

Sexton, Max and Lees, Dominic (2017), 'Becoming Independent: Distribution After the Multiplex' in Weinstein, Anna (ed) *Perform: Directing for the Screen*. (Abingdon: Focal Press)

Authors: **Max Sexton**
Dominic Lees

Becoming Independent: Distribution after the Multiplex

Ownership of entertainment distribution capability is like ownership of a toll road or bridge. No matter how good or bad the software product...is, it must pass over or cross through a distribution pipeline in order to reach the consumer.¹

Harold Vogel encapsulates the problem facing independent filmmakers - in the traditional model of film distribution they must always gain access to the major exhibition channels in order to reach the audience. Today, the power of the major distributors continues unabated. Edward Jap Epstein examines how the acquisition of 'properties' produces the well-understood top-down transfer of films from the corporate producer to audiences.² Using such diverse strategies as pickup deals, financing, licensing, horizontal integration, screen testing for playability, as well as advertising and marketing, a movie is transferred to the consumer with the minimal amount of difficulty by powerful distributor consortiums. The lasting impression is of films that are moving in orderly fashion through a series of exhibition outlets (cinemas, digital download, pay-per-view, cable, television). In these ways, distribution, which has long since become the most profitable sector of the film

industry and whose agents wield considerable influence on what is eventually seen, continues to marginalise the smaller budgeted, independent feature film.

So what alternatives are there for new film directors and producers wanting to break through, or to distribute genuinely independent work? Filmmakers create movies in order to put them before an audience, but outside the mainstream of Hollywood this can often seem impossible. However, every new filmmaker will have a sense that they are in an era of exciting opportunities due to high-speed connectivity and the web 2.0. This essay will look at what it takes to succeed in marketing an independent film on the internet and the implications of the new technologies for film distribution. The case study of indie filmmaker, Marcus Markou, and his film, *Papadopoulos and Sons* (2012), suggests it is possible to reach your audience *and* maintain control of your film.

Online film distribution and the film audience

Vogel's metaphor of film distribution as transmission through a "pipeline" has its limitations when thinking about online channels of distribution. As film culture has become more diverse, it is no longer centrally locatable in the multiplex cinema but exists within a multiplicity of viewing spaces: older forms such as television and DVD, as well as viewing opportunities on an extensive range of portable digital media players. Moreover, the pipeline model of distribution cannot account for the internet's ability to create interactive networks of social exchange. It is the

development of usability on the web 2.0 that determines how audiences view and respond to film.

The widening choice of films that have become available to download or stream is crucially linked to the mobility of the viewing experience, which reconceptualises film from being a strip of celluloid to files that are stored on a database and which can be sent as a flow of information using software applications on the internet. Today's film audience not only can access films wherever they are but can also use social media to interact with other consumers of film. It is the organisation of forms of social interaction between consumers and social networking sites such as Facebook and Bebo, where information about films can be exchanged once they have been viewed. Ramon Lobato argues that this method for the exhibition of films is global because it occurs across a variety of sites simultaneously, linked by complex networks of textual and economic exchange.³ For Lobato, these informal modes of film consumption are 'subcinema', which he argues is non-cinematic because it is consumed outside the multiplex. Subcinema is not about the thrill of cinemagoing but is instead more televisual in its rhythms and texture, although, as we will see, the social aspect of film viewing is usually retained by many online providers and continues to play an important role in the strategies that are used for marketing a newly released film. At the same time, the increased qualitative diversity of stories told is a feature of online distribution. The rise of file sharing has enabled the formation of communities on sites as diverse as MUBI or Netflix, which are capable of producing lively discussions of the merits of the film that has been seen. In the independent film, *Papadopoulos and Sons*, its consumption tells us what

audiences *do* with a film and how a film contributes to everyday life. Consequently, there is a reformulation of existing terms such as film producer, distributor, and audience and the nature of film itself when everyone can leave a comment and become a story-teller on the web.

Other ideas help us understand exactly how the online audience behaves differently from the traditional moviegoer. Kevin Kelly has described two main types of media technology: “push” and “pull”.⁴ The distinguishing characteristic of push media is that it finds the user rather than the user finding it. Traditional film marketing is push media because it functions in a non-interactive manner and is pushed towards the viewer. Pull media, on the other hand is, “the invitational pull you make when you click on the web. Pull media is media that you (interactively) steer.”⁵ The user will choose what s/he wants to watch and by clicking on a computer mouse will be able to stream/download or pull the desired content towards them.

Two web television theorists, L. Bordewijk and B. Van Kaam, have developed the idea further, describing two models of watching on the internet.⁶ The “consultative” model is when information content is produced and owned by a central information provider but the individual user controls which information is delivered and when. For example, the provider delivers video on demand (VOD) and the user exercises active choice among several alternatives. A more sophisticated form of interactivity is the “conversational” model that describes an information flow between individuals, both makers and viewers. Online film-viewing is not just a one-way street and the audience is not passive. For example, a filmmaker may respond to

feedback after their movie has been shown and give feedback on a film they have seen from another provider.

The beneficiaries of the internet are not only independent filmmakers but also mainstream distributors that are highly conscious of the reputation of films in the domain of internet conversations. They pay attention to the buzz a film generates on sites like Facebook and monitor postings to blogs. Technoarti.com and Blogpulse.com are used to index blogs and sites, monitoring the (English-speaking) blogosphere and allowing the distributor to track popular topics and rank blogs as most visited.

Who benefits?

The new distribution ecology that exists between the filmmaker and audience has been well documented by Dina Iordanova, who raises important questions such as how will filmmakers benefit from distributing non-Hollywood films and how might this circulation of film be made to operate globally?⁷ Iordanova discusses the rise of what has been the fringe of cinema, which she claims is altering the balance of power between the Hollywood studios and a more diverse range of film-makers from the different corners of the world. The network flow of independent films from around the world is changing the dynamics of cinema.⁸ One characteristic of this increased global dynamic is the possibility of bypassing the ordinary gatekeepers and preserving eclectic styles. Hitherto, the ability of the distributor to modify the director's vision fits into a 'narrative of authenticity', with the director battling to defend their artistic

vision against the distributor, who is normally represented as a vulgarian, selling the film according to the commercial logic of the mass market. Meanwhile, internet enabled streaming video (VOD) channels, including the global big five YouTube, iTunes, Amazon Prime, Hulu and Netflix, have disrupted this model of distribution, and the direct access to films has altered the viewing of films. In the past, the film which was consigned 'straight to video' continued to be integrated with theatrical forms and only allowed director and audience preferences as far as the broader system allowed. Rather than this model and its layers of constraint on the film-maker, online distribution creates a cinema on demand, and, crucially, this represents further alternatives to thinking about distribution and what it means in the debate about becoming independent in film.

Chris Anderson of *Wired* has referred to this trend as the 'long tail'.⁹ Web sites promoting niche film-makers are designed to appeal to narrower interests and the segmentation of culture into narrower tastes. According to Anderson,

...the long tail describes the shift from mass markets to millions of niches, the low sellers that we traditionally haven't had room for on our shelves, screens and channels, but which we now do have room for thanks to the internet and abundant distribution systems.¹⁰

For example, online sites such as MUBI specialise in world cinema, whereas Movieflix stocks mainly straight-to-video fare and older films. The proposition that Anderson is making is that there can be a new commercial logic in which film content may appeal to an engaged group of people as opposed to an audience composed of very large numbers who only have a moderate interest. Through online distribution, the niche markets can agglomerate into a sufficient audience to make the independent film viable.

The success of these forms of distribution and consumption depend on how it is more specific and differentiated than has been the case. The decentralisation of distribution because of networks based on peer-to-peer technology including the smart phone has encouraged several types of distribution ranging from ones that are highly curated to viral forms of distribution. For example, sites such as Jaman, a Silicon Valley-based enterprise that launched in January 2007, and MUBI, founded by Efe Cakarel, operate as a social network for lovers of cinema. Cakarel began MUBI after his frustration in Tokyo at not being able to watch online, *In the Mood for Love*, directed by Wong Kar-wai. Both Jaman and MUBI operate as a film discovery site, offering films that are difficult to access. Jaman licenses content, which is available to global audiences through its online service. Jaman also works with film festivals, seeking exclusive rights for on-line showings of films that are screened at particular festivals such as Tribeca, San Francisco International Film Festival, and Cinequest.

The development of distribution through online streaming already provides benefits to the mainstream film industry, by lowering costs and expanding markets, but it also opens up space for smaller independents.

Rights Problems for filmmakers

The developments in online film distribution have brought with them cultural shifts which threaten the viability of independent film production. The sense of open access provided by the internet has been accompanied by a shift from copyright and exclusivity to a belief in sharing and common rights. Lobato notes that newer forms of distribution online are disrespectful of trade agreements and intellectual rights law.¹¹ The rise of piracy using peer-to-peer software has become an issue since it represents a threat to the financial security of film-makers: as we will see in our case study of *Papadopoulos and Sons*, even a very successful independent distribution is now hard-pressed to break even. Filmmakers are caught in a dilemma: new internet platforms allow them to reach an audience which is inaccessible using conventional means of distribution, but at the same time their films' online presence makes them highly vulnerable to piracy. Protection of intellectual rights (IR) in a film continues to be a key problem in new modes of distribution.

Case Study: Marcus Markou and *Papadopoulos and Sons*

Marcus Markou is a British independent film-maker, with a background as an actor, writer and entrepreneur. His feature film, *Papadopoulos and Sons* (2012), is the story of a wealthy Anglo-Greek businessman living in London who loses everything in the

financial crash. He discovers his only financial asset is a forgotten Greek fish and chip shop co-owned by him and his brother, which they started after immigrating to London. The film is a ‘feel-good’ movie about the Greek and Cypriot diaspora community. Markou drained funds from his online business in order to self-finance the \$850000 budget. As a producer, he was new to the business and only began to consider distribution during the postproduction of the movie. Markou failed to find a sales agent or distributor, and the search left him appalled by the business practices of the film industry. Instead, he decided to self-distribute his film when he became convinced that he could reach an audience using social media:

If you know your audience, if you know the demographic, the metrics of your audience, then the internet...will allow you to reach those audiences.

For me, it was a much easier audience to target (initially) because it was Greeks. So anyone who had ‘Greek’ in their profile on Facebook, I was able to target.¹²

Markou created a network of loyal “Papadopoulos Ambassadors”, unpaid enthusiasts – “they’d seen the trailer, they knew me, they loved what the film was about” – and this team began networking through online media and traditional social contacts. Presently, the Facebook page for *Papadopoulos and Sons* has over 20000 fans. Markou found that if he aggregated his Facebook supporters’ Friends of Fans, he reached 1.3 million people in the UK. However, his following needed to be continually encouraged to renew its interest using tweets and blogs by him. His ability to emote openly and to map out his own successes and failures as a highly

personal narrative on social media encouraged his followers to comment on how moved they had been on reading the blog. His personal style, creating a type of one-to-one interaction between himself and his followers, was to prove immensely popular. Markou also has a clear and schematised approach to different forms of social media.

[Start text box]

Markou sums up his tactics as “I saw blogs as the big personal autobiographical statement... I saw Facebook as the tactical publishing statement... Twitter is just any old crap that came into my head. When you’ve had a bad meeting - tweet it; when someone’s slagged off the film – blog about it.”

[End text box]

Facebook advertising also allowed him to promote the *Papadopoulos and Sons* fan page and the screenings by location and interest. Those with Greek interests (Food/ Dancing/ Community) within areas identified by clusters of Greek Orthodox Churches could be identified on the Facebook site.

Markou paid for a ‘service theatrical deal’ for *Papadopoulos* to be shown in cinemas and gain some reviews, because VOD platforms such as Netflix insist on a one week theatrical run before considering a film for distribution. His proposed marketing plan won the support of Cineworld cinemas, who agreed to open the film

on thirteen screens in cities with sizeable Greek communities. Having developed such a vivid and effective online presence for the film, the public response to the release was spectacular: the film outperformed big Hollywood movies such as *GI Joe: Retaliation* and made \$96000 in UK cinemas.¹³ In a gesture of unheard-of openness, Marcus Markou has published the full details of the budget and income for *Papadopoulos and Sons*.¹⁴ This demonstrates both the opportunities and financial challenges of independent self-distribution. Surprisingly, the various forms of VOD in the US and UK have only netted \$3000. In total, the income from his independent self-distribution now stands at around \$400000 – less than half the film's budget – though Markou remains confident that in the long run he will fully recoup.

Conclusion

This essay has analysed how the advent of digital distribution makes self-distribution more possible. It replaces older notions of distribution and suggests that the greater circulation of films on the internet opens the possibility of more heterogeneous forms suitable for independent films. The devices of the internet and social media are able to increase attentive viewing sensibilities and offer a heightened awareness of the films on offer due to the development of cinema-on-demand. At the same time, there is a consolidation of the 'long tail' and undoubtedly a growing use of the internet by film studios and media conglomerates to renew local distribution and exhibition monopolies and replace the ones that have become outmoded such as DVD releases. Distribution is crucial to Hollywood and the tighter managing of the channels of distribution on the internet is expected. Meanwhile, revenue can be generated by new ways of not only promoting single films as in the case of *Papadopoulos and Sons*,

but also groups of independent films that lie outside of established formal genres, including local genres that may have once have flourished within ancillary markets, such as films about cities and urban experiences. At the moment, it should be recalled that Brazilian favela films are being marketed using the internet to take into account the appeal of the transnational in a technologically converged and global media culture. Therefore, within the interstices between the local and the global, theatrical films and the films of subcinema, new models of nontheatrical distribution can provide new opportunities for independent film-making.

References

¹ Quoted in Tino Balio, "Major Presence in All of the World's Important Markets: the globalisation of Hollywood in the 1990s", in Murray Smith and Steve Neal, eds, *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1990), 58-73.

² Edward Jay Epstein, *The Big Picture: The New Logic of Money and Power in Hollywood* (New York: Random House, 2005)

³ Ramon Lobato, "Subcinema: Theorising Marginal Film Distribution", *Limnia: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies*, v13, 2007, 113-120.

⁴ Kevin Kelly, "Push! Kiss your browser goodbye: The radical future of media beyond the web", *Wired*, n5, March 1999, 5.

⁵ Kelly, March 1999.

⁶ L.Bordewijkl and B. Van Kaam, "Towards a new classification of tele-information services" in Allan Brown (ed.), *Digital Terrestrial Television in Europe* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2005), 118

-
- ⁷ Dina Iordanova, "Rise of the Fringe: Global Cinema's Long Tail", in Dina Iordanova, David Martin-Jones, Beleb Vidal (eds), *Cinema at the Periphery*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 23-44.
- ⁸ Iordanova, 24.
- ⁹ Christopher Anderson, "The Long Tail", *Wired* v12, n10 (October 2004).
<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html> Accessed 11.07.2015
- ¹⁰ Owen Gibson, "The Story of the Long Tail", *The Guardian*, 10 July 2006, 5.
- ¹¹ Lobato, 114.
- ¹² Interview with Max Sexton and Dominic Lees, 8 July, 2015.
- ¹³ Sexton and Lees, July, 2015.
- ¹⁴ Stephen Follow, "The full costs and income of a £1 million indie film".
<<http://stephenfollows.com/the-full-costs-and-income-of-a-1million-indie-film>>
Accessed 11.07.2015

Biographies

Dr Max Sexton is a published author whose writing centres on film and television. His new book, *The Adaptation of Science Fiction in Film and TV*, is published this year by Rowman and Littlefield. Max has also published in the *Journal for British Film and Television*, including an interview of the actor Philip Jackson, who is best known as Inspector Japp in the hugely popular *Poirot* television series.

Dominic Lees is Associate Head of Department – Filmmaking, at the University of the West of England. He began his career in television documentaries before

studying film direction in Warsaw, under his mentors Krzysztof Zanussi and Krzysztof Kieslowski. In 2008, Dominic's first feature film was released in the UK – the drama-thriller 'Outlanders'; it sold internationally and won five film festival awards. Dominic also writes on filmmaking and is a contributing author to the *Journal of Media Practice*.