Cinephilia, Take Three?: Availability, Reliability, and Disenchantment in the Streaming Era

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Abstract:

This article proposes a modified reading of Thomas Elsaesser's (2005) theories of cinephilia, taking into account the new viewing practices established by the rise of online media streaming. Elsaesser characterised early film culture (labelled as 'take one') as rooted in celluloid and marked by a longing to view films that were not always easily available. By contrast, his characterisation of the later 'take two' era is one in which each new distribution technology (television, VHS, and

so on) promises greater abundance and convenience, to the point where this new generation of cinephiles – in response to the widespread success of DVD – were perceived as having to deal with the 'anachronisms generated by total availability' (Elsaesser, 2005: 38-40). Amanda D. Lotz (2022: 40) argues that streaming services appear to provide an extension of the 'take two' ideal, offering assurances of 'availability (on-demand libraries with many choices) and reliability (you don't have to watch it now or it's gone)'. I suggest, however, that the underlying impermanence of streaming has prompted fears related to both access and ownership, marking a break from the expectations surrounding the DVD (as well as its successors Blu-ray and 4K Ultra HD). The impact of content migration – fracturing access between a greater number of paid platforms – and particularly content delisting – the outright removal of access to a given text – can place certain works in a form of limbo. This article proposes the dawn of a new generation of cinephilia – a potential take three – marked by a newfound concern of ephemerality, albeit much more potential and localised than the widespread unavailability of the take one era. In essence, then, take three wrestles with the anachronisms of loss in a media landscape that, in many other ways, offers unprecedented levels of access to film and television content.

In his influential 2005 essay, the late Thomas Elsaesser makes a distinction between two major generational eras of cinephiles, delineated as 'take one' and 'take two'. The first generation showed a marked preference for the theatrical experience and the material authenticity of celluloid, with proponents at once lamenting, yet also fetishising, the limited and fleeting opportunities to view films (particularly canonical entries, as dictated by auteur theory) in this state. By contrast,

Elsaesser (2005: 38) argues that the comparative ease with which one could choose to engage with cinema and media by the early twenty-first century – spread across a range of different technologies, contexts, and spaces – required a re-definition of cinephile practices: 'what does it mean that the loved object is no longer an immaterial experience, an encounter stolen from the tyranny of irreversible time, but can now be touched and handled physically, stored and collected, in the form of a videotape or disk?'. While take one devotees 'valued the film as much for the effort it took to catch it on its first release or its single showing at a retrospective, as for the spiritual revelation, the sheer aesthetic pleasure or somatic engagement it promised at such a screening', the take two cinephile instead was required to negotiate the 'anachronisms generated by total availability, by the fact that the whole of film history is henceforth present in the here-and-now' (Elsaesser, 2005: 38-39). Although Elsaesser does make brief reference to computer downloads and Internet access, his conception of take two appears particularly influenced by the then-dominant DVD format, which had fostered a strong 'sell-through' market in many global territories, and – at the time of the essay's publication – was at its commercial mainstream peak (Klinger, 2008: 19, 26; Nelson, 2014: 63). In subsequent years, the rise of online streaming has again significantly altered the home video experience, with portals such as Netflix and Disney+ shifting a great deal of distribution and consumption towards a 'bundle' subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) model, in which users pay a fee for limited-term access to a library of content (Lotz, 2022: 147).

I am proposing, therefore, that the distinctive attributes of the Internet age require a new categorisation: a potential 'take three' (if I may be so bold as to build upon Elsaesser's seminal work).[1] Elsaesser (2005: 32-35) argues that cinephilia, in all of its forms, is marked by feelings of 'disenchantment', and 'the ever-present possibility of disappointment' about the very nature of

cinephilia itself, likening his own experiences to that of a struggle with religious belief. Sarah Keller (2020: 12) suggests that such ruptures 'may be most readily found in a changing media environment' and, indeed, Elsaesser's own conceptualisation of a second generation runs parallel with a period of significant technological change, as well as the new taste cultures (and accompanying splinterings of the 'faith') that emerged in response. Amanda D. Lotz (2022: 40) posits that the 'new viewing practices' established by SVOD platforms are built around concepts of '*availability* (on-demand libraries with many choices) and *reliability* (you don't have to watch it now or it's gone)'. Despite such assurances, however, the growing consumer reliance upon streaming has prompted fears of ephemerality related to both access and ownership, marking a break from the expectations surrounding the DVD (as well as its successors Blu-ray and 4K Ultra HD). It is an examination of these central tenets of availability and reliability that will form the basis of this article.

The notion of a distinctive third stage of cinephilia is admittedly complicated by the continued debates over the legitimacy of *any* concept of the cinephile beyond that of its first incarnation. Jason Sperb (2012: 76) suggests that one can posit a definition of new cinephilia 'in its crudest possible iteration' as simply 'a love of watching movies'. He acknowledges, however, that many traditional cinephiles 'hate such a vague definition, and further resent how this conception of the term has gained a certain amount of traction in popular film criticism today – simply, and not inaccurately, because it's watered down to the point of being meaningless (not to mention, "common")'. The critic Susan Sontag, for instance, infamously proclaimed in 1996 that cinephilia was 'dead', displaying an apparent unwillingness to countenance the modes of non-celluloid-based 'cine-love' that were being embraced by a new generation of viewers. Even Elsaesser (2005: 40), in sketching the boundaries of take two, expresses reservations that the

changing landscape of filmic consumption may have exceeded the boundaries of a workable conception of cinephilia. By contrast, and in response to the growing popularity of DVD, the journalist Elvis Mitchell argued that 'everyone's a film geek now', suggesting that the once-elitist community of the cinephile had – by 2003 – evolved into a more democratic, open concept of membership. The increased prominence of home video has undoubtedly collapsed boundaries between different types of media – and even different taste cultures – that were previously seen to exist in isolation from one another. Indeed, Lotz (2022: 16) has recently gone so far as to argue that, in the twenty-first century media landscape, 'it is not clear that [even…] "movie" and "television series" remain *industrial subcategories* with nearly the usefulness as was once the case'.

For the purposes of this essay, then, the broadest interpretation of a new cinephilia will be privileged, one which acknowledges the looser material and philosophical conceptions of what it constitutes to engage with a 'film'. In the take two era (and beyond), the interests of the videophile and even the telephile share a significant amount of common ground with the previously distinct category of the cinephile. There is certainly truth in James Quandt's (2009: 209) lament that the new cinephilia 'champion[s] ubiquity over purity', but – from a modern perspective – one may view this with greater ambivalence than the original author, or even interpret such a development as an improvement over the gatekeeping of the past. At its most utopian, take two cinephilia was celebrated for allowing access to a broader, more inclusive canon, one which had 'become adeptly cross-cultural [and] diverse' – responding not just to the auteurist preferences of take one, but also recognising and serving many previously marginalised texts and audience groups (Ng, 2005: 70; see also Shambu, 2020: 6).

In offering a more sympathetic vision of take two – once the source of so much cinephilic anxiety for an earlier generation – I suggest that many of its seemingly revolutionary changes have, over time, become largely normalised. As we navigate this new period of technological and cultural change – the streaming era that I am positing as take three – there are many aspects of the DVD experience that are now themselves becoming fetishised and even mourned, much as Elsaesser's 2005 article wistfully expresses his own longings for the aspects of take one cinephilia that appeared in danger of being eradicated by the second generation. In this regard, Elsaesser (2005: 40) is extremely prescient in his claim that 'cinephilia, of whatever form, […] is a crisis of memory', and thus the disenchantment of any given generation is rooted in a sense of nostalgia; a romanticisation or mis-remembering (intentional or not) of what has been lost and gained in the transition of one stage of cinephilia to the next. Online streaming, building upon the take two home video formats that precede it, requires viewers to contend with an even greater range of potential viewing options, though changes the way that users can discover and interact with these materials. At the same time, a number of recent reports involving content being removed from streaming libraries, increasingly without a clear promise of the material being made available on alternative platforms, creates an environment in which the long-term availability and reliability of any *specific* text appears less assured than over the last couple of decades. Take three cinephilia thus has parallels with its take one counterpart in reviving a (nonetheless mutated) sense of uncertainty and longing: attributes that, in the interim period, the take two era had seemingly promised to all but eradicate.

It must be emphasised that, even at the supposed apex of the second generation, any claims of 'total availability' were themselves an anachronism.[2] Nonetheless, the second half of the twentieth century, and the beginning of the twenty-first, is marked by a fairly linear trajectory in

which each new mainstream home video distribution technology was positioned as offering a greater breadth of access to an accumulated media history. The advent of television offered the first major remediation of cinematic content – creating newfound opportunities to (re-)view archival films – albeit still possessing much of the ephemerality of the 'take one' era, with broadcasts initially only accessible in the moment and presented as part of a linear schedule. Jason Sperb and Scott Balcerzak (2009: 19), with reference to the scholar James Morrison, argue that the widespread adoption of the video recorder marked the more permanent change to the 'nature of cinephilia' in its second generation, consolidating consumer desires 'not just to possess movies but also to watch them when, where, and however they chose' (Greenberg, 2008: 1-2). The LaserDisc format, and then the DVD (the mainstream successor to VHS, due in part to its relative portability and lower cost), helped to open a global marketplace for committed cinephiles. Jonathan Rosenbaum praised the role of 'multiregional DVDs and players' in allowing fans 'to easily order films from the other side of the world', noting (for instance), his purchase of a French edition of *Johnny Guitar* (1954) rather than having to wait for a release in his home country (Rosenbaum and Martin, 2003: viii; Quintín et al., 2003: 185). The ability to add multiple audio and/or subtitle options to a disc further contributed to the possibility of being able to engage with cinema history from a range of different territories, reducing the language barriers inherent with earlier formats.

The rise of Internet distribution – freed from the restrictions of a linear broadcast schedule, or the literal shelf space needed to store physical media – initially came with elaborate assurances of 'advanc[ing] what VCR and DVR recording and DVD […] began to allow' in terms of access (Lotz, 2017: 15). Lucas Hildebrand (2009: 230), similarly, suggests that online platforms have 'accelerated and exaggerated [the] expectations for availability' that began with the popularisation

of the videotape. This range of choice is further compounded by the stated flexibility of many of these online services, permitting viewing on everything from conventional television sets to computers, games consoles, and even devices that could be taken outside of the home. If, as Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (2005: 13) suggest, take one and take two cinephiles were often respectively stereotyped in terms of binary preferences for '"going out" versus "staying in"', then the rise of streaming – bridging the gap between take two and three – is marked by the promise of fluidity and mobility, allowing users to consume material in a variety of different spaces and contexts.[3]

Elsaesser (2005: 40) notes that the take two generation of cinephile, faced with the potential barrage of viewing options, addressed this conundrum in part by becoming collectors and connoisseurs of physical media. As Barbara Klinger (2006: 56) elaborates, the organisation of one's own personal library was enshrined as a 'significant activity' of this new cinephilia, with the individual 'archivist' aspiring to a 'sense of mastery over a private universe'. In the Internet age, however, rather than the user building a personal, bespoke collection of individual titles (likely obtained piecemeal over time), the SVOD service instead offers instant access to a wealth of material, providing a maximised – and potentially insurmountable – evocation of what Elsaesser (2005: 39) describes as 'too much/all at once'. Patrick Vonderau (2015: 726, 729) argues that while such concerns as 'choice fatigue and oversearch' are not entirely new symptoms – one could certainly feel overwhelmed in the video stores of the take two era, or while scrolling through the numerous channels of cable television – these anxieties have been exacerbated by the delivery mechanisms of the digital archive, which both facilitate and frustrate one's ability to explore and organise the included content. Most of the offered material is not immediately visible from the homepage or main section of the app – indeed, given the sheer abundance offered by portals such

as Netflix and Disney+, it is unlikely that many (if any) users will even engage with the metadata showing the full extent of a service's archive, let alone be able to actually watch everything. As Vonderau (2015: 729) suggests, then, 'what seems new' about the streaming era 'is the increasing amount of rubbish: more films are made available yet do not properly circulate, remaining waste that is deeply buried in storage'. The physical media collector may well possess more content in a collection than could conceivably be consumed within his or her mortal lifespan, while a DVD producer may have overestimated demand for an item (resulting in the creation of actual landfill). In an online marketplace, however, the waste becomes at once less tangible – proving both functionally and physically invisible – but also, in a more abstract, collective sense, a new potential source of disenchantment: a reminder of one's ever-growing inability to master the totality of the archive.

To an extent, the necessarily partial engagement with a portal's content is promoted as a feature, rather than a bug, of the streaming experience. Although not everything on a given platform might be to the individual user's taste, the ability to select content on-demand, rather than dealing with the linear flow of broadcast television, enables a level of customisation that could not be fully exploited by past subscription-based technologies, and which serves as a potential replacement for the collector mentality of the DVD era. Services such as Netflix have thus far been characterised as adopting a '"conglomerated niche" strategy', aiming to consolidate a profitable subscriber base by offering a range of different types of content that will each attract a different type of audience, rather than consistently promoting singular texts that are trying to appeal to many groups simultaneously (Lotz, 2017: 26). The hedonistic implication of the streaming era, then, is not just that the user has access to an abundance of viewing material, but that – within the catalogue as a whole – there will be a wide array of relevant, targeted content to serve any particular cinephile

preference. In essence, one person's 'waste' may be another's primary source of engagement with the platform.

Putting aside (at least temporarily) the question as to whether all audiences are adequately served by the major streaming services, there remains debate regarding the methods used to drive consumers towards the different types of niche content. Most portals allow users the ability to search the collection in some form, as well as build lists of films and TV shows to facilitate future viewing. However, streaming has placed much more of an emphasis on aggregation and algorithmic recommendation, in which the system itself generates a personalised set of choices – scraped from the portal's archive, and given particular prominence on the home page as well as between programming – based on data gathered from the individual's previous usage of the platform. Sarah Arnold (2016: 50, 59, 57) suggests tha**t,** although such features are 'framed as in service of the audience', algorithms often 'work to actively negate choice' by compartmentalising and assigning users 'to specific – often socially overdetermined – identities'. Neta Alexander (2016: 89), drawing on the work of Eli Pariser, highlights the risk of the 'filter bubble paradox', in which users are constantly pushed to consume material of a similar type, rather than encountering anything outside of their 'comfort zone'. Furthermore, a subscription service is usually only primed towards pushing content that it can actually offer, rather than what the user may really want and could potentially find elsewhere. Such limitations would seemingly be an anathema to cinephilia of either previous generation, given the desire to explore and/or expand the canon through engaging with a range of idiosyncratic films.

Caetlin Benson-Allott (2021: 55-56, 51) thus argues that automation generates a new form of viewer engagement unique to the streaming age, one which

encourages physically and mentally passive consumption. The easiest way to keep watching a streaming service is to just do nothing and let the platform plan your viewing for you. This may lead to binging, but it also suggests a certain spectatorial transience via indifference. Locked in an eternal present, the viewer moves through their entertainments without interruption or the opportunity for reflection. […This framing] encourages transient enjoyment rather than deep analysis, the kind of analysis that would engage cultural, industrial, aesthetic, or political histories.

Such claims risk being rather alarmist, and fail to account for the continued agency of the user, who may still – in the face of automation – discover the existence of films and/or subsequently reflect upon them via other paratextual means, much the same as in any previous generation.[4] Benson-Allott's comments are nonetheless extremely helpful in highlighting that 'transient viewing' – or what Casey J. McCormick (2016: 103) similarly describes as 'smooth binging'– tends to be the default mode proffered by most streaming platforms, unless the viewer reacts against it, with the software facilitating the ceding of control over certain aspects of the curation and viewing process in favour of the undoubted pleasures of continuous flow. While binge-watching was certainly possible on DVD, several of the format's other features were seen to offer the potential for more contemplative study. As Jo T. Smith notes (2008: 140), with reference to the scholarship of Laura Mulvey, the use of 'freeze-frame, the scan feature and slow motion […] enable the spectator to "possess" the film image more definitively, thus leading to enhanced forms of cinephilia'. Such elements have tended to be downplayed on streaming services: while one is usually given rudimentary options to pause, rewind, and fast-forward, these rarely permit the same level of precision previously offered on disc-based media. The ability to take screengrabs, or

excerpt clips, from subscription-based streaming services is often obfuscated, if not entirely prohibited, by digital rights management (DRM) technology (Baker-Whitelaw, 2022). The updatable nature of digital portals means that user interfaces are always capable of receiving new functionality – Netflix, for instance, added a playback option in August 2020, allowing viewers to 'speed-watch or slow down films and television shows' (Alexander, 2021: 52) – but the general scholarly consensus is that streaming has tended to rely upon the lure of ubiquity and automation to cloak the underlying changes to the user experience from that of the take two generation (see, for instance, Tryon 2013: 4; Elkins, 2019: 80).

The emphasis on 'smooth binging' also has the potential to impact the range of viewing options that are made available for consumption, particularly in relation to problematic archival texts. The DVD format's ability to 'annotate' the work – through disclaimers on the packaging and on the disc itself, through analytical extra features, and so on – helped to establish a 'rhetorical difference' between the intentions of the original filmmakers and the studio distributing the work in the present day (Benson-Allott, 2013: 177). This enabled the issuing of numerous controversial works on DVD, often in an uncut form, that had been unavailable via broadcast television and/or VHS. The size of the customer base at the height of DVD's popularity even, at times, permitted the release of multiple cuts of individual films, either as part of the same volume or separated into differentiated products. The ability for consumers to navigate between a version aimed at general audiences (usually with any particularly contentious material removed) or another targeted more overtly towards the cinephile, furthered the promises of choice in the take two era (Church, 2015; McGowan, 2018). Compared, then, to the titles individually curated and sold on DVD – which require users to be at least somewhat active in the process of engaging with a given text – the subscription streaming service tends towards making its entire library of content open to everyone

(save for the implementation of parental controls), and usually does not include multiple versions of a film or programme. As such, online platforms appear less equipped to handle the complexity of framing 'difficult' content – or, more pointedly, the parent companies offering these services appear less willing than in the DVD era to assume the risk and attempt to find workable solutions. The underlying portal technology is certainly capable of annotation and/or creating subsections within a catalogue to separate certain texts from the wider collection, but streamers have increasingly tended towards editing material or omitting a work in its entirety.[5]

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, for instance, a number of services removed episodes of several popular sitcoms – including *Scrubs* (2001-2010), *30 Rock* (2006-2013), and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005-) – due to characters appearing in blackface, rendering the online 'boxsets' of these series incomplete (Alter, 2020). In June 2023, it was discovered that the version of *The French Connection* (1971) available on streaming platforms, including the cinephile-focused Criterion Channel, now contains an abrupt jump cut to excise slurs uttered by the lead character. This generated a heated debate online, with many respondents condemning the decision to alter the film, and demanding the reinstatement of the original cut (Aubrey, 2023). On a broader level – moving beyond the specifics of the above examples – there are undoubtedly questions to be raised in the take three era regarding the cinephilic desire (and sense of entitlement) to continue to engage with an archive that has frequently proven itself to be racist, sexist, and exclusionary. Nonetheless, the degree to which streaming services should be the primary 'gatekeepers of access and curators of taste' (Verheul, 2020: 58) when it comes to such material remains an area of valid contention, especially if such decisions are made out of financial prudence – a desire not to harm the wider 'brand' – rather than through more open discussion with relevant audiences and cultural groups.

If the 'censorship' of content has proven to be one of the most visible – and highly debated – disenchantments of the online era, it is the more mundane reality of copyright and licencing costs that establishes the primary barrier to the continued availability and reliability of most video material (Lotz, 2017: 24).[6] Evan Elkins (2019: 80, 77) argues that a significant form of gatekeeping exists through the practice of geoblocking, which establishes a new set of digital boundaries that determine where and when content can be consumed:

> Geoblocking generally operates through technologies that block user's access to a platform based on their Internet Protocol (IP) address, the unique number assigned to each device connected to the internet. Because IP addresses indicate users' geographic locations, platforms can measure them against databases of IP addresses to determine how to respond. If the IP address indicates that the user is connecting from a country where the platform is allowed, the user gains access; if not, the user is blocked.

A streaming service could theoretically be available in any part of the world – save for instances where a government or Internet provider may intervene – but the company may only have permissions to distribute certain pieces of content in a particular region. To ensure that the rightsholder can still exploit the property in other territories, the portal must take action to prevent non-authorised consumers from using the service. Such issues have thus created fractured and uncertain access: for instance, HBO content can be streamed in the United States via Warner Bros. Discovery's Max, a portal which is not currently accessible in the United Kingdom. Some of this programming is available in the UK through the NOW platform, but there are certain texts from HBO's catalogue which cannot be streamed and – due to geoblocking – users from this region are

also unable to subscribe to Max outside of its host country to engage with this 'missing' material. While a number of streaming portals (such as Netflix and Disney+) now position themselves as global brands, the actual library of content available to the user may vary significantly depending on the location from which the service is accessed (Lobato, 2019: 14). As Elkins (2019: 80) notes, although 'these issues are indicative of broader forces of market and infrastructure, […] they also bring out more banal feelings of frustration and discrimination'. Building on the work of Peter Urquhart and Ira Wagman, Elkins argues that geoblocking also has 'softer, complex, and identity-based dimensions – namely how regional lockout reminds people of where they stand in global cultural hierarchies'.

Although many previous technologies, including DVD and Blu-ray, have also involved forms of region coding, these barriers could often be overcome (at least by knowledgeable users) with a permanent hardware fix, such as a modified player. Geolocking can also be challenged in the online age with the use of a virtual private network (VPN), which masks 'a user's IP address and [can] trick a [streaming] platform into thinking that she is connecting from [a different] country' (Elkins, 2019: 81). The latter solution remains more precarious, however: while there would be little justification for a company to confiscate one's multiregion DVD player and collection of discs after purchase, streaming services continue to undertake measures to block the continued effectiveness of VPNs. There is no guarantee that a VPN that can currently force access to a different territory's streaming library will still be able to perform this function at a future date.

As the streaming industry has developed, however, the availability of content has proven to be increasingly impermanent even *within* a particular region. The initial catalogue of Netflix's streaming platform, for instance, was inherently unstable since all of the content was licenced from other companies. The success of the service has, over time, encouraged many of these rightsholders

to re-evaluate the worth of their archives, leading to instances of material being removed from Netflix in an attempt to find a more lucrative deal elsewhere (Biesen, 2019: 47). A number of the biggest studios have created new vertical integration opportunities by launching their own streaming services which has, in turn, often involved the liberation of archival content from any previous licencing agreements in order to bolster the offerings of these new platforms. The anxiety about loss of content – from the user perspective, at least – is highlighted by the growing existence of third-party website and social media services that report on the expiry of titles on the major streaming portals (Tryon, 2013: 41, 21). The claims of reliability – that 'you don't have to watch it now or it's gone', to reiterate Lotz's description – have been tested and increasingly found wanting. For the most part, though, existing scholarship on the phenomenon has tended to discuss this in relation to content migration – where material transfers from one service to another – rather than the outright loss of access in any form (see, for instance, Tryon, 2013: 21, 42; Biesen, 2019: 46-47). The inferred promise of legacy corporations – such as Disney, Warner Bros., and Paramount – in creating their own separate and increasingly globalised portals was that, moving forward, there would be *fewer* concerns about content expiring. Compared to the early years of Netflix and its reliance on time-limited external partnerships, the implication is that these services would focus more on exploiting owned intellectual property and archival material (and, indeed, even Netflix itself has subsequently placed more emphasis on producing original content as a means of establishing a more constant base catalogue).[7]

The assertion that most content is still conveniently available online in some form, when libraries are increasingly fractured across a range of different pay-to-access subscription services, speaks to another source of disenchantment within the take three era. As more of the major conglomerates create their own portals, the ability to choose from a wide range of different

streaming content – although technically possible – becomes less economically viable for many users. While access in any cinephile generation has been reliant on various forms of privilege, especially related to financial and geographical mobility, the streaming marketplace establishes further roadblocks. The rental or purchase of DVDs, for instance, rarely tied customers into a particular consumption loop: opting for a Warner Bros. film, say, would not usually limit one from subsequently choosing a Disney movie, or a Paramount production.[8] By contrast, in selling access to a library rather than individual works, online streaming restricts user choice to a specific ecosystem, based more overtly around a singular corporate agenda and collection of archival holdings. Paying for a service such as Max (especially for those unable or unwilling to consider multiple subscriptions) comes with a substantial opportunity cost, in which the user is foregoing access to other content in favour of an abundance of Warner Bros. Discovery-owned material.

The streaming landscape – dominated by legacy corporations such as Disney, and a handful of upstarts including Netflix – has been likened to a maximised version of the 'classic Hollywood' system, where studios engaged in practices such as block booking (forcing cinemas to take a package of films, instead of having the freedom to choose individual movies), before government intervention deemed this level of control to be anti-competitive and unlawful. Michelle Leigh Farrell (2021: 191) argues that the offering of exclusive streaming content, bundled as part of a wider catalogue of media texts, and locked behind a subscription paywall, 'does give one pause over the prospect of a return to a single media company's vertically integrated control over production, distribution, and exhibition', especially as the regulation of the digital marketplace appears to be lagging behind that of (comparatively) 'old media' industries such as cable broadcasting. Consumers can, in theory, cancel one service and join another, potentially jumping from portal to portal and maximising the short-term access obtained from each in succession: a

process known in the industry as 'churn' (Lotz, 2017: 45). Streaming companies have tried to dissuade such practices, however, at times even providing incentives for customer retention: Disney+, along with several other providers, offers a discount on an annual subscription when payment is made upfront, encouraging users to save money by sacrificing the monthly opportunity to cancel the service in favour of a competing platform.

The take two goal of broadening the canon thus faces considerable resistance as 'the provision of culture' is increasingly structured around a small group of platforms, the majority of which are now focused on exploiting their own products, rather than offering a truly diverse set of choices (Crawford, 2021: 14). Tryon (2013: 4), referring to the work of Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, and Anthony Freitas, draws comparisons between the respective trajectories of cable television and streaming. In the case of the former, during the early years of the service 'viewers were offered a wide array of channel choices' and – in another parallel to the classical studio era of Hollywood cinema – 'an escape from the "oligopolistic" stranglehold of the major broadcast networks. Further, the increased number of channels was also supposed to open up new opportunities for independent broadcasters to produce content that could be tailored to niche audiences that might have been underserved' by traditional free-to-air television. Such promise, however, was ultimately short-lived, with 'most cable channels [eventually] being owned by one of the major media conglomerates'. Many of these stations slowly diluted or even abandoned their initial remit in the pursuit of larger audiences: as June Deery (2015: 16) notes, 'TLC used to be The Learning Channel, Bravo used to be a fairly high-brow (ad-free) arts and drama broadcaster, and the History Channel focused on historical archives', but each has ultimately shifted towards offering cheaper, often more sensationalist content such as game shows and reality television.

Streaming has endured similar transformations: while many of the corporate services have not entirely abandoned the 'conglomerated niche' approach, the push to expand profits and diminish churn has led to certain audiences and content types being prioritised over others. Sheri Chinen Biesen (2016; 2019), for instance, notes that while it was once – in the early years of the platform – possible to binge a wide range of classic noir films as part of Netflix's American streaming library, the company no longer offers a particularly strong catalogue of older films, with a greater focus now placed upon its roster of modern, 'original' programming. Just as region locking creates a sense of imbalanced global hierarchies, the precarious level of support for a particular subculture within the streaming landscape serves as yet another form of disenchantment for the take three generation. As Lotz (2023: 25) suggests, perceived gaps in the marketplace have fostered the existence of some SVODs built 'around a single content niche' offering 'fewer titles but significant depth in particular types of content'. Such attempts are nonetheless reflective of the challenges inherent in competing with the volume-based offerings of the major services. For instance, the world cinema-focused portal MUBI was created in 2007, after the founder Efe Çakarel found that he was unable to find any means of streaming the film *In the Mood for Love* (2000) while on a trip to Japan (Thornton, 2022: 55). Although MUBI initially aimed to provide a growing archive, since 2012 the service instead 'only offers thirty films at a time, changing them regularly'; an act which Niamh Thornton (2022: 50, 55) argues fails to deliver what had been promised in the company's 'foundational narrative'. In the United States, the Criterion Channel (which launched as a standalone service in 2019) also relies heavily (though not exclusively) upon time-limited licenced content as a means of temporarily expanding choice. Both services attempt to reframe the fleeting nature of the library in relation to cinephile practices of generations past, placing an emphasis on human curation, rather than viewing choices being driven by an automated

aggregator. Films are often grouped into themed 'festivals' or retrospectives – almost as if one is entering a virtual repertory theatre – while the Criterion Channel also recalls take two sensibilities in continuing to offer contextualising bonus features. As Roderik Smits and E. W. Nikdel (2019: 26) suggest, however, such gestures are often 'borne out of economic necessity'. The use of ephemerality 'as a badge of exclusivity[, or as] an incentive to engage with the content' before it disappears (Crisp, 2021: 103), serves to obscure the degree to which online services are often unable to truly deliver on the twin promises of availability and reliability.

As the streaming marketplace matures – and, as noted, in response to significant competition and the threat of churn – even many larger corporations are choosing to retreat from the loss-leading expenditure that was used to entice subscribers to yet another new service; an initial tactic which may have also given users false hopes about the long-term sustainability of large and constantly expanding libraries. Just as in previous generations of broadcast television, where supposedly 'failed' series would be promptly cancelled, and would likely not be revisited again through syndication, services such as Netflix and Disney+ are increasingly delisting material with no clear indication of future accessibility. In the interim, the take two era had appeared to offer at least some respite: for instance, *Clerks: The Animated Series* (2000) – based on Kevin Smith's 1994 independent live-action feature – was removed from the airwaves due to low ratings after only two episodes, while a subsequent DVD edition allowed fans to possess all six completed instalments of the show (Benson and Gray, 2020: 123). The sitcoms *Futurama* (1999-2003, 2008-2013, 2023-) and *Family Guy* (1999-2002, 2005-) even saw a return to television after an initial cancellation, with new production reportedly spurred primarily by the strong DVD sales of existing seasons (Hills, 2007: 49). The rise of streaming initially seemed primed to expand this trend, with Netflix (and other services) often viewed as platforms that could 'rescue' – and potentially even

continue – texts that had been 'mistreated' by older broadcasting media. Indeed, one of Netflix's first 'Original' productions, made exclusively for the portal, was a revival of the critically acclaimed series *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013, 2018-2019), which had been cancelled by Fox after three seasons. The shift from take two optimism to take three disenchantment is visible in the social media responses to news that *Arrested Development* was itself due to be removed from Netflix in March 2023, casting doubt over the continued availability of the series, especially the later 'Netflix' instalments.[9] In this case, viewers experienced a rare reprieve, with Netflix striking a last-minute deal to keep the show on the platform until at least 2026 – though even this announcement comes with the suggestion of future, albeit deferred, ephemerality (Ryan, 2023).

While the *Arrested Development* example marks yet another instance of an external licence expiring, the delisting process has been increasingly applied to content directly produced and owned by the streaming corporation itself. On May 26, 2023, for instance, Disney+ and Hulu – among many other shake-ups of their respective libraries – removed the Marvel-branded series *Hero Project* (2019-2020), *616* (2020), and *Runaways* (2017-2019) (Sanders, 2023). Similarly, in June 2023, Paramount+ permanently delisted a number of texts, including the prequel series *Grease: Rise of the Pink Ladies* (2023) – which had only premiered on the service less than two months beforehand – and the animated *Star Trek: Prodigy* (2021-) (White, 2023). Such decisions are driven principally by economics, as delisting can allow the streamer to avoid paying royalties to creative personnel, and/or to write off 'losses' on the project for tax purposes (Spangler, 2023).[10] As a result, the delisting process overtly demonstrates the commodification of online production and distribution, in which a work of art is denied continued circulation – turned into a form of waste no longer accessible to the consumer – if it is more financially beneficial to the corporation to remove rather than maintain it.

This is not in itself a particularly new phenomenon, but delisting becomes a distinctive form of disenchantment of the take three era because it marks such a substantial regression from the initial claims that streaming would negate the threat of unreliable access. The new portals had been primed to offer an evolution of Henry Jenkins' (2006: 2) oft-quoted model of convergence culture, which involves 'the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want'. Indeed, streaming actually appeared to centralise much of this flow, promising – at least in terms of film and televisual content related to a given franchise – a singular, convenient repository of texts, once again leaning into the take two model of total availability. By contrast, the increasingly visible excising of material – especially content related to major properties that continue to form part of the streamer's wider conglomerate identity – means that the goal of convergence now gives way to uncertain pathways and even potential dead ends, where there is nowhere for audiences to migrate to access certain entertainment experiences within a particular franchise. At the time of writing, in the cases of *Hero Project* and *616*, there is no official way to view these series, while an option to purchase *Rise of the Pink Ladies* was only belatedly announced in July 2023, a month after its delisting (Tinoco, 2023).

A number of the major streaming companies have announced plans to rehouse at least some delisted content by licencing it to other portals (see, for example, O'Rourke, 2022). Such actions once again lead to the fracturing of studio libraries, and mark a pronounced return to a streaming experience built upon unreliable, time-limited agreements. Users are still being asked to subscribe to a multitude of services – Paramount+, Max, Disney+, and so on – but these platforms may no longer necessarily provide all of the viewing experiences associated with the corporate brand. The

transferring of content also means that – even though it becomes available again – the terms of access can be prone to change, in ways that may be incompatible with the user's needs. Benson-Allott (2021: 57), for instance, discusses the challenges of writing a scholarly analysis of the series *Battlestar Galactica* (1978-1979), which had initially been streamable on several platforms in the United States but, by the end of her project, was only offered on a single service, NBC.com, 'which interjects ads into the program every time one pauses it': a viewing experience, she notes, that 'made textual analysis quite frustrating, to say the least'.[11] Feelings of outright loss in the take three era may thus be, for the most part, more decadent than the first generation of cinephilia, relating to a much smaller range of works compared to the widespread unavailability of canonical films experienced in the age of celluloid. As Benson-Allott (2021: 57) notes, however, even remediation, though it 'is not the same thing as loss', can still 'feel [very much] like it'. The disenchantment of the streaming era is not just related to the possibility that a text might disappear. The conditions of its potential return – how, where, and in what form – may create equally fertile grounds for user anxiety.

At the end of her book on the history of cinephilia, Keller (2020: 228) makes brief reference to a 'recent preoccupation with [once again] collecting specifically material media (including DVDs)' which she views as a new 'fear of loss specifically tinged with a worry both about ownership and about a tactile relationship with media in an age when streaming has become the default for most consumers of home media'. It was reported, for instance, that the Blu-ray release of the first ten episodes of *Star Trek: Prodigy* rapidly sold out across many American retailers following the news of its delisting by Paramount+, while purchases of *The French Connection* also spiked on physical media in response to its Internet 'censorship' (Lovett, 2023; JEM-Games, 2023). Vinzenz Hediger (2005: 142) argued that, in the (then-contemporary) age of DVD, 'once a

film appears on the home video market, there are basically no time limits to its availability'. The disc suggests the romantic notion of capturing and preserving a moment of textual production, safe from the ability of newer, online technologies to update, re-edit, or remove. Furthermore, the 'lots of copies in lots of places' principle of traditional physical home video distribution appears to ensure that the text is never in danger of entirely disappearing (Straw, 2016: 173). Even if a product goes out-of-print, the implication is that one should still be able to find a used copy, or even an alternative release of the film issued by another distributor overseas.[12]

With the rise of streaming, however, and the 'all-you-can-eat-buffet style of access' offered by the subscription bundle (Strangelove, 2015: 149), the physical media marketplace has considerably declined. As Tryon (2013: 3, 10) notes, the supposed 'persistent availability of movies through different VOD services has altered their value, often with the result that [many] consumers have felt less urgency to own copies of individual films,' especially on comparatively expensive formats such as Blu-ray and 4K. The reduction of mainstream interest in video-based physical media has meant that fewer titles are issued, and usually in smaller quantities – making the ability to track down a copy less assured (especially at a reasonable price) if the text gets removed from an online catalogue. Many newer productions, particularly original content commissioned directly for streaming, are skipping a physical media release entirely. Furthermore, due to the use of original content as a means of enticing subscribers to join a particular service, this material has tended to remain exclusive to a single platform, and is not usually made available to buy or rent on other competing digital portals.[13] The unreliability of streaming – and the diminishment of alternative points of access – thus has the potential to limit or even deny the user's engagement with particular works of art.

The notion of the outright deletion of any media in the digital age remains a subject of debate, with the optimistic view being that, as long as a work is released in some form, it can theoretically be captured and disseminated. Indeed, it is possible to chart on social media a growing discussion of illegal methods to engage with 'lost' texts, in cases where the official access to film and televisual content is being deliberately blocked by the rightsholders. While piracy has existed throughout the industry's long history, there is an intriguing sense of righteousness pervading these recent debates and even some instances where creators of delisted material have appeared to implicitly endorse the practice (see, for example, Cannito, 2022). It remains to be seen whether current cinephiles will generate serious grassroots rebellion against the conditions of streaming, or whether the occasional loss (and/or unfavourable remediation) of media will congeal into an experience that is – however begrudgingly – accepted as the trade-off for the many other conveniences offered.

The take three generation that I propose, therefore, remains conflicted in many areas. Streaming still offers most users proximity to (though not direct ownership of) a volume of content unthinkable even at the height of take two, and there are definitely benefits as well as shortfalls of the streaming revolution that need to be taken into consideration. For fans of many franchises, such as Marvel and *Star Trek*, there are more films and/or television shows to choose from than ever before, with the continued production of new strands and spin-offs potentially helping to mitigate the removal of some earlier material. For completists, however, the lack of consumer choice will undoubtedly be a sticking point, and there remain questions about how delisting underserves particular audiences: the aforementioned *Prodigy*, for instance, was the first *Star Trek* series to primarily target younger viewers, while *Hero Project* was noted for exploring issues such as disability and LGBTQ+ rights under the banner of the Marvel brand. More 'traditional'

cinephilic fare, such as older films and world cinema, has now tended to be shifted to smaller, niche services, which often necessitate the turnover of library content. As noted, Elsaesser (2005: 39) argues that the take two era was primarily rooted in the conflict of 'too much/all at once'. I would suggest that this remains a central concern in the take three era, but one that contends with a new wrinkle. How will cinephilia continue to function in the new streaming landscape where we still have too much all at once, but also – with the visible losses of control in relation to availability and reliability – never quite enough?

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[1] In terms of precedents, Malte Hagener and Marike de Valck (2008: 22) briefly outline the boundaries of a third generation of cinephiles engaging with films 'increasingly via the Internet' and whose cinephilic practices 'no longer took up physical space as their collections were now largely digital.' This discussion predates the rise of subscription-based streaming services, however, and – much like Elsaesser – broadly views online consumption as an extension of practices established by other home video formats such as VHS and DVD. My conception of take three views the SVOD portal as a much more substantial disruptor to the viewing experience: one that creates distinctive restrictions, as well as possibilities, for engaging with media content. The growing anxieties related to the streaming age, expressed by scholars such as Chuck Tryon (2013) and Caetlin Benson-Allott (2021), offer valuable evidence of the new disenchantments experienced by cinephiles of the 2010s and particularly the 2020s.

Just as Elsaesser (2005: 29) sketches out the boundaries of take one and take two with reference to his own personal experiences of cinephilic practice – such as his attendance at film screenings as a student in Paris and London in the 1960s – this article's discussion of take three is informed by my usage of a variety of American and British streaming services over the last decade and a half. In this regard, I must acknowledge that my description of the third generation of cinephilia remains largely (and regrettably) Anglo- and Euro-centric, but I hope that the underlying concepts may be adaptable to the user experience in other contexts. Certain large (and often American) services have become multinational: Netflix, for instance, has expanded to over 190 countries and lays claim to being 'the world's most widely used SVOD service' (Lotz and Lobato, 2023: 5), though the library of content available to stream can change significantly from territory to territory, and will obviously exist in competition with different local alternatives. Unfortunately, the 'rhetoric of borderlessness' (Elkins, 2019: 80) often promised in the digital age is frequently

challenged by practices such as geoblocking (discussed in more detail later in this article) which can frustrate the attempts of scholars to effectively access and study the streaming mechanisms outside of a particular region. For more information on the varying taste cultures and technological infrastructures experienced in different countries, see for instance, Baschiera and Fisher, 2022; Mitchell and Samuel, 2022.

[2] The DVD brought a large number of films to home video for the first time, but the format was not without its own significant omissions. As Paul Cuff (2013: 106) notes, with reference to Elsaesser, 'in an era of "total availability" […] it is disconcerting to consider that there are still major films that are almost totally impossible to view and study'. A film may be prevented from release due to rights or legal issues, changing boundaries of censorship, or the existing copies of the work may fail to meet the audio/visual standards set by a new format (Hediger, 2005). Indeed, given the various costs of releasing movies in any marketplace, especially when manufacturing and distributing a physical product, certain works may simply be viewed as commercially unviable, regardless of the potential cultural loss its unavailability may engender. Benson-Allott (2021: 59-93) discusses the strange case of *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977), a film that was a financial success upon its theatrical debut, features known stars such as Diane Keaton and Richard Gere, and was nominated for two Academy Awards. Despite home video releases on VHS and LaserDisc, the film has never been issued on DVD or Blu-ray, for reasons that have not been disclosed by the rightsholder, Paramount. (Given this article's focus on the potential disenchantments of streaming, however, it is notable that *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* is now actually available, at the time of writing, on Paramount+ in the UK.)

[3] The very promise of mobility may be a source of potential disenchantment in itself. While take one cinephiles expressed anxiety about the decentralising of the theatrical space in the shift to the

second generation, the DVD era nonetheless placed an emphasis upon a relatively stable domestic experience, with enthusiasts often devoting attention to the creation of a suitable home cinema setup (Klinger, 2006: 17-53). By contrast, as Sheri Chinen Biesen (2016: 138) suggests, a 'sense of homelessness or dislocation' may be the trade-off for the apparent convenience of the streaming era, removing the specificity of the hallowed site (to extend Elsaesser's religious metaphor for cinephilia) in favour of being able to engage with films in any location.

[4] Mattias Frey (2021: 10) notes that, based on his own detailed empirical audience research, 'algorithmic suggestions maintain some value to many VOD users, but typically they constitute just one small piece of a multistage, iterative process of active and passive engagement with film and series information'. In the streaming era, the existence of online super-aggregators, such as JustWatch, allow users to search for specific texts across multiple platforms (rather than being led by the inward-looking algorithms of any given service). Similarly, the social networking site Letterboxd offers an opportunity for cinephiles to log their viewing practices – transforming them from a mere fleeting experience – as well as to share recommendations and written commentaries with other users (see, for instance, Edmond 2023: 103-105).

[5] There are a few exceptions. On Disney+, for example, access to films such as *Dumbo* (1941) and *Aladdin* (1992) is preceded by a non-skippable title card that warns viewers about content, and distances the modern Disney corporation from these values. *Gone with the Wind* (1939) was pulled from HBO Max in 2020, but reinstated later in the year with disclaimers and educational content added. However, such treatment on the major streaming services has tended to be reserved for a handful of 'prestigious' (if nonetheless problematic) works that have traditionally been accepted as part of the mainstream canon.

[6] Lotz (2017: 24) notes that a single digital portal could, on a technical level, 'conceivably make any piece of content ever made available' for consumption. In terms of music streaming, the service Spotify has broadly achieved this goal, offering access to a catalogue 'of over 35 million songs', including content produced by many of the biggest musicians and record labels (Aguiar and Waldfogel, 2021: 655). Patrick Vonderau (2015: 723) explains that Spotify works on a 'pay-per-listen, rather than pay-per-unit approach. This means that [advertising and subscription] revenues received by Spotify are divided to the rights holders based on how many plays a certain track has in relation to other tracks, and payment for each play increases with every new paying subscriber'. By contrast, he notes that the 'video streaming model is more complex, as there are no fixed deals in the video-on-demand sector, only recurring compensation patterns linked to the respective legal agreement on which a given film's online exploitation is based'. The Spotify model is unlikely to be adaptable into an all-encompassing video subscription service, given the significantly higher costs of film and television production, which would require a substantial user base in order to be sustainable: indeed, as Vonderau notes, even Spotify 'needed to scale to its twenty-four-million paying subscribers before the model worked' for music. The instances of content delisting, price rises, and the introduction of advertising into services such as Netflix suggest that even the current economic model for video streaming – let alone a Spotify-style approach – is proving impractical. As Warner Bros. Discovery's CFO Gunnar Wiedenfels recently commented: 'for a decade, in streaming, an enormously valuable amount of quality content has been given away well below fair market value, and I think that's in the process of being corrected' (quoted in Szalai, 2023).

[7] Not all content designated as an 'original' production on services such as Netflix is necessarily owned outright, however, and may still be licenced from other rightsholders, albeit usually on a more long-term, exclusive basis (Crawford, 2021: 60).

[8] This should not, however, imply that there was ever an entirely level playing field. Big box stores such as Walmart, and large-scale rental services such as Blockbuster, still tended to privilege studio DVD releases over indie product, and the mass production of the former's discs often permitted more favourable discounts which may have, in turn, influenced purchase and/or rental decisions.

[9] See, for instance, the comments section in Stedman, 2023.

[10] The result of content purges can nonetheless have profound repercussions for fandom and academia alike. For example, Robert Alan Brookey, Jason Phillips, and Timothy Pollard published *Reasserting the Disney Brand in the Streaming Era*, the first full-length scholarly examination of Disney+, in April 2023; by the end of the following month, two of the four major case studies analysed in the book – all original productions that had released exclusively on the Disney portal following its 2019 launch – were suddenly no longer part of the studio's streaming library.

[11] Several of the 'premium' SVOD platforms – such as Netflix and Max – have also begun to incorporate advertising. However, for the time being at least, this is something that users can opt into in return for a reduced subscription fee, rather than being a mandatory part of the service.

[12] As Benson-Allott (2021: 93) emphasises, all media objects are nonetheless still 'impermanent' in one way or another. Media such as LaserDisc and DVD are susceptible to deterioration – resulting in data loss – and it may become increasingly difficult to source functioning playback hardware, especially for analogue formats.

[13] Indeed, even in cases where it is possible to 'purchase' individual digital film and television texts – such as on Amazon Prime Video or Apple's iTunes service – the boundaries of ownership

tend to be rather more tentative than in the age of physical media. The ability to lend a digital movie to friends and family – or resell the item if no longer needed – cannot be taken for granted as one could with (for instance) a tangible book or DVD. If a specific piece of media is delisted, or if the hosting service itself ceases functioning, then access to the content may no longer be possible (see Perzanowski and Schultz, 2016). Vonderau (2015: 723) notes that electronic sell-through of digital films and television shows has not proven particularly successful in many national marketplaces, especially when compared to the growth of subscription-based services.