

„Kwartalnik Filmowy” no. 124 (2023)
ISSN: 0452-9502 (Print) ISSN: 2719-2725 (Online)
<https://doi.org/10.36744/kf.1845>
© Author; Creative Commons BY 4.0 License

Bolesław Raciński
University of Warsaw
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1908-9039>

Lost in the Stream: An Overview of Online Distribution of Latin American Films Co-funded by European Film Funds

Keywords:

European film funds;
Latin American
cinemas;
Hubert Bals Fund;
streaming;
distribution

Abstract

The main focus of this paper is to explore the impact of the ever-expanding internet SVoD and VoD services on the availability of Latin American films that receive co-funding from the Hubert Bals Fund and the World Cinema Fund. These co-funded films are typically showcased at prestigious international festivals but often struggle to reach their home countries. This lack of local distribution remains a challenge, especially as these funds openly declare the wish to support small local film industries. After briefly investigating the streaming service landscape in Latin America, the author examines Unleashed, a platform associated with the Hubert Bals Fund. He scrutinizes the positioning of selected Latin American works to determine how the films are framed within national labels and production conditions. Following this, he explores how Netflix can serve as a distribution channel for niche cinema, using the case study of Maya Da-Rin's film *The Fever* (*A febre*, 2019) and its distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic. His research approach involves qualitative methods, particularly semi-structured interviews, and draws from the emerging field of streaming studies.

The article was made possible through a grant from the Polish National Science Centre (2019/32/C/HS2/00495).

Among all the promises European film funds booklets make to aspiring filmmakers from the Global South, some are especially appealing. The German World Cinema Fund (WCF) booklet describes the Fund's activity as *supporting film production in countries that lack a constructive film industry ... giving talented filmmakers the opportunity to gain or improve their international awareness and reach a global audience*.¹ Official Netherlands Film Funds promotional materials characterize the Hubert Bals Fund (HBF), not dissimilar in scope from the World Cinema Fund, as an organization supporting projects that *should contribute to the development of the local film industry and to local filmmaking skills*.² These two publicity documents reveal one of the biggest challenges European film funds face today: reconciling the international, festival-oriented appeal of the supported films with the aspiration to strengthen local, usually small film industries. While international success is often achieved, as many supported filmmakers win prizes at prestigious international festivals (Carlos Reygadas's films being the best example), the potential to strengthen the local industry is frequently hindered by the fact that these films are rarely distributed in their countries of origin. Rarely ever are the same films cherished by both festival audiences and programmers of commercial cinemas that dominate exhibition circuits. This results in a conundrum: is it possible to strengthen a small film community when its most artistically acclaimed productions are hardly ever exhibited in this community? The rise of popular and widely available internet streaming services might finally create a solution to this problem.

Methods and scope

How does the proliferation of internet SVoD and VoD services impact the availability and distribution of Latin American films co-funded by European film funds in their respective countries of origin? This question is essential to the constantly growing field of film funds studies, as the lack of proper distribution beyond festivals is one of the main concerns regarding the functioning of the funds. Moreover, as noted by Niamh Thornton, *the growth in these services and the shrinking DVD market, what they show, where it gets seen, and how this determines the viewers' understanding of Latin American film, makes this a particularly fecund area for new research*.³

The research question stated above is an extensive one, and answering it in whole would require the work of a team of researchers based in different Latin American countries, as the practice of geoblocking is the most significant barrier in region-wide studies of streaming platforms (widely available VPN services alleviate the problem, but do not solve it due to their various restrictions). In this article, I examine selected aspects that need to be considered with regard to this large topic, hoping to create a roadmap (or, to use a more suitable metaphor, a watchlist) for further research. Hence the array of issues studied and methods employed – I believe them to be representative of the variety of approaches that such streaming studies require. With that in mind, I begin by investigating the potential importance of this relatively new model of distribution for Latin American film industries and communities. Then, I narrow the scope, examining the International Film Festival Rotterdam's streaming platform, Unleashed. As the only streaming service adjacent to a European film

fund, it is a proper example of online distribution of festival cinema. After investigating this little-known platform, I turn to its polar opposite, Netflix, and a particularly revealing case study of Maya Da-Rin's *The Fever (A febre, 2019)*, which demonstrates how a mainstream service can become a distribution vehicle for niche cinema, albeit with certain deficiencies. Building on the outcomes of these analyses and employing results from qualitative research, I then broaden the scope again to examine various obstacles that filmmakers face when it comes to online distribution. This investigation is limited to the workings of the World Cinema Fund and the Hubert Bals Fund.

The methods employed in this study – especially with regard to examining the tagging, cataloguing, and gatekeeping policies of streaming services – derive in part from the works of Constantin Parvulescu and Jan Hanzlík and their research on digital peripheries,⁴ adapted to the specific requirements of studying cultural production of Latin America. Niamh Thornton's "Bridges, Streams and Dams: The Multiple Negotiated Strategies of Distribution and Access in Latin American Cinema"⁵ also contains highly useful examples of studying streaming services and their relationships with small cinemas. Moreover, this study is a part of a larger research project, "In Search of Authenticity: Exploring Problematic Relationships Between Latin American Filmmakers and European Film Funds," which is focused on qualitative research and consists principally in semi-structured interviews. The results of these studies have been used to contextualize this article when necessary.

It is also useful to briefly raise the notion of a streaming catalogue, which is understood here as the compilation of licensed or proprietary content that a specific platform distributes at a particular moment. When it comes to streaming services, these compilations can be thought of as dynamic sets of licensing contracts that shift over time and across different regions, presenting various challenges for research. As catalogues change rapidly, often without any warning, this study should be treated as a snapshot of the current situation, which might be altered at any moment, even between the time of writing and the publication date. Nonetheless, the studied cases demonstrate many general dynamics governing the world of digital distribution. The findings tell us much about how the discussed streaming platforms operate and how their catalogues, tags, designs, and 'genres' have changed.

As noted by Deborah Shaw, the term Latin American cinema *renders certain countries invisible, yet the term is clearly used and useful to discuss films from Latin America, not least as a marketing label.*⁶ There is, however, a *well-established practice of scholarly writing about Latin American film that groups a significant spread of highly differentiated countries together, although there is considerable variability in terms of production, distribution, and local marketplaces.*⁷ It would also be exceptionally irresponsible to ignore vast differences between, for example, the Argentinian film industry and rather small-scale film communities in Paraguay or the Dominican Republic. Bearing that in mind, I attempt to identify and depict common traits that may come to the fore when one examines films and SVoD services.

Against the dam: The challenges of distribution

The World Cinema Fund Classic programme offers up to €60,000 per project and €40,000 for post-production funding. The Hubert Bals Fund has different funding schemes based on the stage of film completion, with the Script and Project Development grant providing up to €10,000. The Netherlands Film Fund – Hubert Bals Fund Co-production Scheme supports Dutch co-producers with up to €75,000. HBF+Europe: Minority Co-production Support encourages European producers to participate as minority co-producers with up to €60,000 per project, co-financed by the European Union Media Programme.

While the importance of production support is difficult to evaluate, as it differs from film to film, depending on the expected budget and other available funding sources, it is easy to notice that the studied funds do not offer a scheme focused principally on distribution. The supported films may be distributed in Germany (WCF) and Benelux countries (HBF), and the fund logos visible at the beginning of opening credits certainly serve as seals of approval that facilitate festival entries and attract international sales agents. However, rarely are these films distributed in the Global South, remaining available mostly to arthouse audiences there, while in many small countries arthouse cinemas are nearly non-existent. As noted by Tamara Falicov, *US distribution companies dominate all other countries' distribution channels worldwide, including Latin American countries The smaller the national film industry, the larger the portion of the distribution pie taken by the US majors.*⁸ In his 2004 *Atlas of World Cinema*, Dudley Andrew stated that *the real film wars have been waged less over production than over competition for audiences.*⁹ Nearly twenty years later, it seems that hardly any war is fought over films from *ground-breaking directors*, as Hubert Bals Fund promotional materials describe them¹⁰ – at least when their countries of origin are considered. The lack of distribution is often considered the biggest challenge by the filmmakers themselves. Niles Atallah, whose *Lucía* (2010) and *Rey* (2017) were supported by the Hubert Bals Fund, has shared the following sentiments: *You can find the funding to make a film, but then... well, it's very weird, but you just can't show it. This is a whole new problem. ... This is a very exhausting way to live because you find yourself continually fighting against the whole ecosystem.*¹¹ Antonella Sudasassi, a director from Costa Rica (*The Awakening of the Ants / El despertar de las hormigas*, 2019 /) has called the distribution *damaged*, noting that *there are many other films that may not see any other distribution platform or window, except the festivals that select them.*¹²

Of course, one can hardly blame European film funds for the suboptimal cinema infrastructure in Latin American countries, for the neoliberal transformations that in the 1990s and 2000s devastated exhibition circuits in the region (for example, in Mexico¹³), the relatively recent abysmal changes in the cultural policies of Bolsonaro's Brazil, or the general crisis of audience engagement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the rise of streaming, it is appropriate to ask if SVoD services might be a solution, especially because they have been considered a possible answer to the challenge in question for many years now. In 2010, Dina Jordanova wrote that with the rise of internet distribution *markets become liberated*



The Fever, dir. Maya Da-Rin (2019)



Alba, dir. Ana Cristina Barragán (2016)

*from the 'tyranny of geography': the new distribution set-up permits unrestrained availability of distinctive products, and the remote village residents can have access to cultural goods as easily as those in the most central metropolitan locations.*¹⁴ She noted that online services *easily make niche material that is not likely to be stored in the physically limited space of traditional video stores as available as the mainstream holdings. In addition, such niche material is now available to a much wider client base than could be reached previously.*¹⁵

Nevertheless, the first thing to take under consideration is that SVoD services also require complex infrastructure, in particular easy access to fast and fixed broadband Internet that allows users a steady streaming experience. According to the report *Acceso y uso de Internet en América Latina y el Caribe* from September 2022, 60 per cent of people in Latin America and the Caribbean can access the Internet, while two-fifths of the regional population are left without digital connectivity.¹⁶ Those with internet access constantly encounter various obstacles, such as high fees, poor service, and recurring energy shortages. There are persistent and significant gaps in digital infrastructure among the countries of the region, as well as between rural and urban areas within Latin American and Caribbean countries; in the urban areas, 67 per cent of households are connected, compared to only 23 per cent in the rural areas.¹⁷ As argued by Jack Goldsmith and Tim Wu, the history of the Internet since the late 1990s is a process of creating more and more borders: *the result is an internet that differs among nations and regions that are increasingly separated by walls of bandwidth, language, and filters.*¹⁸ Nonetheless, video streaming services are popular among those with fast broadband internet access; as a result of COVID-19, the number of users who subscribe to a streaming platform has increased considerably and it is expected that by the year 2026, there will be approximately 131 million subscriptions to streaming platforms in the region (of which around 48.37 million will be to Netflix).¹⁹ According to Netflix's quarterly earnings breakdown in 2020, the Latin American market is responsible for 18.49 per cent of the platform's subscribers worldwide.²⁰

(Un)leashed: Streaming festival cinema

Established in 2018 and officially launched during the 47th International Film Festival Rotterdam, IFFR Unleashed appears as a direct response to the problem of scarce worldwide distribution of art cinema. The idea, however, was born much earlier: right after the festival's first edition. It was then that the Dutch festival began to sell selected titles on DVDs under the moniker of Tiger Release, as an attempt to promote films that were unable to obtain wide distribution deals, with the Hubert Bals Fund-funded productions among them. This endeavour eventually failed its promise, as the festival *always lacked the financial means and manpower to be a distributor*,²¹ as stated by one of its producers. The sudden rise of streaming services presented another opportunity for the Rotterdam festival to somehow alleviate the difficulties of distribution.

IFFR Unleashed combines a SVoD model and a TVoD (transactional video on demand) service: members from the Benelux countries can subscribe to the

service, while users from other regions (except the USA, where the service is unavailable) pay for renting each film separately. Seven months after its initial launch, the plans were revealed to make IFFR Unleashed a worldwide SVoD service, but, as of yet, they did not come to fruition.²² While in 2018 the service offered films directed by world famous directors, such as Jim Jarmusch, Alexander Payne, Andrea Arnold, and Nuri Bilge Ceylan, it currently focuses almost exclusively on the works of lesser-known filmmakers, often their first shorts or features (although some of the big names reappear in the catalogue around the time of the festival, usually for approximately 50 days).

A short analysis of press statements and interviews from IFFR Unleashed representatives shows that they are mainly targeting users who are already familiar with the IFFR or similar to its regular audience, hungry for the *kind of quirky, unexpected, boundary pushing, brilliant concept*.²³ However, there is also a need for *finding a global audience, an unexpected audience*,²⁴ and *finding a group of people in Malaysia who really like your film*²⁵ would be considered a success. It is necessary to note that the IFFR Unleashed managers and producers strongly underline the essential role of filmmakers in any activities regarding the contents of the service: as the managing director stated, they are looking to work *with directors and rights holders to find tailor-made solutions to fit their needs and their film's particular situation*.²⁶

As of the time of writing of this text (August 2023), the IFFR Unleashed catalogue contains 64 films (although there are 66 entries; the Argentinian film *La flor / dir. Mariano Llinás, 2019* / is divided into three parts, which reflects the way it was usually presented during its limited cinema release): 53 features and 11 short films. This includes 21 Latin American productions (*The Idea of a Lake / La idea de un lago, dir. Milagros Mumenthaler, 2016* / is currently unavailable due to a recurring server error) supported by the Hubert Bals Fund during various stages of production, from development to post-production. It is astonishing that in the era of geoblocking and regionally restricted distribution rights, the vast majority of these films are available in their countries of origin. I consider it important, as geoblocking represents a subtle method of cultural control, similar to localized search and algorithmic recommendations. Its increasing prevalence alters the essence of the unrestricted Internet by placing users within specific national online domains and tailoring content according to particular notions of territorial markets.²⁷ There are only two geoblocking exceptions in the IFFR Unleashed catalogue of Latin American films: Brazilian *The Fever* is unavailable in Brazil and Niles Atallah's *Lucía* is unavailable in Chile (and currently not available anywhere on streaming).

As noted by Parvulescu and Hanzlík, *platform design plays an important role Tagging tools and categories can render more manifest or make less visible the peripheral status of a national film culture*.²⁸ IFFR Unleashed began as a separate platform but then it was incorporated into the festival's main service. The Spotify-like playlist invites visitors to select a film from the alphabetical list. On the IFFR Unleashed landing page, alphabetical order remains the main organizational principle, which must be considered unconventional, as the majority of streaming services utilize their landing pages as a kind of digital shopping window that encourages potential viewers to click on promoted and /or algorithmically selected content.²⁹ And, although the site offers to help choosing a film by providing

visitors with the “Unleashed Collections” tab, outside the period of the festival, the link only leads to a “this page could not be found” error. The search options reveal that – contrary to some public statements quoted above – the platform is, to a great extent, focused on the IFFR audience: apart from “Length,” “A-Z” and “Production country,” the only other search category is the “IFFR edition” (which is often different from the year of production).

These “tagging tools” and “categories” mentioned by Parvulescu and Hanzlík, and further explored by Thornton,³⁰ are also essential for this study. In the festival and distribution circuit, Latin American cinemas – as (mostly) small and (exclusively) non-Western – are often presented as *representatives of a particular national consciousness*,³¹ offering a glimpse into distant cultures and a promising insight into the unknown. Hence the widespread festival policy of obscuring complex supranational sources of film funding and complicated notions of the films’ national identity by presenting them as belonging solely to one particular, non-Western (peripheral, or even ‘exotic’) culture. In this matter, IFFR Unleashed presents a very odd approach. For example, *The Fever* is categorized as a film from Brazil – this information is presented right next to the film’s length and year of production. However, the “Countries of production” category lists Brazil, France and Germany, reflecting the factual sources of funding. This, of course, might be a result of contracts between production companies and relationships between majority and minority coproducers (or even just the decision of site designers), but the waters are muddied even more by the platform’s search option. A visitor exploring the catalogue by country of production will not find Germany in the drop-down menu, and selecting France does not result in finding *The Fever*. A similar problem would be encountered by someone aware of Nicolás Pereda’s close links to Canada and the fact that this country co-funds most of the Mexican director’s films. The catalogue profile of *Summer of Goliath* (*Verano de Goliath*, 2010) says that it is a film from Mexico, while the “Countries of production” category lists Mexico and Canada, but the latter is absent from the platform’s search option. This is also the case with other films on the platform, such as Óscar Ruiz Navía’s *Los hongos* (2014, Colombia, Argentina, France, and the German World Cinema Fund) and Ana Cristina Barragán’s *Alba* (2016, Ecuador, Mexico, Greece).

It might be relevant here to compare IFFR Unleashed to another art-cinema oriented streaming service. Niamh Thornton studied the meta-categories utilized by the platform Mubi, pointing out that *Jauja* (dir. Lisandro Alonso, 2014) *appears under Mexico because it is one of the co-producing countries despite the fact that the film is set in Denmark and Patagonia, and there is no Mexican element to the narrative.*³² This designation invites the researcher to *puzzle over national labels and to follow the financing.*³³ IFFR Unleashed follows many film festival policies: the complex production background is somehow obscured in favour of exciting ‘strangeness.’

IFFR Unleashed is a part of a multi-purpose platform of IFF Rotterdam, and a niche audiences-oriented streaming service.³⁴ It employs content curation strategies and promotional approaches similar to those utilized by art cinema festivals that often build their brands not on the commercial values of presented films, but their more ambiguous cultural merits, such as promises of an insight into another culture, preferably one from the Global South. With reasonable pricing (€4.5 for rent-

ing a film), good streaming quality, and English subtitles available, IFFR Unleashed appears to be an exceptional distribution vehicle for Latin American films supported by the Hubert Bals Fund, and the one to finally bring them to their countries of origin. However, it is difficult to disregard the fact that the platform's development appears to be somehow hindered by its close links to the IFFR (it functions as a *vertical extension of self-owned creative goods*³⁵), especially when it comes to promotion and spreading awareness about streamed films. IFFR Unleashed is practically invisible in Google search, and various streaming guides do not list it at all. The platform truly 'lives' only during the festival and is known mostly to its frequent visitors.

The fever spreads: The case of Netflix

Netflix, currently the largest and most impactful subscription VoD service worldwide, poses intriguing challenges for the field of film research, including the studies focused on Global South cinemas. Ramon Lobato enumerates some of them in a special issue of *World Cinema* journal, "World Cinema in the Age of Netflix": *What can be said about Netflix's geographically mutable libraries and the enormous and heterogeneous reservoir of texts ...? Should we approach Netflix as a distributor, producer, network, or platform? How can we reconcile Netflix's disruptive character with its equally obvious tendency to mimic and absorb business-as-usual practices?*³⁶ I would like to focus on one case study that demonstrates the potential of streaming services as a distribution vehicle for niche audiences. As mentioned above, Brazilian residents cannot watch *The Fever* on IFFR Unleashed. This is because the streaming rights for the film went to other streaming services, including Netflix; Brazil is one of the biggest markets for the platform,³⁷ and Netflix has 18 per cent of the market share, the highest percentage of any single service in the country.³⁸ The film was released in cinemas in October of the previous year (delayed from March), but the window for cinematic exhibition under COVID-19 was very small – the cinemas closed again in December.

Telling the story of an indigenous man from the Desana tribe who works in Manaus harbour, *The Fever* can be considered an example of what scholars call a "festival film." These films generally adopt a serious tone, often exhibiting austerity and minimalist aesthetics in their *mise-en-scène*. They often feature open narratives, and many focus on character portraits, emphasizing small moments over grand spectacles. Furthermore, a common approach in these films is the use of non-professional actors to capture a sense of everyday realism.³⁹ "Festival films," especially non-Western ones, often do not get a release outside a festival, but in the case of *The Fever*, it was crucial for the filmmakers to make their work available to indigenous audiences in the Brazilian interior. A specific campaign was launched to encourage indigenous people to see the film; it often involved face-to-face meetings, even in the most remote villages that one can get to only by boat.⁴⁰ Regions of the country were chosen carefully, so different indigenous peoples would be involved, Kuikuru and Tupinambá among them. But the spread of the pandemic put these plans in danger. In an interview, Maya Da-Rin has revealed: *We didn't want to tell people to go to the cinema to watch our film. So, how can you run a distribution campaign when you don't want to encourage people to do something that*

*they might not feel safe doing? It was a challenge for us, and we chose to release the film simultaneously on streaming platforms and in cinemas.*⁴¹

The Fever premiered in 2020 on Net Now, Vivo Play, and Oi Play streaming platforms, then on YouTube Films and Google Play, and finally on Netflix in February of 2021, still at the peak of the pandemic season. Considering the circumstances, the PR and marketing campaign had to go online. The scheduled interviews, as well as Q&A sessions, took the form of online junkets and the filmmakers (as well as the distributor) focused on sending links to the film to people living in indigenous communities, encouraging them to promote *The Fever* within those communities. The result was rather unexpected, considering the lack of standard promotional activities; organic debates were organized in local communities of indigenous peoples.⁴² Maya Da-Rin recalls: *I'm uncertain about the number of people who received the links and watched the film [Netflix does not share audience numbers]. I know that we received a lot of feedback from various individuals, exclaiming, "Wow, what's »The Fever« all about?" The film that has been circulating widely. For instance, an indigenous person's grandmother remarked, "What's this film that everyone is talking about?". This sentiment was echoed by many, indicating the film's significant impact on the indigenous community.*⁴³

Individuals who watched *The Fever* expressed their emotions through tears and songs, the director remembers. This suggests that perhaps for the first time ever, they experienced a sense of representation in a fiction film. What they emphasized about their viewing experience was hearing their local language spoken in the film and witnessing a portrayal of the real-life dilemmas of local peoples, usually ignored by the mainstream cinema.⁴⁴

Maya Da-Rin has pointed out various flaws of the Netflix platform, mostly that it is a paid service and its availability depends on internet access. It is important to remember that *The Fever's* case is unique because it shows how both the filmmakers and the distributor are directly using the platform's capabilities for a specific purpose: to promote the film among niche, in this case mostly indigenous, audiences. However, both the director and the distributor have observed that generally putting a film on a streaming platform means *a constant fight for visibility, a fight against algorithms.*⁴⁵ The Netflix Recommender System is an assemblage of algorithms employed to recommend content to users and tailor virtually all facets of their experience within the platform. Describing Netflix's *modus operandi*, Sarah Arnold utilizes the term "algorithmic governmentality." Originally coined by Antoinette Rouvroy and signifying *the idea of a government of the social world that is based on the algorithmic processing of big data,*⁴⁶ for Arnold it also conveys Netflix's methods of influencing viewers so their *ability to act, to determine among the totality of the Netflix service and without reference to their profile, is impeded.*⁴⁷ Hence the assertion that Netflix utilizes algorithms which *work to actively negate choice.*⁴⁸ As it is beyond the scope of this study to research a large enough control group and the ways the algorithm presents films like *The Fever* to a particular user, it is sensible to assume that the algorithm – the almighty, disembodied gatekeeper – in the majority of cases would prevent the user from watching *The Fever* if their choices do not comprise almost entirely of similar films.⁴⁹

According to Netflix's tagging policy, *The Fever* is "cerebral" and "understated," and belongs to four categories: Brazilian, Brazilian Dramas, Drama



Los hongos, dir. Óscar Ruiz Navia (2014)



La flor, dir. Mariano Llinás (2019)

Movies, and Mystery Movies. Apart from the widely discussed notion of Netflix's specifically created "altgenres,"⁵⁰ it is worth comparing the film's presentation on Netflix with that on IFFR Unleashed. The film's summary on the latter platform takes up two large paragraphs and tells the user that the protagonist is a widower and that the film's cinematography is "stunning, hypnotic, and minimalist;" it enumerates the awards *The Fever* won in Locarno (ignoring – in a way that is somehow a widespread habit among Western media – the laurels from Brazilian juries), mentions previous works of the director, and of course underlines that the Hubert Bals Fund had funded the film. The grim, inconspicuous promotional film still shows the protagonist and his daughter as she puts her hand to his forehead, checking for the eponymous fever. The film's tab on Netflix presents users with an overview more akin to a Hollywood logline,⁵¹ and a promotional still shows the protagonist with his daughter, hugging and smiling. Only by scrolling to the bottom of the page can the filmmakers' credentials be found; even so, they are restricted to the director, writers, and cast, while the altgenres (that is, Brazilian Dramas etc.) are much more prominently exposed. The comparison between Netflix and IFFR Unleashed film tabs demonstrates that the former platform is clearly more commercially oriented, and relies almost exclusively on Netflix Recommender System to suggest content to its viewers.

Continue watching? The problem of visibility

As the case of *The Fever* demonstrates, although at first glance a streaming service giant such as Netflix would seem the perfect vehicle to distribute niche cinema, a film should be carefully curated outside the platform in order to reach the desired audiences. Beyond any doubt, streaming services of various kinds pose multiple challenges to small cinemas, since, as stated by Parvulescu and Hanzlík, *digital markets, and large and deregulated global ones, are neither democratic nor quality and diversity driven. They are even less meritocratic as they tend to generate monopolies, disparities, bubbles, conformism, formulaic content, and have no protection plans for smaller players.*⁵² Those 'small players' face a number of adversities, the greatest among them being the difficulty in recovering any substantial investment in production. Researching distribution access for Peruvian filmmakers amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Jazmin Mateo and Giancarlo Gomero highlighted the possible significant expenses associated with the delivery process. This process involves preparing films and related materials like trailers and promotional images to meet the requirements of streaming services. *As this stage is the one that runs out of funds because it is the last in the post-production process,*⁵³ it might pose quite a challenge, even with postproduction money obtained from a European fund, as it already has to cover various costly procedures (including colour correction, editing, sound-mixing, and subtitling), which, according to funding requirements, often have to be conducted in Europe, generating even more costs. However, it needs to be emphasized that this is not always the case. While the biggest platforms might even require that the film is shot with particular cameras, other streaming platforms such as Mubi and many small local services

(such as +Cinemateca in Uruguay) do not impose any particularly problematic requirements on filmmakers.

Even then, the problem of visibility remains. Alex Piperno, whose *Window Boy Would Also Like to Have a Submarine* (*Chico ventana también quisiera tener un submarino*, 2020) has been available on various streaming services, notes that *the issue is that platforms usually drive only small audiences to small and medium films and the lack of visibility they might have on those platforms*.⁵⁴ This sentiment is shared by Antonella Sudasassi, who underlines that even if a film is available on a streaming service, *many times these are small platforms that people are unaware of and it is difficult to let audiences know about the availability of the film on those platforms*.⁵⁵ It is worth noting that the challenge also lies in the differences between platforms themselves: diverse layouts and payment and authentication methods might confuse viewers.⁵⁶ The director from Costa Rica notes that for small independent films, negotiating with certain platforms can be far from advantageous: *Selling the film immediately to such platforms could be unwise as they often demand rights for all territories for minimal compensation, which may not justify its availability. Moreover, algorithms tend to prioritize pricier catalogue items, reducing the chances of the film gaining visibility or being seen by a large audience. Despite being on platforms like Netflix or Amazon Prime, the film's discoverability within the platform is low, making it uncertain whether it will reach the audience*.⁵⁷

A near-paradoxical *status quo* has emerged: small platforms oriented at niche audiences lack visibility and exposure, and are difficult to sustain, while the biggest streaming players make non-commercially oriented films disappear within their vast catalogues. Nevertheless, filmmakers constantly attempt to take advantage of online distribution by putting their films on local streaming platforms (apart from the above examples, Ecuadorian *Alba* is available on the Ecuadorian service Choloplus) or even sharing their films for free on YouTube. The latter is the case of El Pampero Cine, an Argentinian collective working outside of typical film industry relationships and constraints. In an unprecedented move, they have released eight films from their catalogue *as a contribution in times of mandatory quarantine due to the coronavirus pandemic*,⁵⁸ without geolocal blockages and including the World Cinema Fund and Hubert Bals Fund backed film *La flor* (even though its director, Mariano Llinás, spoke about his “complicated feelings” regarding watching films on small screens⁵⁹). Apart from a plethora of local, privately owned streaming platforms, Latin American state schemes also attempt to create spaces for online distribution with initiatives such as Cine.ar (by INCCA, the Argentinian Film Institute), the supranational Retina Latina (a concerted effort from Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay) or cooperations with commercial services (e.g., a section of FilmIn Latino sponsored by IMCINE, the Mexican Film Institute), with some of them offering singular examples of HBF and/or WCF funded films.

The sudden and continuing rise of VoD and SVoD services, along with the constant development of stable broadband internet access, will eventually make Iordanova's claim about the *unrestrained availability of distinctive products* and the access to cultural goods for *the remote village residents* as easy as for those in the most central metropolitan locations⁶⁰ a reality. However, streaming studies will also be required to focus on more issues directly resulting from the streaming (r)evolution.

It is worth noting that, apart from the matters addressed above, the issue of digital piracy appears to be crucial: the sudden rise of illegal streaming services marks the new era of piracy and complicated tensions between copyright and availability. The current situation, however, already demonstrates that the distribution of peripheral cinema outside film festivals is a tremendous challenge – one that various funding institutions should consider, given the growing opportunities technology provides.

- ¹ *World Cinema Fund Supported Films 2004-2021*, https://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/content_stage/world_cinema_fund/wcf_booklet_2022_web.pdf (accessed: 23.07.2023).
- ² *Introducing the Dutch Film Sector*, <https://catalogus.boekman.nl/pub/P12-0354.pdf> (accessed: 23.07.2023).
- ³ G. Aguilar, M. Lacunza, N. Thornton, "Latin American Film in the Digital Age", in: *The Routledge Companion to Latin American Cinema*, eds. M. D'Lugo, A. López, L. Podalsky, Routledge, London 2017, p. 370.
- ⁴ See C. Parvulescu, J. Hanzlík, "The Peripheralization of East-Central European Film Cultures on VoD Platforms", *Illuminace* 2021, vol. 22, no. 2, 2021, pp. 5-25.
- ⁵ N. Thornton, "Bridges, Streams and Dams: The Multiple Negotiated Strategies of Distribution and Access in Latin American Cinema", in: *World Cinema on Demand: Global Film Cultures in the Era of Online Distribution*, eds. S. Baschiera, A. Fisher, Bloomsbury, New York – London 2022, pp. 47-67.
- ⁶ D. Shaw, *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham 2007, p. 4.
- ⁷ N. Thornton, op. cit., p. 51.
- ⁸ T. Falicov, *Latin American Film Industries*, Bloomsbury, London – New York 2019, p. 82.
- ⁹ D. Andrew, "An Atlas of World Cinema", in: *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film*, eds. S. Dennison, S. H. Lim, Wallflower Press, London 2004, p. 11.
- ¹⁰ *The Hubert Bals Fund Annual Report 2021-2022*, <https://iffr.com/en/annual-report-2021-2022/hubert-bals-fund-0> (accessed: 19.06.2023).
- ¹¹ Interview conducted by the author, 25.01.2021.
- ¹² Interview conducted by the author, 12.07.2022.
- ¹³ See I. Sánchez Prado, *Screening Neoliberalism: Transforming Mexican Cinema 1988-2012*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville 2014.
- ¹⁴ D. Iordanova, "Rise of the Fringe Global Cinema's Long Tail", in: *Cinema at the Periphery*, eds. D. Iordanova, D. Martin-Jones, B. Vidal, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 2010, p. 35.
- ¹⁵ Ibidem.
- ¹⁶ "Acceso y uso de Internet en América Latina y el Caribe. Resultados de las encuestas telefónicas de alta frecuencia de ALC 2021", <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-09/undp-brlac-Digital-ES.pdf>, p. 1 (accessed: 12.06.2023).
- ¹⁷ "Latin America's Digital Divide: Overcoming Persistent Gaps", <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/latin-americas-digital-divide-overcoming-persistent-gaps> (accessed: 12.06.2023).
- ¹⁸ J. Goldsmith, T. Wu, *Who Controls the Internet?: Illusions of a Borderless World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, p. viii.
- ¹⁹ "El boom del streaming en Latinoamérica, ¿cuáles son las más usadas?", <https://www.revistaeconomia.com/el-boom-del-streaming-en-latinoamerica-cuales-son-las-mas-usadas/> (accessed: 12.07.2023).
- ²⁰ M. Meimaridis, D. Mazur, D. Rios, "De São Paulo a Seúl: las estrategias de Netflix en los mercados periféricos", *Comunicación y Sociedad* 2021, vol. 18, p. 9.
- ²¹ G. Macnab, "IFFR Unleashes VoD Initiative", <https://www.screendaily.com/rotterdam/iffr-unleashes-vod-initiative/5099587.article> (accessed: 1.06.2023).
- ²² "Streaming Platform IFFR Unleashed Reflects on Promising First Seven Months", <https://press.iffr.com/168511-streaming-platform-iffr-unleashed-reflects-on-promising-first-seven-months> (accessed: 23.07.2023).
- ²³ G. Macnab, op. cit.
- ²⁴ Ibidem.
- ²⁵ Ibidem.
- ²⁶ T. Grater, "Rotterdam Launches Streaming Platform with Jarmusch, Payne, Arnold Titles", <https://www.screendaily.com/>

- news/rotterdam-launches-streaming-platform-with-jarmusch-payne-arnold-titles/5126021.article (accessed: 23.07.2023).
- ²⁷ R. Lobato, "Introduction: The New Video Geography", in: *Geoblocking and Global Video Culture*, eds. R. Lobato, J. Meese, Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam 2016, p.10.
- ²⁸ C. Parvulescu, J. Hanzlík, op. cit., p. 16.
- ²⁹ See e.g. G. Fontaine, *The Visibility of Audio-visual Works on TVoD*, <https://rm.coe.int/visibility-of-av-works-on-tvod-2019-edition/16809c8653> (accessed: 8.07.2023).
- ³⁰ N. Thornton, op. cit., pp. 54-57.
- ³¹ F. Chan, "The International Film Festival and the Making of a National Cinema", *Screen* 2011, vol. 52, no. 2, p. 255.
- ³² N. Thornton, op. cit., p. 57.
- ³³ Ibidem.
- ³⁴ For the entire classification see: H. Storstein Spilker, T. Colbjørnsen, "The Dimensions of Streaming: Toward a Typology of an Evolving Concept", *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 42, no. 7-8, pp. 1219-1220.
- ³⁵ A. D. Lotz, *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-distributed Television*, Michigan Publishing – University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor 2017, p. 40.
- ³⁶ R. Lobato, "Ways of Seeing Netflix", *Studies in World Cinema* 2022, vol. 2, no. 1-2, p. 1.
- ³⁷ M. Meimaridis, D. Mazur, D. Rios, op. cit., p. 9.
- ³⁸ M. Meimaridis, D. Mazur, D. Rios, "The Streaming Wars in the Global Periphery: A Glimpse from Brazil", *Series: International Journal of TV Serial Narratives* 2020, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 69.
- ³⁹ C. H. Wong, *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2011, pp. 75-83.
- ⁴⁰ Comunicação PUC-Rio, *Cine Debate: "A Febre"*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBbwZ_p29iQ (accessed: 8.08.2023).
- ⁴¹ Interview conducted by the author, 16.06.2023.
- ⁴² Comunicação PUC-Rio, op. cit.
- ⁴³ Interview conducted by the author, 16.06.2023.
- ⁴⁴ Ibidem.
- ⁴⁵ Comunicação PUC-Rio, op. cit.
- ⁴⁶ A. Rouvroy, "Algorithmic Governmentality and the Death of Politics", <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/algorithmic-governmentality-and-the-death-of-politics/> (accessed: 8.08.2023).
- ⁴⁷ S. Arnold, "Netflix and the Myth of Choice/Participation/Autonomy", in: *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, eds. K. McDonald, D. Smiths-Rowsey, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2016, p. 59.
- ⁴⁸ Ibidem.
- ⁴⁹ See the experiment conducted by N. Pajkovic: "Algorithms and Taste-Making: Exposing the Netflix Recommender System's Operational Logics" in: *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 2021, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 215-235.
- ⁵⁰ F. Gaw, "Algorithmic Logics and the Construction of Cultural Taste of the Netflix Recommender System", *Media, Culture and Society* 2012, vol. 44, no. 4, pp. 706-725.
- ⁵¹ *After years of working in the city, an indigenous man starts to question his environment as his daughter prepares to leave home for medical school.*
- ⁵² C. Parvulescu, J. Hanzlík, op. cit., p. 21.
- ⁵³ J. Mateo, G. Gómero, "Independent Films and Streaming Platforms: Access Difficulties for Peruvian Filmmakers", *International Conference on Information Technology and Systems*, eds. A. Rocha, C. Ferrás, A. Méndez-Porras, E. Jimenez Delgado, Springer, Cham 2018, pp. 567-568.
- ⁵⁴ Interview conducted by the author, 21.07.2021.
- ⁵⁵ Interview conducted by the author, 12.07.2022.
- ⁵⁶ Comunicação PUC-Rio, op. cit.
- ⁵⁷ Interview conducted by the author, 12.07.2022.
- ⁵⁸ "Streaming: El Pampero Cine liberó casi toda su filmografía, incluida *La Flor*, de Mariano Llinás", <https://www.otroscines.com/nota?idnota=15584> (accessed: 23.08.2023)
- ⁵⁹ "Mariano Llinás: *A Thierry Frémaux yo creo que ya no le gustan las momias*", <https://www.paris-barcelona.com/es/mariano-llinas-a-thierry-fremaux-jo-crec-que-ja-no-li-agraden-les-momias-2/> (accessed: 23.08.2023).
- ⁶⁰ D. Iordanova, op. cit., p. 35.

Bolesław Racięski

Assistant Professor at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” at the University of Warsaw. He is in charge of the research project “In Search of Authenticity: Exploring Problematic Relationships Between Latin American Filmmakers and European Film Funds,” funded by the Polish National Science Centre.

Bibliography

- Aguilar, G., Lacunza, M., Thornton, N.** (2017). Latin American Film in the Digital Age. In: M. D'Lugo, A. López, L. Podalsky (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Latin American Cinema* (pp. 358-374). London: Routledge.
- Andrew, D.** (2004). An Atlas of World Cinema. In: S. Dennison, S. H. Lim (eds.), *Re-mapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film* (pp. 19-29). London: Wallflower Press.
- Arnold, S.** (2016). Netflix and the Myth of Choice/Participation/Autonomy. In: K. McDonald, D. Smiths-Rowsey (eds.), *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century* (pp. 49-62). New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Chan, F.** (2011). The International Film Festival and the Making of a National Cinema. *Screen*, 52 (2), pp. 253-260.
- Falicov, T.** (2019). *Latin American Film Industries*. London – New York: Bloomsbury.
- Gaw, F.** (2012). Algorithmic Logics and the Construction of Cultural Taste of the Netflix Recommender System. *Media, Culture and Society*, 44 (4), pp. 706-725.
- Goldsmith, J., Wu, T.** (2006). *Who Controls the Internet?: Illusions of a Borderless World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grater, T.** (2018, January 29). *Rotterdam Launches Streaming Platform with Jarmusch, Payne, Arnold Titles*. ScreenDaily.com. <https://www.screendaily.com/news/rotterdam-launches-streaming-platform-with-jarmusch-payne-arnold-titles/5126021.article>
- The Hubert Bals Fund Annual Report 2021-2022** (2022). Iffr.com. <https://iffr.com/en/annual-report-2021-2022/hubert-bals-fund-0>
- Introducing the Dutch Film Sector** (2012). CatalogusBoekman.nl. <https://catalogus.boekman.nl/pub/P12-0354.pdf>
- Iordanova, D.** (2010). Rise of the Fringe Global Cinema's Long Tail. In: D. Iordanova, D. Martin-Jones, B. Vidal (eds.), *Cinema at the Periphery* (pp. 23-45). Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Lobato, R.** (2022). Ways of Seeing Netflix. *Studies in World Cinema*, 2 (1-2), pp. 1-3.
- Lotz, A. D.** (2017). *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-distributed Television*. Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing – University of Michigan Library. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9699689>
- Macnab, G.** (2016, January 31). *IFFR Unleashes VoD Initiative*. ScreenDaily.com. <https://www.screendaily.com/rotterdam/iffr-unleashes-vod-initiative/5099587.article>
- Mateo, J., Gomero, G.** (2018). Independent Films and Streaming Platforms: Access Difficulties for Peruvian Filmmakers. In: A. Rocha, C. Ferrás, A. Méndez-Porras,

- E. Jimenez Delgado (eds.), *International Conference on Information Technology and Systems* (pp. 562-571). Cham: Springer.
- Parvulescu, C., Hanzlík, J.** (2021). The Peripheralization of East-Central European Film Cultures on VoD Platforms. *Iluminace*, 22 (2), pp. 5-25.
- Rouvroy, A.** (2020, March 27). *Algorithmic Governmentality and the Death of Politics*. GreenEuropeanJournal.eu. <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/algorithmic-governmentality-and-the-death-of-politics/>
- Shaw, D.** (2007). *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Streaming: El Pampero Cine liberó casi toda su filmografía, incluida "La Flor", de Mariano Linás** (2020). OtrosCines.com. <https://www.otroscines.com/nota?idnota=15584>
- Thornton, N.** (2022). Bridges, Streams and Dams: The Multiple Negotiated Strategies of Distribution and Access in Latin American Cinema. In: S. Baschiera, A. Fisher (eds.), *World Cinema on Demand: Global Film Cultures in the Era of Online Distribution* (pp. 47-67). New York – London: Bloomsbury.
- World Cinema Fund Supported Films 2004-2021** (2022). KulturstiftungDesBundes.de. https://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/content_stage/world_cinema_fund/wcf_booklet_2022_web.pdf

Słowa kluczowe:
Europejskie fundusze
filmowe;
Hubert Bals Fund;
kinematografie
latynoamerykańskie;
streaming;
dystrybucja

Abstrakt

Bolesław Racięski

Zagubione w strumieniu. Internetowa dystrybucja filmów latynoamerykańskich współfinansowanych przez fundusze europejskie – zarys

Celem artykułu jest ocena wpływu stale rozwijających się internetowych serwisów SVoD i VoD na dostępność filmów z Ameryki Łacińskiej, współfinansowanych przez Hubert Bals Fund i World Cinema Fund. Filmy te są prezentowane przede wszystkim na prestiżowych festiwalach międzynarodowych, ale niezwykle rzadko docierają do krajów, w których powstały. Ten brak lokalnej dystrybucji jest znacznym problemem, tym bardziej że fundusze otwarcie wyrażają chęć wspierania lokalnych branż filmowych. Po krótkim przedstawieniu sytuacji usług streamingowych w Ameryce Łacińskiej autor przygląda się platformie Unleashed, powiązanej z Hubert Bals Fund, analizuje stosowane przez nią metody przedstawiania wybranych filmów, aby określić, jak są one pozycjonowane w kontekście warunków produkcji, a następnie bada, w jaki sposób Netflix może służyć jako kanał dystrybucji dla kina niszowego, posługując się studium przypadku filmu *Gorączka* (*A febre*, reż. Maya Da-Rin, 2019) i jego dystrybucji podczas pandemii COVID-19. Zastosowane tu podejście badawcze opiera się na metodach jakościowych, w szczególności wywiadach, i czerpie z rozwijającej się dziedziny *streaming studies*.