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Editors

# European Cinema in the Streaming Era

Policy, Platforms, and Production

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## FOREWORD: EUROPEAN CINEMA FACE-TO-FACE WITH SILICON VALLEY

The story of streaming and its impact on film culture is still evolving, and so are the frames that we use to tell this story. For some observers, it is a story of platforms, in which services including Netflix, Disney+, Max—and all the rest—take centre stage. For others, it is a story of technologies—of high-speed broadband, video compression, mobiles, and smart TVs—and the new consumer subjectivities associated with those technologies. For political economists, the story is naturally about capital, investment and regulation of platforms, networks, and production resources. For audience researchers, streaming is instead a story of viewers and their ever-changing, ever-fragmenting, and ever-surprising ways of engaging with screen content. And for formalist film scholars, streaming is also about textuality: how the marks of a mode of production and distribution can be felt in the storytelling and stylistic norms of movies made for streaming platforms.

*Streaming European Cinema* is alert to these different facets of the streaming story, and it brings them together in fascinating ways. But what I admire most about this book is that it offers the reader a perspective that is simply not available in any of the other anthologies about streaming media published so far in screen studies, new media studies, or Internet studies. Specifically, this book helps us think about streaming-era European cinema *as a transcultural encounter*—a mode of relation between European cinema and its constitutive outside; a space of cultural engagement and negotiation in which the idea of European cinema is, once again, being redefined in relation to a new external force—namely, the US tech industries.

As the chapters in this book make clear, the amorphous entity of ‘tech’ is the ground upon which European cinema increasingly relies for circulation and against which it struggles for independence. The chapters, each in their own way, are all fundamentally concerned with this relation. So, while this book is proudly about European cinema, it understands its object in a broad and expansive sense, and is alert to the transcultural flows that constitute it.

In his indispensable 2005 book *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*, the late Thomas Elsaesser opens with two apparently irreconcilable truths: first, that there is ‘no such thing as European cinema’ (Elsaesser 2005, 13); and second, that European cinema exists, has to exist, and has done so since the earliest years of the medium. This apparent contradiction—European cinema as a fabrication and as an actually existing set of relations between national industries and institutions within the continent, and international markets beyond it—is something that Elsaesser unpicks at length, and something which has animated much other work on the topic of European cinema, by Tim Bergfelder, Mette Hjort, and others.

The idea of cinema as a transcultural relation has, of course, a long history in cinema studies, and particularly in theories of national and international cinema—a debate to which many of the book’s authors have also made formative contributions. This concept was also foundational to much of the great work on early cinema, on film distribution and reception, and on film style. Now, in the age of streaming, we find that Netflix and the other US platforms offer a postscript to this epic tale. Yet the need for a relational conception of European cinema endures, and carries through to the present volume.

Across the chapters in this book we can see the dialectics of US/Europe and culture/tech play out repeatedly, but to different and surprising effects. Many chapters describe situations in which film producers, regulators, and creatives negotiate conditions of possibility and constraint offered by Netflix, Prime Video, and the other US platforms, or seek alternatives in smaller European-run platforms—such as Mubi and Filmin—that are themselves constituted by a negative relation to (operating ‘in the shadow of’) the US platforms.

Yet the encounter with streaming described in this book is not the same encounter with Hollywood noted by Elsaesser almost twenty years ago. While the institutional structures and storytelling strategies of Hollywood remain formative for film industries worldwide, it should be noted that we

are no longer dealing primarily with ‘Hollywood studios’ as the principal agitators. Instead, it is the streaming services including Netflix and Prime Video that—for better or worse—control many of the key pipelines through which European cinema now finds its audiences, and which have become major commissioners in their own right.

The tensions between the streamers and the legacy European film ecology are by now quite apparent and are sensitively analysed in this book. A model of cost-plus financing, as preferred by Netflix, now competes against a patchwork system of co-production financing, as preferred by many European producers. An engineering culture of ‘content’ and ‘discoverability’ operates against a cultural-policy vocabulary of ‘culture’ and ‘audiovisual promotion.’ A *laissez-faire* capitalism opposes a mentality of cultural exception. The monolingualism of the US (and the global language of ‘user experience’ design) contrasts with the multilingualism of Europe. A US-based, globally dispersed platform ecology rivals a messy terrain of European broadcasters, pay-TV operators, and smaller SVODs and AVODs.

At the moment of streaming’s ascendancy this book does us a great service in theorising these tensions and showing how they manifest in concrete case studies. In so doing, the book points us towards a way of thinking about European cinema that is future-facing in its attention to cinema’s current conditions of digital circulation while also properly historical in its attempt to situate the current conjuncture of film, technology, and policy in a spatio-temporal context.

The encounter between European cinema and US tech is not the only transcultural encounter considered by the present book. Also under investigation here are Europe’s encounters with its own internal heterogeneity: the many insides and outsides to European cinema that can be found within the continent. This problematic is expertly analysed in several chapters grounded in the experience of small nations in Eastern and Central Europe, whose institutional presence in the region has always been tenuous, and which now have an equally complex relationship with the US platforms as sources of runaway production funding and global distribution.

The authors are not of one voice in their arguments—as is to be expected given the complexity and heterogeneity of problems considered in this book. They see things differently and bring different perspectives to bear on common problems. For some contributors, and the industry workers whose experiences they give voice to, the encounter with US tech

culture is generative in the sense that it diversifies funding possibilities away from the old gatekeepers (in particular, national film funds). Elsewhere, the encounter between European cinema and US tech is understood in terms of superimposition, erasure, and dominance. There are also moments in the book when a different kind of analytical voice emerges to describe the diverse *logics of integration* of US tech and European cinema—how the mega-platforms are localizing their operations (especially production), to what extent, and with what effect.

Whether expressed in terms of dominance, liberation, or integration, these encounters all involve the exercise of cultural power, and as such, are ideal fodder for critical exploration. And they all have some kind of analogue in the long history of European cinema scholarship. By linking past and present, and tracing the roots of our present streaming age through the intellectual traditions of trans/national film theory, *Streaming European Cinema* is doing the work that we need to disentangle these prehistories. It is precisely the book we need right now in our field.

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