tv tropes (n.d.).

16 Femicide is a widespread problem in Turkey, with hundreds of cases each year—by November of 2022, for example, 327 women had been killed in the year (see Buyuk 2022). Most of the murders happen at home.

17 "Sheikh" (spelled as "şeyh" in Turkish) is an Arabic term that refers to a religious and spiritual leader within the Islamic tradition. It is also a common practice in religious exploitation that individuals introduce themselves as sheikh, falsely claiming or presenting themselves as knowledgeable and respected religious leader or authority to exploit people's religious beliefs and trust for personal gain.

The pivotal testimony, however, was provided on December 27th by Recep Tahnal, the surviving son of the missing Meryem. While his grandmother Havva Palu and his aunt Emine claimed that he, too, had been abducted by the organ trafficking mafia, Recep testified that Tuncer had subjected him, his sister Melike, and even their own children to torture. Contrary to the claims of abduction (the object of the brief TV appearance in 2008), Recep clarified that he had made multiple attempts to escape. Although the police returned him to his relatives on two occasions, he was finally taken into the custody of social services on the third attempt due to visible signs of abuse. Recep also revealed that he had endeavored to take his sister Melike with him, but Tuncer's deliberate starvation tactics had left them both too weak to reach the window together.

Reception of the Palu Family Case on Different Platforms

Coincidentally, December 2018 also marks the beginning of my research on Anlı's show. As I inquired into the study, I adopted a multi-platform approach, following the show through the live stream on ATV's official YouTube account while also engaging with different online platforms such as the urban dictionary *Ekşisözlük*,[18] Twitter, and Instagram. The notion of television audience has evolved beyond simply watching television broadcasts; it now encompasses exposure to televisual content across diverse

18 *Ekşisözlük* is an online platform that can be described as an urban dictionary, primarily driven by user-generated content. It also serves as a venue for citizen journalism, enabling individuals to follow news events and contribute alternative perspectives to the media landscape (Saka 2018). However, it is important to note that Ekşisözlük also exhibits a significant amount of troll activity and misinformation circulation, which impacts the reliability and accuracy of the information found on the platform. Despite these challenges, Ekşisözlük has played a role in enhancing social media literacy and facilitating the curation and investigation of protest-related news and media by a diverse user community (Saka 2018; Kantrowitz 2013).

digital platforms. Shows like MATS have attained a certain mainstream status, so that one no longer needs to watch the show live on television to encounter it in numerous ways, as it permeates multiple online avenues. This transition underscores the transformative impact of digital platforms on the dissemination and consumption of televisual content.

During its two-week running time, the discourse surrounding the Palu family case and, consequently, the show MATS gained significant traction on social media. This phenomenon can be situated at the intersection of uses and gratifications theory[19] (Blumler and Katz 1974), citizen journalism (Saka 2018), and audience-as-text (Hills 2002; De Kosnik 2016). Remarkably, individuals actively participated in the discussion and analysis of the case, even if they did not watch the show on television. By examining the comments across various platforms, I observed three distinct categories of engagement with the case.

The first category comprises posts that treat the show as a form of entertainment, with individuals binge-watching it for its spectacle value. These posts reflect the gratification derived from consuming true-crime content, engaging with the narrative, and potentially seeking suspenseful or thrilling experiences.

An interesting example is the posts shared by people who claim to be students. Specifically during the first week of January 2019, I noticed a pattern on Twitter in the comments of people

19 Uses and gratifications theory refers to a perspective in media studies that focuses on understanding why individuals choose to consume certain media content and the gratifications they derive from it. This theory emphasizes that media users are active participants who consciously select and engage with media based on their needs and desires. When applied to fan studies, one key approach by media scholars is to examine the gratification fans seek from their media engagement. This includes exploring the emotional attachments, escapism, social connections, and identity formation that fans derive from their interactions with media texts and fan communities (see Blumler and Katz 1979). My claim is that the active audience of MATS shows structural similarities to the activities of fans.

expressing their complaints about the untimely introduction of the Palu family case. Many university students found themselves drawn into binge-watching the show instead of dedicating time to prepare for their finals. "And how will the Palu family be held accountable for causing students all over Turkey to fail their exams because they couldn't focus on studying due to thinking about them?" (@kahveyedoymayan, January 6, 2019). "Is it a coincidence that the Palu family is making headlines in Turkey during finals? It is evident that forces beyond our control do not want us to study" (@yasolin, January 6, 2019). Comments like these illustrate how the captivating nature of the case and the discussions surrounding it attracted audiences, even those who may not typically engage with MATS content.

The second category encompasses social media posts, podcasts, and videos that offer summaries of the case or share images related to efforts aimed at deciphering the complexities surrounding it. These serve as informational resources, notifying individuals about the case and its developments. This investigative interaction allows the audience to actively analyze and contribute to the public discourse, shaping the narrative beyond the show's confines.

This particular group of the audience closely follows the show in search of clues to unravel the case. An example of their engagement can be seen in a tweet: "...on the first day while discussing Melike on #mugeAnlı, Havva whispers to her son, 'I wish we had said she [Melike] disappeared too'...! But no one noticed" (@gizemlide, January 6, 2019).

Abigail De Kosnik describes the complex interactions between the audience's investment in and participation with the show on the one hand and its production logic on the other as follows: "Fans' 'speculations, observations and commentaries,' gathered together in large online communities, present 'the audience-as-text' to fellow fans and interested lurkers, and this audience-text gets consumed alongside 'the originating commodity text'" (De

Kosnik 2016, 156; see also Hills 2002, 177). In addition to such intra-audience exchanges, the active "audience-as-text" feeds information back into the programming decisions of the show, creating multiple feedbacks between producers and an audience as co-producer—or, more in line with the crime-genre of MATS, as investigative spectators, as I refer to them.

In addition, I connect this type of technologically mediated audience activity to the idea of "citizen journalism," similar to the concept of "open source intelligence" (OSINT) or "open source investigation" used by civil society actors,[20] a phenomenon that can be observed all around the globe due to the widespread use of the internet and digital devices, mainly developing between the early 2000s and around 2012, just after the "Arab Spring" protests. The 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul sparked an explosion of online creativity and new media development.[21] As it has all over the world, citizen journalism has since been thriving in Turkey as well. This can be explained by traditional media outlets failing in their role as independent sources of news and by functioning as a sphere to keep powers in check through critical reporting (see Tunç 2018). I believe that the audience activity of true-crime talk shows can be understood as the transference of citizen journalism's online habits or workflows—albeit with less idealistic goals. If we consider Turkish citizen journalists as a collective force that produces facts and evidence to counteract the mainstream media's silence or disinformation on government politics, the motivation of the "investigative spectators" appears

20 See Investigative Commons (n.d.).

21 The emergence of citizen journalism in Turkey in the wake of the Gezi Park protests is illustrative of the transformative power of social media in its ability to challenge traditional media structures. The protests, which were led by young people living in urban areas, demanded accountable and pluralistic government, which brought them into conflict with the established media system. Traditional media failed to adequately report on the demonstrations, whereas social media played an essential part in facilitating communication and information sharing during this historical social movement (see Saka 2018).

to be more ambiguous. They engage in the act of "playing detective" while also actively seeking accountability. The most notable distinction, however, lies in the direction of their investigative activities. Citizen journalists primarily aim to "speak truth to power," directing their critique vertically upwards against those in authority or those who suppress information. On the other hand, the investigative spectatorship tends to be horizontally directed, focused on gathering evidence against fellow citizens as part of a quasi-"citizen tribunal." Interestingly, the social dynamics often become inverted, with individuals from disadvantaged and poorer groups being accused on these shows, effectively putting those from lower positions on trial.

One of the most intriguing activities observed among the investigative spectators is their engagement in private chat groups. These individuals, who are often avid followers of true-crime documentaries and other crime-related formats, display a heightened level of dedication. Their involvement goes beyond simply consuming the content produced by the show; they actively drill into the social media profiles of the guests featured on the show, meticulously searching for potential clues. If they stumble upon any relevant information, they share their findings by submitting it to the show's WhatsApp hotline. In this way, this audience group directly contributes to the show's content, despite having no direct connection to the case.

The third and final category involves critical discussions of the Palu family within a socio-political context. These posts dive deeper into the case, exposing or reaffirming the existing polarization within Turkish society. Participants express their views on the family's actions, scrutinizing their behavior and examining the case's broader implications. By disseminating condensed summaries or visual representations, participants engage in audience-as-text interaction, contributing to the collective understanding and interpretation of the case.

For instance, Twitter posts about the Palu family case demonstrate —to borrow a phrase coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari— the "micropolitics"[22] at play in the show, as users express their emotions, opinions, and reactions, shaping public perception and discourse.

> The "Palu Family" incident, which occurred in Turkey in 2019, encompasses all the pathologies, filth, and corruption of this country, reaching its peak during the AKP rule! Historians who recount the AKP era in the decades and centuries to come will undoubtedly mention the "Palu Family" as a significant event representing the essence of this period! (@dribrahimsozen, January 6, 2019)

Another post from the January 6th comments upon the censorship of LGBTQ+ content on television:

> While RTÜK considers homosexuality, including kissing and making love, as detrimental to child psychology, it fails to denounce the acts of violence, rape, and atrocities committed by the Palu family. Violence and rape go unchecked, while love remains forbidden! (@foxveloxx, January 6, 2019)

Overall, the engagement of social media users with the Palu family case demonstrates the multifaceted nature of audience activities in the context of true-crime talk shows. Through active participation on various platforms, individuals embody the principles of uses and gratifications theory, assume the role of

22 One aspect of micropolitics as developed by Deleuze and Guattari describes the field where individual emotions and perceptions intersect with the social organization—the reciprocity of affects and norms. "Everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a *macropolitics* and a *micropolitics*. … There is a micropolitics of perception, affectation, conversation and so forth" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 249). In this context, emotional affects and behavioral micro-patterns, as captured by a television camera and broadcast publicly, the ensuing internet mobilizations, memes, and social media posts are mirror images of social tempers, political moods, and cultural sensibilities.

 citizen journalists, and engage in audience-as-text interactions, collectively shaping the discourse surrounding the case.

Conclusion: True-Crime Talk Shows and "Speaking Turkey"

Following sociologist Laura Grindstaff and media scholar Raymond Williams, I understand television as "both an intention and an effect of the social order, including relations of power and inequality, and as such, it offers people a kind of language or grammar for understanding and negotiating those relations" (Grindstaff 2014, 4; see also Silverstone and Williams 2004). In Turkey, political influence on the media has a long history, albeit the methods have evolved over time. I claim that television has for some time been playing the role of shaping, censoring, and channeling public and political discourse in Turkey, that it is, in the words of Nurdan Gürbilek, a "strategy of power" (see Gürbilek 2011). Referring to how the mainstream media—magazines, cinema, television—handled the aftermath of the violent military coup of 1980, Gürbilek writes:

> It was a period of denial, censorship, and silencing; but also one of promise, provoking desire as never before. One strategy [of power] operated on the basis of repression and exclusion, or forced abnegation; but a second sought to arouse, internalize and tame. Turkey was silenced, the right to speech cut off; but "A speaking Turkey" offered new channels and frameworks for speech.[23] (Gürbilek 2011, 6 and 198)

"Speaking Turkey" or "*konuşan Türkiye*" refers to the emergence of a new form of public discourse in Turkey, characterized by a

23 It is important to note that the term "speaking Turkey" was coined by conservative politician Süleyman Demirel, one of the many politicians targeted by the 1980 coup and subsequently prohibited from political activities.It is therefore a political term embraced by the media of the period—and not an academic one.

shift from a state-centric mode of expression to an emphasis on individual voices and narratives. This transformation has been facilitated by the rise of various media platforms, allowing ordinary people to share their personal stories and experiences, shaping public discourse in the process.

In the context of reality shows, the concept of "speaking Turkey" becomes particularly relevant. Reality shows often focus on the private lives of ordinary people, showcasing their personal struggles, conflicts, and intimate moments. These shows have become a stage for individuals to voice their narratives, inviting audiences to engage with their stories. By broadcasting personal dramas and family issues, these reality shows contribute to constructing a public discourse that prioritizes individual experiences over traditional institutional narratives.

I assess true-crime talks shows as prime examples of this "speaking Turkey"—as a form of "governmentality"[24] that both encourages and discourages speech, that conceals as much as it reveals, that asks its audience to participate but renders them passive by limiting the scope of participation to private issues, and that is both a critique of and support for existing power structures. Criticism of those similar to or below oneself is allowed—even incentivized by the complex media environment centered around a live TV show—while criticizing those in positions of power is met with repercussions (thus the omnipresent censorship in Turkish television).

With this paper, I have tried to dissect some of the inherent complexities of this contradictory kind of audience activity. I understood true-crime talk shows' success and longevity as

24 According to Foucault, the structure of the public sphere is shaped by complex networks that extend into international, national, regional, and local arenas, encompassing various cultural and political orientations (Habermas 1996). However, it is essential to acknowledge that within this intricate web of public discourse, certain power dynamics come into play. The government, along with the media, aims to redirect public attention.

indicative of a unique trifold address of contemporary audience demands: first, of traditional consumerist needs (exemplified by the "binge-watching" students), second, of semi-participatory audience activity in a post-television new media environment (exemplified by the "investigative spectators) and last, of para-political insights allowed by reality television (exemplified by the "political commentaries"). I subsequently sketched out some preliminary ideas on how unpacking this layered form of audience engagement has the potential to provide insights into the ways authoritarian politics in Turkey and the media interact—summed up in Nurdan Gürbilek's concept of a "speaking Turkey." I could, however, only hint at possible conclusions—because to really listen to and interpret this cacophonous, auto-aggressive, but also, in a way, honest internal monologue Turkey's society has with itself through shows like MATS would exceed the context of this essay and is a project reserved for a more detailed and in-depth analysis.

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[1 3]

“The Wormhole,” or YouTube’s Borderline Content Problem

Becky Holt

Over the past 48-hours I have discovered a Wormhole, as I would call It, into a softcore pedophilia ring on YouTube
—Matt Watson

Through cyberporn, the pedophile and the computer-savvy child became hypervisible figures of anxiety over the jacked-in computer’s breaching of the home.
—Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

The “Wormhole”

In 2019, a YouTuber named Matt Watson uploaded a video titled, “YouTube is Facilitating the Sexual Exploitation of Children, and it’s Being Monetized.” In the video, Watson claims that pedophiles are finding videos of young girls on the platform and swarming

the comment sections with lude remarks and other disturbing behaviors. Watson expressed disgust, not only because many of the videos were monetized but also because finding one of these videos resulted in what Watson called "the wormhole"—a word he used to describe YouTube's algorithmic effect (Watson 2019). According to Watson, once you stumbled across one of these videos, which he claimed was easy to do, YouTube would immediately recommend more videos of young girls that contained similar predatory behavior in the comment section—turning your recommended feed into a trash fire of pedophilic activity (Watson 2019). This led Watson to allege that YouTube was "facilitating" a softcore pedophilia ring on the platform.

The internet has always generated public concerns over exposure—what kinds of content are children exposed to and conversely, how children became visible to predators online. One early example of this is *Time Magazine*'s 1995 cover story, "On A Screen Near You: Cyberporn." In the article, author Philip Elmer-Dewitt claimed that over *eighty percent* of images on Usenet were pornographic and the market for adult content on bulletin board systems was driven by the search for pedophilic images, among other deviant forms of content (Elmer-Dewitt 1995, 38). Most of Elmer-Dewitt's facts and figures, which were sourced from an undergraduate thesis, were later debunked (Chun 2006, 77). Still, the damage was done. The *Time* cover story launched a full blown cyberporn panic with concern for children at the center. As a result of this sex panic, American (and to some extent international) public(s) became convinced that the internet was less a technological medium than an audiovisual one (Chun 2006, 81).[1]

1 danah boyd recounts a related example in her piece "Hacking the Attention Economy," wherein she recounts how early users of 4chan broke into mainstream consciousness by trolling Oprah in the early 2000s: "Many inside 4chan felt that widespread anxieties about pedophilia were exaggerated and sensationalized," she notes, adding that 4chan users trolled Oprah Winfrey for stoking parents' fears; "They got her to talk on live TV about how 'over 9,000 penises' were raping children." (boyd 2017)

Consequently, mainstream computer users became focused on what children would *see* online, or how they would become *seen*.

The panic that Matt Watson ignited over YouTube's wormhole over twenty-five years later bore similar hallmarks to the cyberporn panic in the 1990s. Watson's video quickly gained mainstream attention, triggering questions and concerns about how child sexual assault could occur on such a popular and widely used platform and what the concerned public could do to protect its children.[2] However, this incident was somewhat unique because it was not so much the *content* in question that sparked widespread concern and disgust. Instead, internet users, journalists, and even researchers expressed concern about how YouTube's participatory features and algorithmic processes were enabling predatory behavior. This shift in interest from content to technology suggests that platformization is reshaping the technological imaginaries of the internet.

Media archaeologist Eric Kluitenberg defines a "technological imaginary" as the "stories that convey what technological media are seen to be capable of" (Kluitenberg 2011, 48). Kluitenberg continues, "more often than not, the expectations contained in such imaginaries far exceed that which actual media machines are actually capable of doing" (Kluitenberg 2011, 48). For Kluitenberg, the technological imaginary is a framework for analyzing how obsolete or failed technologies inform widely adopted technologies that come to fruition. This chapter is not an example of media archaeology, but Kluitenberg's concept is useful for framing my approach to the platform wherein I am less concerned with the actual machinations of the platform than with how people *think* a platform works. Put differently,

2 This was not the first time YouTube received criticism over the safety of children on its platform. Two years earlier, in 2017, a conspiracy theory took hold on Reddit, alleging that YouTube was hosting disturbing kids' videos intended to brainwash children. For more information, see Brandom (2017).

 I am interested in what Marc Steinberg calls, "the platform as rhetorical device" (Steinberg 2019, 6).

As a researcher who works at the intersection of platform and pornography studies, I often observe platform scholars mentioning pornography as a mere form of content or a road stop in the genealogy of content moderation. Granted, this is because platform discourse is a widely applied framework and pornography is treated as an object that falls within it.[3] Despite this, I believe there is value in using a traditionally marginalized topic—pornography—as the central object from which to analyze the platform. Namely, because it allows for questions of sex and sexuality to bubble to the surface—political questions that are important for understanding the broader implications of platforms studies research. I believe the same is true in reverse: the theory of platformization reveals novel insights about online pornography.[4] Finally, I choose to focus on this particular moment in YouTube's history because it taps into the co-constitutive relationship between pornography and platforms that animates my work more broadly.

On the Borders of Pornography

The videos on YouTube that ignited concern were, in Matt Watson's words, "softcore." They did not contain nudity or sexual activity of any kind. A vast majority of the videos flagged were pixelated clips shot on smartphones of girls and pre-teens bouncing on trampolines or showing off their gymnastic skills; videos that kids posted for their friends or family to see—not thinking twice

3 Here I am thinking primarily about key scholars who research platforms in the North American context such as: Bogost and Montfort (2009), Gillespie (2018), Helmond (2015) and Srnicek (2017).

4 Here I am relying on David Nieborg and Thomas Poells's definition of platformization, "the penetration of digital platforms' economic, infrastructural, and governmental extension into the cultural industries, as well as the organization of cultural practices of labor, creativity and democracy around these platforms" (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4276).

about making them public. The videos only took a dark turn when users began to reappropriate and twist YouTube's user-participation features. These included comments ranging from questions about where the girls were from to sexually suggestive emojis. In more extreme circumstances, commenters would hyperlink to hardcore content. Perhaps most disturbingly, users timestamped parts of the videos they deemed lascivious, which created an edit of sorts where users could pan across still images of young girls doing the splits or moments when a small portion of their undergarments were visible, for example.

Child pornography is a deeply complex topic, signaled first by the controversial status of the phrase itself. According to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in the United Kingdom, "there is no such thing as child pornography" (NSPCC 2023). They further argue that "pornography" refers to a type of media that is largely legal to sell or share by and for consenting adults.[5] They continue, "Referring to child sexual abuse materials as pornography puts the focus on how the materials are used, as opposed to the impact they have on children" (NSPCC 2023). Most child advocacy groups place both the behavior and media related to 'child pornography' in the category of "child sexual abuse" or "child sexual abuse materials" (henceforth referred to as CSAM) (NSPCC 2023). That being said, as Philip Jenkins points out in *Beyond Tolerance*, collapsing child porn with child sexual abuse is also a rhetorical weapon for politicians, anti-pornography activists, and moral crusaders to justify censorship, internet regulation, and the marginalization of sex workers. Jenkins also admits that online child pornography has "a substantial presence, and much of the material out there is worse

5 I would amend this slightly by saying that, while a vast percentage of pornography is representational, in many cases we find pornography stimulating precisely because it walks the line between fantasy and reality. Moreover, with the rise of revenge pornography and increased awareness of lack of consent on set, there are other examples of sexual media that are better classified as documentation of abuse.

than most of us can imagine." Despite this, Jenkins continues, "cyberstalking" and "child porn" are "radically different in their nature and in the response demanded" (2001, 9).[6] Put differently, the YouTube crisis of 2019 puts into perspective the importance of differentiating child sexual and CSAM in cases where properly addressing the threat relies on the ability to distinguish between content and behavior. YouTube, as we will see, fumbled their response because the platform assumed it would be enough to address the content alone.

When Watson first alerted the world to the 'wormhole,' YouTube removed only the videos that were brought to their attention. However, after the windfall of attention, and major advertisers began pausing their deals, YouTube was forced to 'throw the kitchen sink' at the issue. The company removed an untold number of videos, banned millions of accounts, and disabled the comments on tens of millions of videos that, according to YouTube, "may include minors and therefore are at risk of predatory comments" (YouTube 2019). Videos featuring children were also subject to what the platform called "limited monetization," meaning certain channels might prove ineligible for pre-roll advertising in particular (YouTube 2019). Finally, YouTube ramped up its machine-learning moderation systems and began to make changes to the design of its recommendation algorithms. Their efforts went so far that YouTubers could not even mention certain words or refer to the crisis without risking removal. At the start of the pandemic, YouTube seemingly favored its automated content moderation system over human moderators; 10,000 employees working in content moderation were "put offline" (Barker and Murphy 2020). However, after its filtering software became "overzealous" and removed 11 million videos over the course of three months, YouTube hired back former employees stating, "one of the results of reducing human oversight was a jump in

6 Please note that researchers distinguish between child pornography offenders and individuals who commit child sexual assault. For more information see Henshaw, Ogloff, and Clough (2017).

the number of videos removed, including a significant proportion that broke no rules" (Barker and Murphy 2020).

This crisis was difficult for YouTube to curtail because the offending videos were what is oftentimes referred to as "borderline content," which is defined as content that is vaguely problematic but "not quite bad enough to remove" (Gillespie 2022, 1).[7] Tarleton Gillespie (2022) has been writing about the topic recently in response to what he identifies as the hyperfocus on the act of removal when this is only one of the strategies platforms can employ to moderate content. Instead, Gillespie (2022, 1) argues, greater attention should be paid to "reduction," or techniques through which platforms reduce "the conditions under which [borderline content] circulates." Social media users generally understand this tactic through the idea of 'shadowbanning,' but it can include a variety of other strategies. According to Gillespie, there are a host of reasons why platforms choose to reduce the visibility of certain content rather than remove it altogether. One reason, Gillespie writes, is that "reduction strategies may also be preferable when the types of problematic content are difficult to identify, in flux, or difficult to police. Reducing without removing allows platforms the flexibility to intervene around quickly emerging phenomena, to go after content designed to elude prohibitions, and to curtail content they 'know' is bad but have a hard time articulating why" (2022, 5).[8]

I am interested in the ideas of borderline content and content reduction because they demonstrate how platformization has transformed what counts as pornographic. Typically, artificial

7 It is worth noting that Gillespie prefers not to use the word "borderline" as he argues it reifies pejoratives related to the term such as "borderline personality disorder" or geographical borders. He suggests the term "reduction" instead. I will use "borderline," as the word "reduction" refers to the act of reducing whereas I am discussing one type of content that platforms seek to reduce.

8 For further work on content moderation and filtering see Apprich (2017), Kosseff (2019), Jeong (2015), Lovink (2019), Gerrard (2018) and Gillespie (2015).

intelligence programmers 'train' machine-learning systems by aggregating visual data—essentially feeding the program pre-labeled image data. Computer vision, as it is termed, relies upon "the increased availability of immense quantities of partially labeled data on the internet, which makes it more feasible to learn object categories without the use of careful human supervision" (Szeliski 2011, 17). Microsoft's machine-assisted "Content Moderator" API powered by Azure AI Vision Image Analysis, for example, uses a statistical model to evaluate and identify content it deems "sexually explicit or adult" ("Adult") or "sexually suggestive or mature" ("Racy") (Microsoft 2024). However, as pornography on platforms increasingly falls under the category of 'I *sort of* know it when I see it,' these already-limited artificial intelligence systems become practically useless.

In some cases, as Gillespie points out, content reduction software is trained to disallow the use of certain words associated with banned or borderline content. However, users are savvy and quickly crowd-source or generate terms and iconography designed to evade content moderation software. Moreover—and this is partly why I insist on taking pornography as a crucial example of borderline content—these phenomena are a complex mix of images, emojis, text, and socializing. The crisis on YouTube illustrates this. Outside the platform, the offending videos were arguably innocent, but placed within a context where users could leave comments, hyperlinks, and timestamp, the videos were transmuted into child pornography.

There are many other instances of borderline pornography that are native to the platform format. Take, for example, the #FreeTheNipple campaign on Instagram. When Meta (then Facebook) purchased Instagram in 2012, the platform's policy on nudity became noticeably stricter (Slater-Robins 2015).[9] Users started drawing attention to the fact that images of breastfeeding or

9 Reportedly, Instagram was forced to become stricter about nudity in order to comply with the Apple App Store's policy, "explicitly banning nudity unless

mastectomy scars were being removed from the platform. It caused outrage on the part of many who felt the policy exhibited a double standard, and sparked a movement of activists, artists, and celebrities who found creative ways to post images of nude breasts that did not violate Instagram's Community Guidelines. This includes the account @genderless_nipples, which features images of nipples that are so close-up it becomes impossible (and silly) to try and determine their gender. This also included images where women photoshopped male nipples over their own or photographs where, according to *The New York Times,* photographers "used paint, glitter, hair, and flower petals" to obscure their nipples (Jacobs 2019). The movement, albeit tinged with a certain respectability politics, demonstrated how users could subvert community guidelines and escape computer vision moderation to create an alternative genre of nude images.[10]

Another more recent example is the presence of fetish content on TikTok that presents as mainstream or 'safe for work' content. One TikTok user, Lena Rae (username 'lenarae.lh') has dedicated their account to featuring sort-of obscene content and answering the question, "Is this fetish content?" For example, in one video the creator stitches a video from another account called "5.minute.crafts." In the video, a woman with her face obscured shows viewers a tip for getting jeans to fit by getting the jeans wet first before you attempt to button them. Lena Rae argues the excessive amount of water, the body language, and the fact that the person's face is obscured are clear indicators that the content is sexual (Rae 2022). Despite this, the video does not violate TikTok's Terms of Service nor does it feature nudity or explicit sexual activity of any kind. A quick browse of the rest

the app is rated 17+." Obviously, if Instagram were to have adopted that rating, it could potentially have lost users.

10 Critics of the campaign cited its lack of inclusivity towards gender non-conforming, disabled, and black and brown people. There was also an implicit suggestion that a breast-feeding mother, for example, would not want to be categorized alongside sex workers. For more information, see Gamble (2016).

of "5.minute.crafts," which boasts an incredible twelve million followers, shows numerous videos featuring different women doing bizarre cleaning tasks. Many of the videos show close-ups of feet, such as one video where a woman meticulously crafts a pair of high heels that also serve as a broom. The caption for the video is "High heels for cleaning your home" followed by the squirting water emoji, which is often used to convey that something is sexual (5.minute.crafts 2024). This is just one example among many others that might not *look* sexy at a glance, but through a mixture of sounds, emojis, and comments, it suddenly becomes titillating.

Even in Matt Watson's video, he admits to having stumbled across this "pedophile ring" while he was searching for "bikini haul" videos on YouTube. In response to the question of why he was searching for "bikini haul," Watson (2019) responds, "I mean… red-blooded, heterosexual male. Do I really need to explain? Who cares." Similar to the men exploiting videos of young girls, Watson admits that he was using YouTube to find videos that he found sexually arousing. Of course, Watson was not targeting children, but his admission is representative of the larger phenomena I am pointing to. It is clear that despite the attempts at content moderation and reduction, platforms are open to a variety of uses, some of which are pornographic or sexual in nature.

This is not to say that social media and streaming platforms invented softcore or erotic content. Rather, this phenomenon suggests that online pornography does not always articulate itself in ways that its antecedents in film and video have taught us to expect. Platformization has challenged our expectations of online pornography as being strictly audiovisual. Whether through its participatory features or (ironically) its mechanisms for content reduction, platformization has resulted in a broad range of content that is *vaguely* pornographic—content that simply does not live up to the time-honored legal definition of

pornography in the United States, "I know it when I see it."[11] Of course, there remains a cornucopia of platforms that feature hardcore pornography. Still, I think YouTube's 2019 crisis among numerous other examples demonstrates the need for further consideration of how pornography and platformization often intersect in surprising and important ways.[12]

Imagining the Predatory Algorithm

As mentioned above, Matt Watson claims to have discovered a "wormhole" effect on YouTube. If you found a video where a young child was being sexualized, YouTube would immediately recommend more videos of the same ilk. Others attempted to replicate or test this algorithmic effect. Reporter Julia Alexander (2019) writing for *The Verge* concluded, we "tried to recreate the situation multiple times, and through each experiment, discovered it took six clicks or less to find videos with predatory comments in the comment section." In an open letter, United States Senators Richard Blumenthal and Marsha Blackburn (2019) stated: "YouTube's recommendation engine represents the development of a dangerous new kind of illicit content meant to avoid law enforcement detection." Finally, a group of researchers from Harvard's Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society

11 This quote was taken from a United States Supreme Court Decision handed down in 1964. The case, Jacobellis v. Ohio, concerned obscenity in relation to an adult film, and it was one of numerous court cases where the Supreme Court attempted to pinpoint what amounts to obscenity. In his written decision, Justice Potter Stewart stated, "I have reached the conclusion, which I think is confirmed at least by negative implication in the Court's decisions since Roth and Alberts, that under the First and Fourteenth Amendments criminal laws in this area are constitutionally limited to hardcore pornography. I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that."

12 For work that addresses online pornography and platformization see Keilty (2018), MacDonald (2019) and Paasonen (2019).

conducted a large-scale version of Watson's experiment in the Brazilian context and concluded, "YouTube is not only plagued by political extremism and misinformation, but also by its own algorithms that created a filter bubble of sorts for pedophiles" (Kaiser and Rauchfleisch 2019). The methods for such experiments, however, were dubious at best. For example, most reports failed to mention what types of search terms they used to find the videos or the fact that using anonymous accounts would impact the search results.

Filter bubbles are a well-documented impact of social media websites. In academia, filter bubbles have come into focus for their ability to spread political and medical misinformation. YouTube is transparent about its recent attempt to control the spread of misinformation, stating that it uses human content moderators to "demote" borderline content. However, misinformation and all, recommendation systems on platforms often work as designed. The YouTube recommendation system is composed of two neural networks. First, the system retrieves a smaller subset of its total videos that it thinks a user will be interested in. For this the platform utilizes "clicks, watch-time, survey response, sharing, likes, and dislikes" (Goodrow 2021). Then, the system performs a ranking of the video subset. According to Google software engineers, "The ranking network accomplishes this task by assigning a score to each video…using a rich set of features describing the video and user. The highest scoring videos are presented to the user" (Covington, Adams, and Sargin 2016). In other words, software engineers work diligently to ensure that users are getting served similar content to that they have already watched. It is likely that when other folks found the "wormhole" Watson described, they were operating under confirmation bias.

Recommendation systems are complex and difficult to manage, particularly on platforms with a massive amount of content. Still, as numerous media scholars have argued, platform technologies do not inherently possess political or cultural ideologies outside

the programmers and designers who make them, and the people who use them. So why, in the context of YouTube, were so many people prepared to believe that an algorithm could act maliciously towards children? I argue it is because fears about sex—or what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun calls "sexuality-paranoia"—play a powerful and unique role in shaping beliefs about how platforms work.

In *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics,* Chun broadly defines "sexuality paranoia" as paranoid knowledge produced in and through discourses of sex and sexuality (Chun 2006, 12–13). According to Chun, in the context of the early internet, "sexuality-paranoia" manifests in several ways, but perhaps the most crucial is the paranoid ideation of the child. As I mentioned in the introduction, Chun argues that the conflation of the internet with pornographic content heightened fears of pedophilia and concerns over children learning about sex and sexuality from watching porn. Chun writes, "through cyberporn, the pedophile and the computer-savvy child became hypervisible figures of anxiety over the jacked-in computer's breaching of the home" (2006, 29). This is not to negate real-world incidents where children become targeted. Rather, as Chun incisively points out, it is worth pausing to consider why so many automatically assumed that internet technology would "induce perversity," when it could easily be taken as a tool for *protecting children* (2006, 97).

In the intervening years since *Control and Freedom* was published, public knowledge of the internet has grown to encompass things like data collection and algorithms. For example, features like TikTok's personalized "For You" page have normalized the idea that users interact with their 'own' algorithm. Despite this increased acceptance that the internet is not strictly an audiovisual medium, sexuality-paranoia has anything but disappeared.[13] From internet users to journalists and even

13 I have written about the staying power of sexuality-paranoia elsewhere, see Holt (2024).

researchers, everyone was prepared to argue that YouTube's recommendation algorithms were responsible for aiding in the creation of an online pedophile ring. But an algorithm cannot be a pedophile. To suggest otherwise, which Matt Watson and many others did, signals that fear of sex and sexuality serve as "a dense transfer point for relations of power" between platforms and users (Chun 2006, 12).[14]

Platform studies scholars tend to focus on the act of content moderation itself, which has the somewhat unfortunate outcome of reifying the types of content that platforms deem 'bad' or 'almost bad.' However, from the perspective of a pornography studies scholar, a video promoting 'flat earth' conspiracy theories and a video where a sex worker promotes her work on other platforms are radically different—affectively, morally, and aesthetically. Hence, it is perhaps worth examining if our unwillingness to parse through these categories hasn't contributed to a certain political hardening around questions of sex and pornography. As the YouTube crisis demonstrates, there is value and perhaps even a need to treat pornography—and the questions it automatically raises—as more than a form of content.

Pornography and the Platform

After 2019, Matt Watson went into relative obscurity. Other content creators were critical of Watson for allegedly seeking attention and doing more to harm YouTubers than protect children. As YouTuber Daniel M. Keem ('Keemstar') stated in his response video to Watson, "This is just gonna hurt the livelihood of YouTubers big and small" (Keem 2019). Indeed, for many content creators, reduction and removal have trickle-down effects that

14 Chun states that her "insight that power can be experienced as sexuality" is indebted to Paul Daniel Schreber and particularly Michel Foucault, who "contends that sexuality is 'the secret' instrumental to power/knowledge … Sexuality, for Foucault, is a dense transfer point for relations of power" (2006, 11-12).

negatively impact their ability to work as influencers. So-called "mommy-vloggers"—a group of primarily female creators who publish lifestyle content focusing on their children and experience of motherhood—were one of the groups most affected. YouTube disabled comments and recommended that creators limit their children's visibility on the platform. Mommy vloggers and lifestyle influencers were left scrambling, trying to figure out how to engage their audience. Comments and even timestamping are incredibly important to their business; without the ability to interact with their audience and vice-versa, their content lost traction. YouTube did not enable comments for such channels until 2021 (YouTube 2019).

The broader arc of my research focuses on Pornhub and its parent company, MindGeek. Up to this point, I have focused almost exclusively on analyzing online pornography at the intersections of adult media and digital culture and technology. Within the limitations of this article, however, I challenged myself to approach the same questions I have been grappling with for years from a different vantage point. Namely, what does platform studies teach us about online pornography, and what does online pornography offer to our understanding of the platform?

Assessing the impacts of platformization on pornography forces one to rethink the questions of representation that have often occupied the study of pornography. I am not claiming to disregard the idea of representation entirely; rather, I argue that there is a need to develop a framework that accounts for the technological, social, and aesthetic aspects that define pornography on mainstream platforms in particular. Like Lev Manovich's (1995, 3) argument that digital cinema is more akin to "a sub-genre of painting" than it is to the indexicality of photography, or the narrative elements of classic cinema, perhaps platformization has had a similar effect on the pornographic. The influx of online content that is *vaguely* pornographic seems to invite comparisons to older examples of pornography—dirty stories, obscene crafts, and the Victoria's Secret Catalogue that you stole from

your mom. At the same time, perhaps these emergent forms of pornography, which seem intricately tied to the processes of platformization, are—drawing from Patrick Jagoda's theory of "network aesthetics"—a form of what we might call "platform aesthetics," or emergent aesthetic forms that help us to apprehend platforms through a "range of both medium-specific and transmedia features that include narrative, text, images, audio, and procedural or participatory interactions" (Jagoda 2016, 5).

To address the former question, what does pornography offer to our understanding of platforms? Namely, addressing platformed pornography requires that one hold onto a different set of affective and political questions. As I hope to have demonstrated, starting with pornography enables a reconfiguration of our traditional understanding of certain platforms; it brings corporate discourse and algorithmic filtering together in new ways; it invites parallel examination of the mommy vlogger and the sex worker. Above all, starting with porn helps us as researchers to hold onto a set of political questions that are important for understanding the broader implications of platform criticism.

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[1 4]

Searching for the 'ALT' in ALTBalaji: An Analysis of the Platform's Streaming Imaginaries and Conjugal Configurations

Sneha Kumar

Introduction

ALTBalaji's[1] story begins with Ekta Kapoor, who is the founder of the platform as well as joint Managing Director, along with her mother, of the platform's parent company, Balaji Telefilms Ltd., a relatively large production house that serves both Bollywood and Hindi television markets. Kapoor began her Hindi television production career under the Balaji Telefilms banner in the mid-1990s, in a post-liberalization India that was seeing an influx of western goods and media, with a family-based sitcom called *Hum Paanch/Us Five* (1995–2006), which helped to establish Zee TV as a popular Indian television channel, resulting in a partnership that would continue into the streaming market. She also went on to popularize the K-serial, a genre of television that revolved

1 As of writing this essay, ALTBalaji has changed its name to ALTT. Ekta Kapoor has resigned from her position and handed the company over to Vivek Koka. Unfortunately, engaging with the name change is outside the boundaries of this essay, but I hope to think about it in future work.

around generational tensions between joint family members,[2] particularly the saas-bahu or mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and included shows such as *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi/A Mother-in-Law was once also a Daughter-in-Law* (2000–2008), and *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki/Every Household's Story* (2000–2008), which aired on Star Plus. It is important to note that these shows leaned into a Hindu, upper-middle class and upper-caste ideology, aesthetic, and sexual politics at a time when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's current nationalist ruling party, was seeing a meteoric rise to power. She forayed into film production in the early 2000s and strayed away from the Balaji Telefilms' formulaic Indian family-centric soap opera drama, to make films such as *Kya Kool Hai Hum/How Cool Are We* (Sangeeth Sivan 2005), a dirty comedy that focused on the hypersexual lives of young people living in the city. In 2010, Balaji Telefilms launched ALT Entertainment (now ALT Digital Entertainment) as part of a diversification strategy with Dibakar Banerjee's film *Love, Sex aur Dhoka/Love, Sex and Deception* (2010), which focused primarily on anxieties over the role of portable cameras (mobile phones, CCTV, and small surveillance cameras) in the circulation of sex. The film was framed as catering to both the masses of Indian society as well as reflecting an alternative cinema that could circulate within film festival circuits. This desire to cater to both populations within Tier 2 and Tier 3 towns and cities[3] as well as to young urban Indian audiences has persisted in the content on ALTBalaji as well, as a way of distinguishing the platform from other popular streaming platforms in India such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, which are more expensive and therefore cater primarily to a certain socio-economic class. The platform was launched in April of 2017 under the ALT Entertainment banner with a catalogue of 32 original shows in Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, and Gujrati (Jha and Gupta 2017).

2 A joint family is one in which three or more generations live together in a single household.

3 Categorized on the basis of population and economic development.

ALTBalaji has seen a steady increase in popularity, particularly since the first lockdown in India, during which its subscribership increased by 60% (Soni 2020). In this essay I will analyze the platform's streaming imaginaries (in part inspired by Rahul Mukherjee's "infrastructural imaginaries," which he describes as orienting bodies toward physical infrastructures such that particular affective relationships are produced between those bodies and infrastructures). I argue that these imaginaries consist of a content ecosystem that marries digital infrastructure with content production and licensing agreements and an aesthetics of sex and sexuality, toward the end of locating the 'ALT' in ALTBalaji. I propose that the platform's streaming imaginaries produce a notion of unlimited data (mobile internet) as central to the eruption of tense intimacies and sexualities in post-colonial India's competing modernities. This encourages the proliferation of media infrastructures as a marker of social and economic progress and for the circulation of 'Hindu' values, but is simultaneously anxious about the obscenities and transgressions that media infrastructures make possible—from the nationalized airwaves of television inculcating the family into the basic form of citizenship (Das 1995; Kumar 2013) to the suspicion around satellite television's potential for bringing the vulgar from outside into the pure inside of the home (Ghosh 2002). The first section of this essay explores how ALTBalaji makes its contents accessible, with a focus on telecommunications networks and mobile internet, and the second section looks at the nature of these contents as reflective of the streaming platform's promises in order to chart the shifts in the desires and anxieties that accrue around media infrastructures in India when the streaming platform is centered.

ALTBalaji's 'Content' Pipes: The Making of a Streaming Platform Ecosystem

I argue that ALTBalaji is attempting to create an intricate content ecosystem—referring to synergies between various kinds of

digital technologies, specifically telecommunications infrastructure (Tiwary 2020)—through its multiple links with telecommunications companies and other local streaming services both in India as well as across South and South East Asia as a delivery mechanism for its digital content. ALTBalaji's content ecosystem includes licensing and production agreements with other Indian streaming platforms such as Zee5 and MX Player; it also feeds into platform ecospheres, such as Reliance's Jio and Indonesia's Xiaomi; and is supported by telecommunications infrastructures through alliances with Vodafone, Airtel[4] and Malaysia's Axiata Group. Furthermore, I argue that the streaming platform's content ecosystem creates publics by orienting bodies in specific ways.

ALTBalaji and Vodafone entered a content deal in 2017 wherein Vodafone Play, a streaming video mobile app, would host ALTBalaji content. Aneesh Khosla, Associate Director of Consumer Business, Vodafone India, said of the deal: "Our audiences, especially millennials, demand diverse, exclusive and original content options to watch as per their convenience. We are happy to partner with ALTBalaji ..." (ETTelecom 2017). At the same time, Nachiket Pantvaidya, CEO of ALTBalaji, stated that the hope was that Vodafone Play would allow the platform to reach more consumers (ETTelecom 2017). ALTBalaji entered into a similar deal with Airtel in 2018, with their content being hosted on AirtelTV (now called Airtel Xstream). This partnership was part of Airtel's efforts to go toe-to-toe with Reliance Jio's JioTV, which also struck a content deal with ALTBalaji that same year (Chakraborty 2018). Reliance Industries Limited, Jio's parent company, owns a 24.9% stake in Balaji Telefilms and sought the deal with ALTBalaji to make their ecosphere more popular among middle to

4 Bharti Airtel Ltd., also known as Airtel, is an Indian multinational telecommunications company headquartered in New Delhi. It is the second largest mobile network operator in India, after Jio, and the second largest mobile network operator in the world, with a commercial presence in 17 countries including India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Kenya, and Nigeria.

lower-middle class[5] Indian consumers (Bloomberg 2019). While Airtel Xstream and JioTV are free of charge for their customers, Vodafone Play is not. These networks forged between ALTBalaji and the three most popular telecommunications companies in India speak to the platform's expansion strategies, which bear in mind not only the importance of the mobile phone and mobile data in Indian daily life but also the importance of mobile carriers to the marketing and promotion of streaming services as add-ons and vice-versa.

Reminiscent of streaming platforms teaming up with one another to expand their notions of Africa in order to target as many markets as possible (Dovey 2018), ALTBalaji has joined with other major local streaming platforms such as Zee5 in order to cultivate the market for Indian OTT content. However, ALTBalaji's partnership with these other streaming platforms does not only involve distribution but also content creation. The Zee5 deal, signed in 2019 for a period of three years, involves the two platforms co-creating 60 new shows that are only available on their respective platforms, which means you cannot watch these shows via ALTBalaji's telecommunication partnerships (ETBrandEquity 2019). Zee5 subscribers can also access all of ALTBalaji's other originals. Such a licensing arrangement is particularly unique as compared to the Netflix or Disney model with originals only available on the one platform. Zee5's target demographic is young urban women, which is reflected in shows like *The Married Woman* (2021–present) and *Dev DD* (2017–present). Both of these shows are ALTBalaji and Zee5 co-productions and seem to target a more metropolitan sensibility through their themes and the treatment of those themes. These shows are slow burns that attempt to tackle India's deeply embedded patriarchal structures by focusing on women seeking to go beyond the roles they have

5 For clarification I would like to state that caste and class are entangled but not in the easiest of ways to parse through. It is possible for somebody to be lower middle-class and still be upper caste, just as it is possible for someone to live in rural India and still be rich and upper-caste.

been forced into. In the case of Zee5 and ALTBalaji's partnership particularly, one can see how the streaming platform's licensing agreements intersect with divisions of taste according to class as well as geographies of consumption, with ALTBalaji's target demographic spanning youth in both the metropolises as well as smaller cities, towns, and villages.

Staying with ALTBalaji's geographies, the platform has partnerships with telecom services Celcom in Malaysia, Xiaomi in Indonesia, and Dialog Axiata in Sri Lanka. In Malaysia, with Celcom, ALTBalaji can be accessed via Video Walla, which is an add-on service by which Celcom customers can access unlimited data for video and music streaming as well as for video calls (Wong 2019). Through Xiaomi ALTBalaji is available via Mi TV's PatchWall app, which is an AI-enabled TV system that classifies content and makes personalized recommendations. The platform delivers approximately 25 original shows and films to Indonesia for a subscription fee of USD 4.99, 7.99, and 12.99 for three months, six months, and one year respectively (Hawkes 2018a). Dialog Axiata launched entertainment platform Viu in 2020 in Sri Lanka for no extra cost with any Dialog network, with ALTBalaji as one of its international partners (Hawkes 2018b). Even though ALTBalaji is circulating its content in ecospheres outside of India, the platform is still committed to creating Indian content in Hindi, although some of its originals have been dubbed into Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, and Bahasa Malaysia, and it also hosts stand-up specials in multiple Indian regional languages such as Punjabi and Gujarati.

The following tweet by Ekta Kapoor (see fig. 1) brings together infrastructure (data), content (sex), and publics in a way that perfectly exemplifies the role of ALTBalaji's content ecosystem in the streaming platform's imagination:

[Figure 1] Screenshot of a tweet by Ekta Kapoor that brings together data and sex while referring to the first season of *Gandii Baat*.

Implied in this tweet is that unlimited data, supported by the proliferation of telecommunications infrastructures, brings sex as content to populations in cities, towns, and villages that may once have been outside of the boundaries of the internet. Similar to how Rahul Mukherjee (2018, 183) argues that cell towers shape public feelings around access to cellular services, I claim that ALTBalaji's streaming imaginaries intertwine data and sex or infrastructure and content in order to frame data as infrastructure as integral to accessing different kinds of sexual expression as content. This creates, through a proximal relation between sex, data, content, and infrastructure, a "porno assemblage," defined by Anirban K. Baishya and Darshana Sreedhar Mini (2022) as spaces of desire, pleasure, and anxiety, where the internet and the mobile phone come to be both feared and policed as well as celebrated as sites of sexual experimentation. The prioritizing of spaces and populations that supposedly

only very recently gained access to the internet via the promise of unlimited data once again gestures toward how ALTBalaji's contents intersect with cultures and geographies of taste and consumption.

This implicit mapping of populations as inhabiting specific spaces and categories evokes the unfolding of public space via pornography and its circulation as discussed by Joshua Neves (2020) in his chapter "People as Media Infrastructure: Illicit Culture and the Pornographies of Globalization" in *Underglobalization: Beijing's Media Urbanism and the Chimera of Legitimacy*. A key distinction here is that Neves' argument involves the production, circulation, and consumption of sex via piracy networks in China primarily through DVDs, whereas ALTBalaji's sexual publics come into being as a result of legitimate[6] data and telecommunications infrastructures. I locate a kinkiness—I use the term 'kink' here in order to gesture toward a possibly pleasurable tension between the looming presence of the state through IT regulations and other technologies of governmentality and certain configurations of sex that are just transgressive enough, which will be discussed further in the next section—in the streaming platform's content ecosystem at the pressure point between mainstream data/telecommunication infrastructures plus content licensing networks and discourses and representations of sex and sexuality that are shamed as "vulgar" by both the state and society. This kinkiness is also predicated on an interplay between private and public that emerges within the aesthetics of ALTBalaji's flagship show *Gandii Baat/Dirty Talk: Urban Stories From Rural India* (2018–present).

Not only does ALTBalaji exemplify the reliance of streaming platforms on telecommunications infrastructures, as argued by Lobato in *Netflix Nations* (2019), it also makes explicit, through

6 Meaning recognized by and having a relationship with the state—made explicit by the laws regulating the platform as well as Ekta Kapoor's praise for the government's grievance redressal mechanism rule (PTI 2021).

synergies with other platform ecosystems and ecospheres across South and South East Asia, the ways in which the internet is experienced differently at various levels of the local. In ALTBalaji's distribution strategies, I locate two instances of the alternative: 1) the difference from how platforms in North America and Europe conceptualize and utilize both the internet as well as licensing arrangements, and 2) the ways in which telecom partnerships and synergies with other local streaming platforms, specifically the former, are positioned as holding the unlimited mobile data that brings with it the promise of access to the sexually explicit. In the streaming platform's imagination, the felt resonances of the internet are intimately bound up with representations of sex, which are brought into traditionally conservative spaces via unlimited data. I argue that these representations of sex are framed by an aesthetics of kink that sits uncomfortably between the public and the private, the normative and the queer, the transgressive and the disciplined. It is through ALTBalaji's "kinks," which emerge from entanglements with the state, infrastructure, and various kinds of publics, that the next section will grapple with the limits of the 'ALT' imagination.

The Erotics of ALTBalaji and the Production of "ALT-ness"

If one of ALTBalaji's primary promises is to bring sex to conservative spaces via unlimited data, then the nature of this sex is important. What is this sex? I attempt to answer this question through a close reading of the first episode of the first season of ALTBalaji's flagship show, *Gandii Baat: Urban Stories from Rural India* (2018–present). I think of *Gandii Baat* as ALTBalaji's primary show because in the words of CEO Pantvaidya, "if there is a name synonymous with erotic web content, it would have to be Gandii Baat" (Indiantelevision Team 2020). This statement is based on viewership numbers that suggest that it is the most enjoyed show on the platform, particularly among lower-middle class

youth (Indiantelevision Team 2020). *Gandii Baat* is an anthology series focusing on the sexual lives of people living in small towns and villages. Starting with the title of the show, *Gandii Baat: Urban Stories from Rural India*, a certain imaginary of what constitutes the urban and the rural is created. The urban quality of these stories, even as they play out in mostly rural settings, is derived from the supposedly queer sexual expressions of their characters. This queerness seems to derive from the supposed taboo associated with certain sexual practices—sex outside of marriage, affairs, having multiple sexual partners—in rural India.

In season one, episode one of the show, titled *Threesome*, we are introduced to the narrative through a relatively unassuming heterosexual couple performing the Karva Chauth[7] ritual of the wife looking at the moon and then the husband before breaking her fast. As the plot progresses, we find out that the macho husband cannot satisfy his wife, which leads her to have an affair with their lover-boy neighbor. In a turn of events, the husband eventually becomes a part of the wife and lover's sexual configuration, feeling a particularly deep sense of love and ownership over the male lover.

Following the well-known Indian popular cinema formula of flirting with a woman until she gives in, which is what happens between the wife and the lover; moving to obsessive thoughts around love and lust leading to murder wherein the wife and husband are compelled to kill their lover's fiancée; and finally, through the archetypes of the angry über-masculine husband, the sexy wife whose sari is always a little too revealing, and the sweet, chocolate boy[8] lover, the episode has all the ingredients of a great '80s B film. In fact, the plot is quite reminiscent of

7 A one-day fast observed by married Hindu women, particularly in Northern India, for the longevity of their husbands. Also sometimes observed by unmarried women, in hopes of finding a desirable partner.

8 Typically refers to a boyishly handsome and charming man. While I have not come across a history of the term, it does seem to encapsulate anxieties surrounding non-traditional masculinities that are believed to erupt in

Mohan Bhakri's 1988 film, *Padosi Ki Biwi/My Neighbor's Wife*, which also involves a husband who cannot satisfy his wife, a wife who catches her neighbor's attention, and a neighbor stuck between two women and murder. It is important to note that a majority of '80s B cinema in India was consumed by the lower and lower-middle classes in single screen theaters, which is why the show leans so heavily on the aesthetics of that kind of cinema to drawn in those populations. Furthermore, the iconography of the wife is borrowed from a popular figure of Indian pornography, Savita Bhabhi. Her origins are unknown, but she has and continues to be the star of many pornographic comic books that can be found both online as well as on footpath book stalls in India (Srivastava 2013). I argue that Savita Bhabhi, with her thick red *sindoor* (vermillion) and ample cleavage that is always spilling out of the blouse of her sari, is a product of the Hindu male fantasy in that she straddles both tradition and modernity (a tension central to India's postcolonial imagination) in a pleasurable way. In many ways, ALTBalaji, through a show like *Gandii Baat*, is also attempting to negotiate the multiple valences between a distinctly North Indian Hindu upper-caste, across class understanding of tradition and modernity through the affects of pleasure, pain, and coercion.

In attempting to navigate between pleasure, pain, and coercion, *Threesome* also produces a certain aesthetic of the kink. Cruz (2016) and Liang (2020) engage with kink as a practice that opens up space for non-normative ways of inhabiting and experiencing pleasure but are also acutely aware of the violence of pleasure as it comes to be structured by the biopolitical projects of race, gender, and disability. The ALTBalaji conception of unlimited data as infrastructure for alternative erotic expression supports such an understanding of kink and finds expression in the throuple between the wife, husband, and lover. When the husband and

more urban settings—gesturing toward a desire to be well-groomed and well-dressed.

wife go to murder their lover's fiancée, it is the wife that acts as the aggressor, and as she is strangling the fiancée, the fiancée begins to moan as if on the brink of orgasm while the camera focuses on her feet twisting and turning. The turning and twisting of the feet is a common way of representing sex in the Bollywood aesthetic paradigm as well as in Indian soft-core pornography. Additionally, the lover is initially uncomfortable with the new sexual relationship he finds himself in with the couple but there is a certain pleasure, even in his acquiescence at the end of the episode, as he is nestled between them, aware of their crime against his fiancée. However, it would do us well to consider who has the agency to practice this level of kink and which figures inform this kind of kink, drawing on the desirability of both the chocolate boy and Savita Bhabhi. An introduction to the couple through what is essentially an upper-caste, Hindu, North Indian tradition very much establishes a boundary around whose sexual practices are permitted and possibly also speaks to ALTBalaji's understanding of who their primary audience is. Therefore, while the relationship between the husband, wife, and lover may kink traditional understandings of the family, it does not do so enough to jostle the structures of caste and religion that determine social relations at all levels of the local in India.

The aesthetics, desires, and anxieties of ALTBalaji and its networks are both new and not. Sanjay Srivastava (2013), in an exploration of what he calls "footpath pornography," writes of transient book stalls at railways stations and bus stops as spaces where the urban poor negotiate between their enforced migration and labor, masculinity and consumption via explicitly sexual publications in the form of booklets, short stories, advice columns, and advertisements. These forms often represent women as embodying an "erotic of modernity" (Srivastava 2013, 235), one that is painfully arousing; painful because these women represent aspirations of upward mobility that seem impossible to fulfil—a kind of cruel optimism à la Lauren Berlant (2011). The footpath then, as conceptualized by Srivastava, becomes a sexual platform

on which battles between tradition, modernity, and oppression are fought. And of course, all of these battles are haunted by the specter of a complex caste system that has varying histories and expressions in different parts of the country. Here, I ask you to remember Ekta Kapoor's provocation: "What happens when a conservative society is exposed to unlimited data & a sexually explicit world of the internet!!!" and what it elides, which is not only that the sexual was always a part of the conservative Indian imagination but also the ALTBalaji project of attempting to bring such informal conjugal configurations into the spaces of the state and capital through its digital content ecosystem. Furthermore, the wife, the husband, and the lover neighbor all point to how kinship relations, informed and made possible by caste, are animated by sexuality, which is another characteristic of Indian pornography (Mini and Baishya 2020; Khubchandani 2022). It is important to note that such kinship relations are central to the reproduction of the rural as imagined by ALTBalaji, gesturing toward how the rural on/in the streaming platform becomes a primarily lewd Hindu space.

Focusing on ALTBalaji's productions of sex and sexuality, through *Gandii Baat*, gives us a partial insight into what is 'ALT' about ALTBalaji. By relying on the aesthetic codes of B grade films and footpath pornography, the content on the platform (excluding their co-created shows with Zee5) diverges from mainstream Bollywood cinema. As mentioned previously, a majority of erotic '80s B cinema in India was consumed either through the medium of video or in single screen theaters, and because video was more accessible to the elite, the single screen theater became a public/private space in which the Indian working classes engaged with sexuality. Here, attempts to capture the publics of the single screen theater in the networks of data and sex are made somewhat explicit. The content on the platform also differs from Netflix and Amazon Prime's Indian originals in that it does not appeal to a dark bourgeois cynicism (see *Paatal Lok/Underworld* on Amazon Prime and *Jamtara* on Netflix).

ALTBalaji inhabits a politically rife space where the state, society, data, and its concomitant infrastructures, sex, power, and capital converge in ways that reflect a streaming platform imagination that is rooted in religion, caste, and class. Considering alternative genealogies of the streaming platform and the history of ALTBalaji as laid out in the introduction of this essay, I position ALTBalaji as an effect of a lineage that directly evokes the post-liberalization rise of a Hindu middle-class, the boom of/in television, and the perverse anxieties and pleasures of a society grappling with the rapid proliferation of cell phones and telecommunications infrastructures. Relatedly, the ways in which ALTBalaji structures the relationship between sex and data suggests a 'sexiness' of data that encapsulates both sexual content as well as a fetishization of the promises of unlimited data—to bring to you whatever you desire. And finally, though this piece does not dwell too much on questions of censorship, I propose that the framework of vulgarity is integral to the work of kink on ALTBalaji. Vulgarity as an excess of bodily gesture, expression of emotion/sensation, and feeling comes to be associated with both nationalism—see the Prime Minister of India refer to his 56 inch chest multiple times during political rallies—and with caste—particularly where oppressed caste women and their forms of performance are concerned (Paik 2022)—in ways that are meant to be both celebrated and disciplined respectively. On ALTBalaji, these two vulgarities coalesce in extremely fraught ways through the agency granted to primarily upper-caste, hypersexual women and the presence of impotent traditionally masculine Hindu men, resulting in a production of sexualities that both escape and lend themselves to censorship through a simultaneous transgression of the *middle-class*[9] family unit and re-inscription of endogamous heterosexuality.

9 I put middle-class into italics here because who gets counted as the middle-class in India seems to be based on a loose set of practices and rituals rather than indicative of a status of wealth.

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[1 5]

Make Room for Smartness: Platforming the Home

Colin Crawford

In "The Smartness Mandate," Halpern, Mitchell, and Geoghegan argue that smartness has emerged as a global infrastructural imaginary redefining the "relations between technology, human sense perception, and cognition … inextricably tied to the language of crisis, whether a financial, ecological, or security event" (2017, 108). Smartness here refers to a conceptualization of technological systems, from buildings to cities, that are "intelligent" because they are connected, sensing, responsive, adaptive, programmable, and automatable. But how might we think about the smartness mandate not only at the scale of the global-ecological but also the domestic, everyday, media-ecological? The expanding consumer device ecologies of the smart home—TVs, speakers, security camera and sensor systems, lights, thermostats, and appliances controllable by voice, phone, watch, tablet, computer, etc.—are invariably promoted as offering "seamless integration," convenience, automation, and security (Maalsen 2023; Humphry and Chesher 2021). Such promises illuminate contemporary anxieties about the fragmentation, difficulty, work, and insecurity of everyday life. Further, these

projections of seamlessness are precipitated by competition for tech ecosystem power and lock-in: access to and control over flows of capital and user data afforded to those actors pushing and supplying smart home devices, software, and services. As consumer electronics have come to form a distributed entertainment infrastructure upon which "dominant cultural and economic practices transpire," (Acland 2015, 247) constellations of connected smart home devices are increasingly envisioned as forming the basis of an ever more platformed domestic infrastructure, what Humphry and Chesher call "domestic smartification" (2021, 1174).

This study situates itself within broader critiques of platform capitalism, where digital technologies and infrastructure increasingly mediate between people, products, companies, states, and markets (Srnicek 2016; Sadowski 2019). The platform capitalism thesis argues that the unprecedented scale, value, and power of major tech platforms and companies reflects their unique structural and organizational capacity to exploit the digitization of ever more aspects of everyday life from communication and culture, to work, commerce, finance, governance, and statecraft (Steinberg, Zhang, and Mukerjee 2024). These intermediaries exercise their power primarily through a) controlling and monetizing the flow, access, and connection between these actors, services, and commodities, and b) the production and collection of data as crucial resources to sell, use, and inform operations, from personalization algorithms to the management of labor (Couldry and Mejias 2019; Srnicek 2016).

In relation to consumer technology, the "making smart" of the home sells ease, convenience, and security in efforts to render domestic space a new frontier for platformed mediation and extraction. The home is increasingly a site to be continually furnished and accessorized with smart devices, serviced by subscriptions, and mined for data (Sadowski 2020). The value proposition tech firms put forth is that the more of their product ecosystem—hardware devices, software, and services—one

uses, the more smooth, efficient, and useful each of them ostensibly becomes (Crawford 2024). Smartness thus offers a vision of integrated, indeed harmonious technological systems that are "greater than the sum of their parts" (Casey 2020). Such an implication that smart things are always useful, always media, and always becoming *more* useful (optimized) necessarily stretches the rich concept of the useful in cinema, media, and cultural studies to include considerations of the smart, cybernetic, and automatic (Bennet 1993; Acland and Wasson 2011; McKelvey and Neves 2021). If useful films are indeed "constellations of media, technology, forms of knowledge, discourse, and social organization," the useful moving images and technologies of smart domestic media are all the more crucial to understanding how the social organizations and institutions of the home and family are shifting under the hegemony of the smartness mandate (Goulden 2021; Hediger and Vonderau 2009, 11). The uses of such smart domestic media, however, are complex and manifold, necessitating deeper investigation. This analysis of Apple's influential smart home ecosystem discourse, marketing, and design opens up one approach to such a project.

Drawing upon Lynn Spigel's *Make Room for TV*, this chapter examines Apple's promotion of its smart home ecosystem of hardware, software, and services across company websites, press releases, and marketing campaigns. These texts "give us a clue into an imaginary popular culture," telling us "what various media institutions assum[e] about the public's concerns and desires" (1992, 23). Where Spigel considers the importance and influence of television's rapid popularization and reception in early post-war America, this chapter is concerned with the dramatic shifts in the composition of domestic visual media technologies and the proliferation of smart home product ecosystems and their attending discourses in the Global North following the Great Recession.

This chapter takes smart home media technologies as "material culture that can be examined alongside their documentation, advertising and representations in popular culture" (Humphry

and Chesher 2021, 2). Complementary to the growing body of work on digital voice assistants in the home, this study concerns itself with the workings and representations of the smart home and its increasingly ubiquitous networks of screens, cameras, and clouds (Goulden 2021; Strengers and Kennedy 2021; Woods 2018). Additionally, this chapter differentiates itself from the dominant focus in studies of the smart home on Google and Amazon, whose smart home ecosystems collect and use data primarily for advertising and e-commerce (Goulden 2021). In looking at Apple's smart home promotion, I investigate the growing range of connected devices, software, and services through which media in the home is framed as smart, useful, and valuable, and how this process reconfigures ideas of the modern home and family. This analysis of Apple's smart home discourse offers one path forward in thinking critically about the everyday technopolitics of platforms and the moving image, particularly in relation to their built-in circuits of information and feedback.

A range of platformed images now flow across the smart home's network of media devices and infrastructure (Pereira 2021). These include TV, film, games, social media, fitness videos, news, cloud-connected security video feeds, personal and family photo storage and sharing, and video calling to name but a few. In discussing the data infrastructure (metadata, algorithmic sorting, internet connectivity) that lies beneath so many digital images today, MacKenzie and Munster argue that these ensembles of smart images are "not simply quantified, but labelled, formatted and made 'platform-ready'" enabling "the emergence of a new mode of perception, and indeed a reformulation of visuality itself," in what they term platform seeing (2019, 5). By this, they mean the various processes and infrastructures through which technological systems analyze such images and their metadata, compare and sort them, and pre-select and present what appears to users.

In the case of Apple, many forms of such platform seeing are embedded across its ecosystem of phones, tablets, watches,

computers, TVs, apps, and operating systems as the company is actively seeking to expand and optimize the contact between users and its smart image services: TV+, iCloud+/Photo Memories, FaceTime, Fitness+, Arcade, and so on (Crawford 2024a; Pereira 2021). These new platform visualities in the home fuse the affordances of ubiquitous computing with those of television through a range of screen devices. With this in mind, this paper begins to unpack and critique Big Tech's hopes and aspirations for platform-seeing homes and the changing work performed by these images and devices. All of this is to say that we must keep in mind the assemblages of networked infrastructure, capital, and power that lay beneath the surface of the multiplying number of platformed images in domestic space.

Smart for Whom?

The conjuncture of the global financial crisis with the launch of the iPhone in 2007 marked a pivotal moment in the development and acceleration of smart consumer technologies. Flows of finance capital have continued to pour into the tech sector since the crash, launching waves of new start-ups and further entrenching the dominance of the existing tech giants, in no small part due to the proliferation of the touchscreen smartphone and its platform economies (Srnicek 2016). Desperately seeking returns in a historically low-interest rate environment and otherwise stagnating global economy, such investment capital has worked to expand smart device ecologies by embedding ever more household objects with sensors to produce, record, collect, and transmit household data (Sadowski 2019. 2020). Necessarily, these data-producing objects are thus connected to the internet (the Internet of Things) and one another, ostensibly to provide functions of remote control, programmability, personalization, and automation.

Narrative discourses surrounding the value of data as the most valuable resource of the digital revolution have further secured

and justified their now ubiquitous extraction (Crawford 2021; Sadowski 2019). This development signals what we might call the smartness creep of digital capitalism, expressed in Big Tech's interlocking drives to a) sell more hardware, software, and services, b) collect user data to sell to advertisers and/or inform production, management, and design strategies, and c) lock users into product ecosystems through continued use and purchase, personalization, optimization, and through the high costs of switching systems (Casey 2020; Srnicek 2016).

In the wake of the vast financial violence of the 2007-8 crash which dispossessed millions of their homes, this chapter argues that smartness and its promotion works, in part, to *re-secure* ideas of the home by trading in affects of control, convenience, connectivity, and futurity. After the Second World War, television was central to the settlement of the suburban family ideal in North America as a consensus ideology promising security and stability (Spigel 1992). Today we must consider the proliferation of smart consumer technologies, from the personal computer and smartphone to evermore household objects, as similarly aiding, expanding, and settling the hegemony of smartness and its promises of domestic control, ease, and seamlessness.

As Gilliard and Golumbia's (2021) notion of "luxury surveillance" suggests, consumers of smart technologies often "see themselves as powerful and sovereign, and perhaps even immune from unwelcome monitoring and control," viewing "self-quantification and tracking not as disciplinary or coercive, but as a kind of care or empowerment … something extra, something 'smart.'" Uncannily reminiscent of Ngai's theory of the gimmick, smartness dubiously promises to "save time, reduce work, and expand value" (2020, 2). Under the guise of making life better and easier—indeed empowered and optimal—tech companies seize new access to the home, the family, and the body. For those who own their homes, smartness is sold as a way of optimizing, monitoring, and securing not only the home and family but also what is likely their most valuable financial asset, their future. For

the growing number of renters, smartness similarly promises feelings of domestic convenience, control, and futurity—through tech marketing's sheen of newness. The futurity of technology, however, stands in for truly accessible, secure, long-term housing and in the face of shrinking real wages, growing precarity, and the extractivism of rising rents (Maalsen 2023). In both cases smart things operate as technological fetishes, allowing users to capture, piece by piece, imagined futuristic lifestyles of a convenient and automatable home, visible and controllable from any distance (Harvey 2003).

The increased mediation of everyday life is a crucial element of how firms like Apple dominate their markets and lock users into their platform ecosystems. Lock-in strategies follow highly financialized logics of securing future use, purchase, and subscription through intentional design choices and cascading marketing campaigns that foreground innovation, seamless product integration, and an easier, smarter life. Lock-in dynamics are most commonly communicated through metrics of brand loyalty and consumer retention: repeat purchases and renewed subscriptions, pleasure and enthusiasm in product use, recommendation to friends, and so on. Here brand loyalty and power expand a company's value by reducing the perceived risk of its future performance. These factors thus come together to bolster investor confidence and faith in the company, driving up stock value and maximizing shareholder returns—the raison d'être of the contemporary corporation under finance capitalism (Crawford 2021). The promotion of the smart home and its aesthetics must therefore be read critically in relation to contemporary capitalism's wider crises of profitability, growth, and social reproduction, and resulting forms of datafied and financialized extraction (Piletic 2022).

The Apple Home Ecosystem

From the personal computer to the smartphone, TV box, tablet, and smart speaker, Apple has long been a key player in making

the home smarter and more connected through its devices and their software. To give a sense of scale, in 2024 Apple sold 232 million iPhones, 52 million iPads, 26 million Mac and MacBook units, 66 million AirPods, and 53 million Apple Watches (Curry 2024). This same year it generated $383.2 billion in revenue (52% from iPhone sales, 22% from services) and grew its home and wearables division to $39.6 billion in revenue (up from $9.8 billion in 2015) (Curry 2025). At present, the company currently has an estimated 95 million Apple Music subscribers and around 30 million for Apple TV+ (Curry 2025). Apple's chief financial officer has described its "active installed base" of over one billion users and their 2.35 billion active devices (defined as devices that have interacted with a service in the past 90 days) as "the engine of our company" (Hall 2025; Shakir 2023; Warren 2022). Indeed these paid services subscribers (including subscriptions to third party iOS apps) brought in a total revenue of $96.1 billion in 2024, up from 745 million paid services subscribers and $68.4 billion in revenue in 2021 (Apple 2024). Importantly, service revenue (subscriptions, advertising, revenue from every transaction in its App Store) brings in margins nearly twice as large as those of hardware—often *through* the distributed network of its closed hardware-software ecosystem (Acland 2015; McGee 2022). It is here where we can situate the product categories of TV & Home (TV boxes, HomePod speakers, Accessories, and Only on Apple/ Entertainment, as key components of this service strategy.

Hardware

At the time of writing, the landing page for Apple's TV & Home category opened to a high-angle image of an unbranded TV displaying a wallpaper for the Apple Original animated film Luck (2022), alongside images of an Apple TV box and HomePod mini speaker with a caption reading:

> The future hits home. Simply connect your favorite devices and transform your house into a remarkably smart,

> convenient, and entertaining home. Control lights, locks, and thermostats with your iPhone—or just your voice. Play any song, in any room, from anywhere. And elevate movie night with theater-like picture and sound. All with the security and privacy of Apple. Stream Luck on the Apple TV app. (Apple n.d.)

Other taglines across the TV & Home page read "Easily control your home from anywhere with your favorite devices"; "Every reason to turn your house into a smart home"; and "Watch, sing, play, and work out. On the big screen." Such marketing taps into anxieties about the stress, speed, insecurity, and work of home life to sell a vision of domesticity aided and benevolently mediated by the Apple ecosystem. We see here how affects of control, convenience, security, and seamlessness lay at the heart of smart home discourse and marketing. The choice of a children's film and use of blue-print styled images displaying the locations of multiple HomePods as "Kid's Room, Living Room, Den, and Bedroom," highlight the idea—and business model—of a connected Apple house and family. Here both the company's lifestyle brand and integrated ecosystem design are projected onto the next generation of users and the home itself (Crawford 2024a). Indeed the inclusion of Home in the branding of the HomePod speakers, Home app, and HomeKit operating system expresses Apple's desire to fix more of its devices in domestic space to create more contact points between users and its ecosystem.

Tech writer Thomas Ricker (2016) describes such a process of ecosystem lock-in through his own family, writing

> My household is an Apple household, not so much by choice but by a slow 16-year evolution. … My first iPod caused me to buy my first MacBook, which led to an iPhone and then an iMac and then more iPhones, iPads, and finally, an Apple TV. And all this Apple hardware begat dozens of compatible accessories … not to mention hundreds of apps and other

content purchased in Apple's stores. It's true, I'm now a victim of vendor lock-in as are my kids who've inherited older devices.

While half-jokingly describing himself and his family as victims of Apple lock-in, Ricker's piece nonetheless contends that the company's greatest innovation since the iPhone has been the "building and nurturing of its ecosystem" of apps, accessories, functionalities, and services surrounding its core devices. Features such as FaceTime, iMessage, and iCloud, as well as bundle deals on services (Music, TV+, Fitness+, News+, iCloud+, Arcade), further incentivize this model of the Apple household, family, or workplace, smoothing communication and media sharing functionalities through ecosystem participation and integration. In recent years the Apple ecosystem, led by the iPhone, has proved extremely resilient, even benefiting from crises such as the Great Recession, which increased investment in the tech sector and solidified Big American Tech's exceptional status on Wall Street, as well as the pandemic, which saw both increased consumer technology spending and use reflected in earnings reports and public relations campaigns championing Apple's role in "keeping people connected"—and working from home (Srnicek 2016; Canon and Jolly 2021).

The combination of a) continually high profit margins on hardware reaped from global networks of environmental, supply chain, and labor exploitation, and b) high product price points sustained by Apple's brand power have made the company one of the most consistently valuable stocks on Wall Street over the past fifteen years (Chan, Selden, and Pun 2020; Qiu 2017). Indeed the company was the first ever to crack market valuations of one, two, and three trillion (USD), all in the past five years, and consistently ranks as one of two of the world's largest and most valuable companies, next to oil giant Saudi Aramco. While iPhone sales remain high and iOS now comprises over 50% of US smartphone users (outnumbering Android for the first time), fears of iPhone market saturation have led Apple to expand other

elements of the ecosystem such as services, accessories, and its smart home effort (McGee 2022).

Beyond screen devices, the only other Apple-branded smart home hardware the company produces are its TV boxes and HomePod speakers, both of which require connection to the same WiFi network to run Apple's smart home framework HomeKit to interact with other devices. Indeed much of the functionality of HomeKit—remote control, automation settings, video feeds, inter-device connectivity—requires at least one HomePod, TV box, or iPad to remain always-on and in the home at all times, acting as a centralized hub that can control multiple devices and allow remote access for users. Here the home itself is increasingly envisioned as a network of devices with central and peripheral nodes: the various Apple device hubs and interfaces, and the non-Apple devices they control. These promises of control promote the sale of more Apple hardware, which in turn unlocks more software and service functionality to collect user data ostensibly for personalization and optimization purposes, and increasingly, in hopes of potential service revenue (Crawford 2024a). This ecosystem strategy is what we might describe as Apple's value flywheel.

Beyond these devices, Apple has thus far elected to let other consumer electronics firms produce other smart things—TV sets, lights, thermostats, security cameras and sensors, door locks, etc.—seeking instead to leverage its "active installed base" of devices as crucial intermediaries between users and smart home products (Warren 2022). As internet connectivity becomes ever faster and more ubiquitous, especially in the wealthy Global North economies Apple targets, the growing popularity of interior and exterior home security cameras and video doorbells (Amazon Ring, Google Nest) with live feeds visible "from anywhere" (other connected screen devices) are particularly dramatic examples of the smart home's new modes of televisuality, in this case closed circuit television (CCTV) (Humphry and Chesher 2021). In addition to viewing "up to four cameras at once to quickly make

sure each room is just as you left it," or monitoring the home in real-time, users can view their other smart home devices at work, visualizing the control, automation, and security smartness promises (Apple n.d-a). Here Apple's hardware partnerships strengthen the value of its own devices by adding functionalities and affects of smart home control and visibility for users, and in turn, compatibility with Apple products is increasingly valuable for smart home device manufacturers given its overall market share and brand power. Critically, the value of such an arrangement hinges upon the careful management and control of hardware systems through software and data collection, another key site of Apple's infrastructural and platform power (Pereira 2021).

Software & Services

As a platform intermediary between users and other smart home devices, Apple collects smart home data through the software licensing agreements it necessitates for all its partnerships. Broadly, the company frames its data collection as serving its goals of device, app, and service improvement and optimization, as well as personalizing the "relevance" of content and ads for users in its apps and services (Apple 2022a; Pereira 2021). Apple's overarching privacy policy vaguely and legalistically distinguishes between personal data, as any information that can be "reasonably used to identify you," and non-personal data for anonymized, aggregated, and cookies information. The company has long employed this distinction strategically in its efforts to brand itself as a more private alternative to the open Android ecosystems (Google, Amazon) and their vested interests in the collection and sale of data to third parties for advertising (Apple 2022a; Pereira 2021).

In recent years Apple has increased its attempts to brand itself as valuing privacy and security, evident in efforts such as its "Privacy. That's iPhone" campaign. Here a series of TV and

YouTube ads dramatize users as a) having their data being sold in the style of an art auction, b) being chased across a city by a growing swarm of people representing third-party tracking apps, and c) reading private messages and emails aloud, followed by Apple's promise not to sell data, let other apps track you (though its apps certainly will), or scan your messages (Apple 2022b). For the smart home, the company's website and marketing campaign for its Home App furthers such discourses, stating "Your data is private property" and "Privacy at home is more important than ever" (Apple n.d.a.; n.d.b). Such messaging calls attention to growing public concerns about user privacy and the surveillance capitalist models of Google, Meta, and Amazon, seeking to assuage such anxieties through differentiating Apple as uniquely secure and trustworthy—key elements of platform intermediation not only for payment processing, but also increasingly sensitive information and content such as health, messaging, and as well as personal photos, videos, and home data (Steinberg 2019).

In 2021, Apple cracked down upon third-party data-gathering practices through a single iOS software update that restricts the ability of (non-Apple) apps to track users across websites and other apps by offering users an opt-out option from such forms of data collection. This move is estimated to cost Meta and Google tens of billions in ad revenue per year (McGee 2022). In the same breath, the company announced that it expects its own advertising revenue to jump from $4 billion into the $20 billion range in the coming years, promising an "alternative" model of advertising that doesn't rely on "personal" data tracking and sale to third parties, but rather as ways of optimizing or personalizing the "relevance" of ads for users across its ecosystem (O'Flaherty 2022). An increased presence of ad-supported and freemium tiering for various services—TV+, music, podcasts, news, as well as in-app ads thus seems imminent. Apple's efforts to brand itself as uniquely secure and trustworthy bely its strategy to fix itself within the home to gather more data for its growing advertising

 arm through software intermediation and of course more hardware sales.

Such discourses and promises surrounding privacy are all the more important for conceptions of the data, content, and images produced and consumed by the home and family. This marketing nonetheless elides how Apple's "walled garden ecosystem," its total control over its hardware, software, and services, centralizes its power to collect, analyze, use, and operationalize the data it collects, even if this happens on local devices and not the cloud (Pereira 2021).

In addition to hardware and software control, Apple began expanding its offerings of paid services in 2019 to include TV+, Fitness+, News+, iCloud+, and Arcade, in addition to Apple Music (2015), seeking to bolster alternative revenue streams atop its "active installed base," to grow this base through incentivizing hardware sales with free trials, and to increase the company's contact points and associations with users (Crawford 2024a). Such services are found on Apple's website under the Entertainment category tab which reads

> Meet the A-list of entertainment. Award-winning movies. Binge-worthy shows. Your favourite music mastered in Spatial Audio. The most epic collection of mobile games. And the world's largest library of 4K Ultra HD fitness content. The best entertainment and experiences live here—only on Apple. (n.d.c).

The phrasing of this last line in particular further underscores the idea of Apple's ecosystem as a network upon which media is distributed and consumed. These descriptions speak to Apple's attempts to intensify its existing lifestyle brand of expensive, high-design technology products to include elevated subscription experiences through culture (TV+, Music, Arcade), wellness (Fitness+, whose functions are heightened by Apple Watch), "trustworthy" journalism, (News+), digital storage and sharing (iCloud+), and payment (Apple Card and Apple Pay).

The framing of services as a way of "getting the most out of the devices you love" imagines an idealized user or family who has already bought into the ecosystem, and can further "fulfill the potential" of such purchases through evermore, indeed lifelong buy-in and subscription. The company's service bundles, branded Apple One, further evidence such desires. Apple's service discourse further imagines the TV as a site of increased interaction with the company in the home, where one can "Watch, sing, play, and work out. On the big screen," with proprietary Apple content promising to be meaningful, thoughtful, and entertaining, thousands of Apple approved apps available through the tvOS app store, as well as the functionality and visuality of the home app.

Aesthetically, TV+ is reaching for the prestige, high-production value look of HBO, though less edgy in its content so as to not compromise the Apple brand (Crawford 2024a). Fitness+ can be compared to Peleton. Apple Music boasts of higher fidelity streaming than Spotify or YouTube, and News+ consolidates top newspapers and luxury lifestyle magazines in one sleek design. Here Apple is seeking to create a cohesive and recognizable aesthetic across these service categories, through its branding, interface continuity, and personalization. Here smartness once again echoes television history as an expanded version of the way TV companies in the '80s and '90s began creating distinctive "looks" for their programs and networks "to attract loyal viewers—and so the investment of advertisers" (Dant 2012, 80; Caldwell 1995). For Apple and its smart home ecosystem, this translates to the attraction of loyal users and so the investment of shareholders. This smart televisuality moves in both directions, in the sense of a growing number of smart screen devices becoming televisual, and the smartification of the television to be more device-like in hosting various apps and services.

Regardless of screen size, such image experiences are smart because they are within the ecosystem, produce feedback data, and are thus tailored and curated based on a user's Apple ID.

Apple's intermediation of smart home devices through controlled software systems, alongside the extension of its lifestyle brand through services, is indicative of the company's current strategy of ecosystem integration, where full product functionality is only available through continual and interlocking purchase, use, subscription, update, and trust.

Conclusion

Taken together, this analysis displays how Apple's smart home messaging seeks to (re)secure, alter, sell, and ultimately capture ideas about the home and family through the promises of smartness: control, convenience, security, and futurity. Such discourses speak to the growing crises of profitability and social reproduction under finance capitalism, where the home and family have emerged as growing sites of digital productivity and extraction (Goulden 2021; Piletic 2022). The smart home promises that you can: view and control your home and its appliances from afar; communicate with your family from a distance, while on the go, or perhaps while working late; maximize the leisure time you do have with not only meaningful but smart experiences; occupy your children with quality entertainment; optimize your living room by turning it into a personal gym; and so on. Evident in such promises are Apple's visions of the platform-ability of said home and family, where it can either provide vertically integrated hardware, software, and services, or at least intermediate between devices through its "active installed base." It is in this situation that Apple's smart home strategy must be read as a way of shoring up the company's value flywheel of core product sales which, through tightly controlled software functionality, can lead to increased intermediation, data gathering, and service subscription, optimized by hardware and software design and integration—and the cycle repeats.

Beyond Apple, the model of analysis offered here must also be taken up to trace the differing contours of other tech giants and

their smart home ecosystems, aesthetics, and strategies of promotion. While this paper focuses on Apple and its targeting of the overdeveloped economies of the Global North, transnational and regionally specific dynamics of platformization in the Global South are also essential lines of inquiry and analysis (Avle 2022; Chen et al. 2021; Kwet 2019; Masiero and Nicholson 2020). Here dynamics of data extraction and surveillance, internet service provision and network access, and ecosystem interoperability hinge less on the privacy premium of ecosystems such as Apple's walled garden, and instead rely on openness, modularity, and interoperability, though at times at the sake of user and data security (Avle 2022; Kshetri 2013). Scholars such as Michael Kwet describe how movements resisting the domination of multinational tech firms are offering inspiring, alternative visions of smart tech in their calls for free and open software, modular and repairable hardware, and decentralized internet infrastructure (Kwet 2019; Hernandez, Miranda, and Goñi 2020). Lastly, considerations of shared, cooperative, and alternative housing arrangements beyond the traditional nuclear family structure can provide different understandings and potential compositions of smart media technology in the home beyond today's dominant company-family-ecosystem paradigm (Maalsen 2023).

Critically unpacking the discursive and design elements of one firm's smart home ecosystem offers a crucial step toward informing policy debates and radically reorienting the potential benefits of smart technology away from Big Tech's control and financial extraction toward socially and ecologically useful ends (Crawford 2024). A few worthy horizons for a public smartness might include the use of a) data as a publicly and responsibly managed informational resource; b) connectivity to bolster more efficient energy, resource, and waste management and communications infrastructure; and c) home automation or programmability to make homes more accessible where needed (Sadowski, Viljoen, and Whittaker 2021). Just as "we cannot trust dominant companies to act as unilateral stewards of user

 privacy," we also cannot trust such private actors to meaningfully lead or change numerous models of extraction and exploitation upon which they have come to dominate their markets (Cyphers and Doctorow 2021, 7; Pereira 2021).

More broadly, and perhaps most ambitiously, such orientations must also spark wider debates about what needs—or what can afford—to be smart in the first place. Do we really need every appliance and accessory to be fully connected and integrated, or might we do better to manage the precious metals, natural resources, manufactured goods, and labor that make things smart toward the more publicly oriented horizons mentioned above? At stake here are vital and interrelated issues of interoperability, ecosystem control, data privacy, and environmental and labor exploitation, which at present remain very inadequately regulated, bolstering Big Tech's business models, market domination, and infrastructural power. This chapter's investigation of Apple's smart home strategy and discourse hopes to open up such critical lines of thinking, analysis, and debate toward a radically different imagination and organization of smartness and technology.

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Afterword

Ishita Tiwary

The genesis of this collection stems from the "Platforms and the Moving Image" workshop organized by the "Configurations of Film" working group at Goethe University, Frankfurt. Spanning three days, the workshop primarily focused on research being conducted by doctoral students, who presented on various facets relating to platforms. The invigorating and rigorous workshop has led to this collection that platforms (pun intended) the work of these students. Reading them curated in a volume, one can observe that the pieces in this collection are diverse in their scope, location, and method. Spanning from North America, Germany, India, and Turkey, the chapters in this volume addresses "platforms" through archival work, social media ethnography, and textual analysis, offering scholars a breadth of approaches to study platforms. The contribution to the book broadly can be signposted by thinking through the relationship between platforms and fan studies, platforms and labor, and by offering us theoretical tools to reconceptualize platform studies.

In 2022, Warner Bros. merged with Discovery. One of the effects of the merger was the pulling up of titles from their streaming library. This led to a widespread discussion of the practices of archiving in the age of streaming, where the user is dependent on the platform to make the title available in the absence of physical copies. There is an impermanence now when it comes to the availability of media titles. Media scholar Abigail De Kosnik (2010) has consistently argued that piracy would define the future of internet delivered television, and that it is pirate cinephiles who will collect and preserve the titles that are taken off by streaming platforms. It is this provocation that Sudipto Basu's piece picks up on, where he argues for KaraGarga as a cinephilic pirate network that aids in shaping film production practices of low budget experimental and art films. Concurrently, Isadora Campregher Paiva, makes a case for the study of the platform

IMDb, its "change from a commons-based organization running on volunteer labor and hosted on university websites to a commercial website owned by Amazon," and the fact that although it is seen with skepticism from the academy, nonetheless, it is an important research tool for most film scholars. If platforms shape practices of film production and research through peer-to-peer and commons-based labor, they also remediate the relationship between the fan and celebrity.

The subfield of fan studies offers insight into creativity, community, and affect. Multidisciplinary in nature, there is not one singular theoretical framework through which one can understand film and media fandom. Despite the increasing visibility of fan studies as a discipline, there remains scant work specifically on methodological issues. The pieces in this collection also offer us methodological windows by thinking through the issues around platforms and fandom. In this collection, Instagram, Etsy, and Facebook becomes sites for this remediation. If Instagram and Etsy become sites for merchandising celebrity filmmakers (Anna Bell), Facebook becomes a platform of intimacy, where fan groups come together to commemorate their favorite celebrity by utilizing archives and anecdotes (Amrita Biswas). On the other hand, through the example of Turkey and the "Palu family case," Zeynep Tuna illustrates how audiences interact with the show through different platforms and how they create content that expands, summarizes, and supplements the show's narrative. Through this case study, which specifically focuses on audience activity, Tuna coins this activity as "investigative spectatorship," which draws from the practices and methods of citizen journalism, amateur sleuths, and the concept of "forensic fandom."

These fan practices on platforms become a way to delineate the 'politics of historiography' (Biswas). This is made clear in the platform in fan interactions, and in what they reveal about their investment, the authenticity of anecdotes associated with the celebrity they are invested in, and the delegitimizing any narrative about the star that contradicts the dominant

hagiographic discourse. But how does fandom and the archive get reshaped when a big media conglomerate enters the picture? Philipp Dominik Keidl, through the example of Disney+ and their making ofs notes that "The Disney+ making-ofs are highly staged and selective accounts of what it means to work for the studio and its archives. They may offer a glimpse into the inner workings of the archives, but they are driven by a corporate agenda to adapt to new platforms and technologies, generate and maintain long-term audience appeal, and establish reliable revenues and predicable costs through various textual extensions to spread their brand as far as possible." However, Keidl focuses more on the archival labor performed by fans in the service of the platform. Through all these threads, we note that labor is integral to the performance of fandom on platforms—whether through seeding files on pirate sharing network, putting up reviews on an online database, selling celebrity merch on social media platforms, or creating an archive to commemorate a celebrity—all of this hinges on labor. Thus, labor also become an important vector in the study of platforms.

Last year the question of labor was brought into public consciousness when the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and radio artists (SAG-AFTRA) went for strike for over 100 days. Among the labor disputes between the guilds and producers were equitable profit distribution, proper residual payments, the industry's adaptation to inflation, and most importantly protection against artifical intelligence usage and influence in film and streaming. The strike was motivated in large part to change the working conditions wrought by the emergence of streaming platforms. According to a March 14 bulletin post to its members by the Guild, the strike has been "driven in large part by the shift to streaming [as] writers are finding their work devalued in every part of the business." The WGA said in a later statement that "the companies' behavior has created a gig economy inside a union workforce, and their immovable stance in this negotiation has betrayed a commitment

to further devaluing the profession of writing." The strike had an effect on the economies of Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta, and all places of media production. The strike brings into sharp relief the relationship between platforms and labor, and one of the main concerns of this volume is to explicate this relationship. Media studies has been dominated by the following three topics: infrastructure, content, and audiences. Film and media scholar Toby Miller (2009) calls for labor to be situated more concretely into these discussions pushing for a blend of ethnographic, political-economic, and aesthetic analyses in a global and local way, establishing links between the key areas of cultural production around the world (Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East) and diasporic/dispossessed communities engaged in their own cultural production (Native peoples, African and Asian diasporas, Latinos, and Middle-Eastern peoples). He argues that this analysis must be animated by collective identity and power, by how human subjects are formed, and by how they experience cultural and social space. The pieces in this volume think through the question of labor and platforms by examining issues primarily through the framework of political and cultural economy. Jake Pitre argues that in the creator economy platforms are enacting a vision of the future where the mode of production is "dictated by these firms and their parent companies, where platform workers like streamers, camgirls, artists, and content creators are all exploited in the name of entrepreneurial self-management." He forcefully makes the point that the disjunction between platforms and their workers and the revenue generated illustrates that one cannot choose to play by the rules of commercialized platforms. Contributing to this political economic reading of platforms, Thomson makes a case for a dialectical analysis between media's extractive and functional properties at the level of wealth, utility, and social relations as way to study the extraction of workers from platform production. Basu also pinpoints this in his study on cinephilic platforms and piracy, where KaraGarga demands users' labor to upload, download, and seed files and requires users to

maintain a ratio. These relationships between platform and labor prompt the reader to ask, what exactly is a platform?

The pieces in the volume get into the heart of it by examining, redefining, and offering conceptual modes to study platforms from the vantage point of smartness, small gauge films, pornography, streaming, and television. Platform studies, as most of the pieces illustrate, deals with corporate platforms and their techno-cultural logics, economics, and policy debates. Becky Holt's piece frames the platform as a "rhetorical device" by examining how "people think a platform works." She uses this this framework to explore how it offers scholars new insights into the work of online pornography, claiming that the platform has imbued a broad range of content available online as broadly pornographic, and that this aspect make us re-think what "representation" really means when it comes to online platforms. This representation can be through data. Sneha Kumar re-imagines the work of data as "kinky" and "sexy" through their analysis of the Indian streaming platform ALTBalaji, an extension of an Indian television and film conglomerate. Kumar argues that the space of this streaming platform is politically rife, "where the state, society, data, and its concomitant infrastructures, sex, power, and capital converge in ways that reflect a streaming platform imagination that is rooted in religion, caste, and class." The sexiness of data in this respect highlights data's promise to bring whatever one desires. In ALTBalaji's case this desire is mapped onto the content produced by them on the streaming platform, where sexual agency is granted to the upper caste Hindu women. The sexiness of the platform is complemented by its promises of smartness. Colin Crawford examines this through a case study of Apple Home, which re-envisions the home and family as platformized. The smart family through the Apple platforms is in reality an extension of the corporate desires of the company. The corporate desires of a company finds its fullest expression through streaming platforms and debates of what constitutes a "mass medium." Jana Zündel discusses the affinities

and dependencies of platform television as it both complements and competes with regular broadcast television. She argues that the platformization of TV further diversifies global and local infrastructures of television delivery—to the point of non-transparent economic entanglements. Following this, platformized TV undermines the traditional conception of television as a "mass medium." Finally, Alexandra Schneider, Haidee Wasson, and Yvonne Zimmermann provide a valuable theoretical framework to study platforms through the lens of small gauge cinema. Some of the connections and differences they make are

1. Small gauge film culture has a long, deep, and dispersed history of operating in some ways similar to YouTube.
2. Things that were important in the history of small format cinema actually continue to be important within digital media today: making, re-use, horizontal circulation, connecting people across vast geographies, creating new "publics." This complicates concepts of "value" in inherited media models.

Thus, platforms are rhetorical, sexy, smart, aspiring to be a mass medium, and can offer valuable insights into thinking about analog media and vice versa.

The volume offers novel and varied insights into the theoretical and methodological study of platforms spanning sites of study such as KaraGarga, Instagram, Facebook, Etsy, Disney+, Apple, Netflix, YouTube, ALTBalaji, IMdB, and Twitch. In a field and moment dominated by presentness, it makes a case for archiving and historiography through cinephilic and varied fan practices. It urges us to look at analog media to better understand and conceptualize the debates that surrounds platforms. It unpacks the promises offered by platforms through its smart and sexy qualities and lays bare the corporate and socio-cultural expressions of power that underlie them. Following that, it asks us to take the question of labor more seriously when thinking about the work that platforms do and foregrounds the importance of political and cultural economy when tackling these questions. Overall, by foregrounding fan and labor practices, the volume

paves the way not only to think through the question of platforms but also how they continually re-define themselves and how we make sense of this redefinition through the conceptual tools offered by this volume.

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Philipp Dominik Keidl and Jana Zündel (eds.)
Platforms and the Moving Image

Platforms and the Moving Image offers a multi-faceted look at how digital platforms shape and are shaped by economic, cultural, and political forces. The collection investigates the effects of gaming, social media, streaming and video-sharing platforms on the production, circulation, and consumption of moving images. The essays emphasize the importance of considering digital labor, media infrastructures, and user practices in understanding platforms' role in contemporary society.

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