

Dina Iordanova, Responses to Cineaste magazine's critical symposium
'From Disc to Stream: The Changing World of Home Video,'
on the Future of the DVD (published in abridged form as part of the
discussion), *Cineaste*, Winter 2017, Vol. XLIII, No. 1, pp. 30-40.

Gary Crowdus: An Editorial we published on this subject in 2012 (see attached) concluded, "We expect that the vastly superior DVD and Blu-ray formats will be around for at least another decade or two." How correct was that assumption? If physical media are dying, why are companies forging ahead with new discs and a new format (UHD)?

You have been overoptimistic back in 2012☺

The periodical death of various media formats is one thing. Besides that, there is the acceleration in the dying out of various carriers: new formats appear and then become obsolete with an increasing frequency and the life-spans of formats are getting shorter and shorter.

If we acknowledge that there is acceleration, we will see that predictions of a life-span of a medium ought to be left to those at the forefront of technology. I first read an article about 'the cloud' as a top innovation at some point around 2011 – and by now we are all 'in the cloud'. Same is with the discourse of software as service (as opposed to software as product) – it only took a few years for this transformation. So, whilst it is about innovation, it is also about acceleration. The acceleration may be coming from the relentless commercial onslaught which the technology giants hide behind appealing consumer rhetoric. The bottom line, however, is that we have had to change hardware on a regular basis mainly as it has been imposed by technology corporations that makes our phones, computers, as well as the

devices that we use to display film. I will not be opening a debate on the ethics of this as it is now beyond control.

Looking back at my 30+ years engagement with these matters, one motive that gets repeated all the time is the loss of material due to change of format. It is manifested in so many ways: for example, my colleague in art history who never made public the work he was compiling over many years as the CD-publishing standards radically changed in the meantime and all his material turned out to be in an obsolete format. Or my attempts to recover the letters I wrote on my Apple Mac in the late 1990s (and saved on square diskettes) - an almost impossible task today.

And, of course, whilst we talk DVD and Blu-ray, my office is still full of VHS tapes. My heart is breaking time when I pull out one of them and put it in the bin – in order to open up space. Most of the films on the tapes have never been transferred on DVD. But even if they were transferred on to DVD – why am I made to feel like a dinosaur, if I still want to cling on to this older format. Why is DVD or whatever other new format, is being imposed so categorically? Isn't this a truly unfair undercutting and invalidation of collections that we have faithfully accumulated over the years?

Films on VHS tapes started appearing on flea markets like Brick Lane in London around 2007/8 with alarming frequency and in huge quantities, costing around £1, or even two for £1. But no one was buying. Then the charity shops in the UK filled up with donated VHS tapes, until they stopped accepting them. I hear of some concerned Universities in the States (was it Yale?) that have started salvage projects and collect old VHS tapes of Asian films. But this is a drop in the ocean. It ought to be a more concerted and sizeable effort.

My friend Jim Haynes (b, 1934), founder of the avant-garde Arts Lab in London in the 1960s, was telling me that back then they had a projection machine that was handling all formats that were available at the time, so people could just come in and screen what they wanted in whatever format they had it. Today such versatility of formats can, sadly, only be handled by well-equipped libraries – like the mediatheque halls at Francois Mitterand Library in Paris or other similar venues.

GC: While streaming movie services have grown in popularity over the last decade, and the sales of DVDs and Blu-rays have clearly declined, do you personally see this situation as an either/or choice? How would you describe your own preferences?

Whilst I would spontaneously answer that my preference is for DVD, after a short reflection I realize that in reality I use DVDs less and less often. AT home, I always have a large pile of DVDs next to my TV set. Previously, the DVD pile was diminishing somehow faster. Nowadays I have a TV monitor that is connected to the Internet and that allows me to access directly several online services, such as BBC I-Player, Netflix, Amazon Prime, and even YouTube, all with the same ease that I would view a DVD. Why would I then limit myself to preference for one of these formats? What matters to me is the film and not if I would see it out of a DVD or streamed.

Many people view films whilst traveling. On board of airplanes, for example. Short-haul flights normally do not offer movies as in-flight entertainment so it is a common practice for passengers to view previously downloaded material out of their own device. Earlier some people had portable DVD players; nowadays these have all but disappeared.

Even if my preference may be to see films out of a DVD, I rarely can do that when I travel – the lightweight laptop I am carrying along no longer comes with a DVD slot; my only option is to use streaming services – either Netflix/ Amazon Prime, or Festival Scope or vimeo.

Festival Scope's service, which is mainly meant to service the community of festival programmers and carries new films that are at the circuit currently, is decent but slows down late at night due to heavy traffic. Vimeo is normally excellent, and it is the preferred choice of filmmakers -- some share the access information only privately whilst others opt to build in a paid vimeo access offer into web-sites from where one can see the film. I recently 'rented' the important Hungarian documentary JUDGEMENT IN HUNGARY (Eszter Hajdu, 2013) for a one-off viewing out of a paid vimeo site and was quite satisfied; I was then able to recommend the film to several friends who are based in different countries, who 'rented' it as well. It would not be so easy to have such specifically targeted audience if the film was only available on a DVD.

And, I strongly prefer YouTube over commercial services such as Netflix – it is here where I am much more likely to find the material that is of interest to me. Normally, this material regarded as 'obscure' (I will not enter arguments here...). Old Romanian films, for example, which have never been released on VHS in the West, nor have they appeared on DVD or Blu-ray, and they are surely not part of Netflix and Amazon Prime's offer. Nor are they ever likely to be. Such films, however, are now emerging at an astonishing speed on YouTube, where whole national cinemas can be found in unprecedented abundance. I wrote about this in a piece in the Cineaste a few years back. The situation has been getting only better ever since, and has evolved precisely in the direction I spoke about back then.

Still, my true preference remains seeing films in cinemas wherever possible.

GC: How would you define the pros and cons of physical media versus streaming?
Are there distinctly different viewers for the two formats? How would you define them?

In my opinion, this question would be answered differently by different generations. My 22 year-old son would definitely favor streaming whilst, at 57, I seem nostalgic for ‘physical media’.

In teaching, we schedule ‘screenings’ for the students but we also work on the principle that they are not obliged to attend – as long as they come to the seminar prepared and have seen the film that is scheduled for the respective week. So, last semester (Spring 2017), out of a class of 18 students in their early 20ies, only three to four people attended the ‘screenings’ (where we would normally show the film out of a DVD or Blu-ray) yet in class it was easy to establish that everybody had seen the film (streamed on their own devices) – and this was true for films that were not mainstream and not readily available.

One should also keep in mind that nowadays libraries discourage the further growth in collections that take up physical space. There are very few books left in traditional libraries, and this is the case even at a University like mine which boasts a 600 year-old tradition. There are no longer any VHS cassettes and whilst we still purchase DVDs and Blu-ray as default position, librarians encourage our use of streaming wherever possible.

In classroom lecturing, it is easier for me to find a suitable clip on YouTube and stream it as

part of the lecture rather than navigate a DVD to get to the respective moment of the film or specifically prepare a film clip incorporated into a PowerPoint presentation.

GC: Disney announced that in 2019 it will leave Netflix to start its own streaming service, as Netflix itself concentrates on its own programming. Does fragmentation among the major players create opportunity for more niche-oriented streaming services? If so, how will they distinguish themselves in an increasingly more crowded market for streaming?

Netflix now represents a vertically-integrated operation which is very similar to the early days of cinematic art, where the need of cinema owners for content triggered the developments of studios. (Later on this was recognized to operate as monopoly under American law, and it was broken into production and exhibition parts, thus necessitating the advent of distribution as such.) Netflix does not need to bother with distribution as it owns the platform where it shows the content that it generates.

Many other content creators will continue striving for a place on this same platform, yet it is likely that content that comes with the Netflix own label will be catching more eyes. Still, Netflix and Amazon Prime – which operates on the same principle – are likely to also provide a platform for the niche-type content of the ‘long tail’. I wrote about these matters in *Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves Online* (2013) and generally the developments since have been in the direction I predicted back then.

Disney can exit Netflix alright, it can set up its own streaming platform, and focus on targeting its own audience. It has brand value and a segment of the viewership is likely to be

loyal to it. If Netflix loses the Disney content, it will still go strong. The withdrawal of Disney from Netflix may be an opportunity for alternative wonderful content for children – e.g. animated tales produced in countries like France, Japan and Russia -- that is now overshadowed, to come to the forefront and be more widely seen.

In the UK we have an example of the ‘fragmentation’ that you talk about in the BBC I-Player – a geo-blocked service featuring only own programmes and available to us Britons who are coerced into pay the hefty TV tax in order to receive the lofty ‘public service’ media content. As one of these taxpayers, I have access to it and use it occasionally. But it is not something that can become an only source, not even a preferred one.

I am skeptical on the matter of fragmentation. Indeed it is likely to create some short-lived opportunity of the type you describe. The reality, however, is that the smaller players already tried and lost out, or are on the way to extinction (unless they have created a specific niche audience, like Festival Scope which services festival programmers). It is much more convenient for consumers to have access to wider material on one platform (most likely Netflix) rather than subscribing to several services for different content. I is not by chance that just in the last year the share price of Netflix has doubled.

GC Feel free to discuss any issues related to this topic that haven’t been raised here but that are of particular interest to you.

The topic seems to be more about formats, yet – as this is ultimately about cinema and cinephilia -- in my view the real issues are about the commercial dictatorship of technological giants and the forms of resistance they trigger. As I travel around the world, I have noticed

that the prevalence of bit torrent downloads is just staggering in non-Western territories. Friends from Egypt or Turkey have signaled occasionally they can get me any film I want, and friends in China have film libraries on small external drives that my formidable collection can barely compete with. To be realistic, for a very large part of the world population, the juxtaposition between DVD/Blu-ray and Netflix streaming is meaningless.

Many people around the world get their viewing in ways that do not fit in any of the schemes and models described here. How about the streaming of tv signal via cable to multiple Indian homes in a neighborhood? Or the bit torrent communities in Russia? Or the video content on youku in China? There are massive archival efforts of amateur communities, which are informal, large, transnational, and absolutely non-commercial groups of activist type, who are engaged in true preservation projects and not involved with any legislated government bodies, non-profit foundations, or commercial enterprises. There is consensus, for example, that the best cinephile site is one called Kara Garga, and all I know about it tells me it is a territory inhabited by noble outlaws who love cinema and are true erudites. These are the guys and the efforts that I feel need to be discussed and highlighted more. I took pleasure reading the book of Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas, *The Informal Media Economy* (Wiley, 2015), and would like to see more writing and discussion that would bring out these shadow media consumption patterns to light. This is where the really interesting developments take place.