

The Long Tail is Not an Archive: The Commercial Limits of Preservation and Distribution

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As they had on broadcast and cable TV, older “library” titles have an important but marginalized role on digital platforms. Lowered distribution costs have certainly made many titles available, but digital plenty is a mirage, or at best a fog. It may appear as if the overall number and variety of titles available is larger than ever, but that visibility may be an effect of the general ease of access to so much material provided by streaming or download platforms, versus the more time-consuming hunt through large VHS rental shops and mail-order catalogs in the 1980s and 1990s. It would be impossible to quantify the entire scope of legitimately licensed offerings of either the analog past or digital present. However, not unlike Blockbuster Video in its heyday, the design and mysterious algorithmic operations of digital platforms have segregated the range of offerings to highlight the “new releases” of today and bury older and less “mainstream” titles deeper in the catalog. Accordingly, as in the earlier eras of electronic video distribution, while there is some range of material available on major venues, most titles outside the mainstream are most easily accessed through dedicated boutique platforms.

The major general-audience streaming platforms in the US--Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu--rarely highlight titles older than a year or two in their algorithm-driven banner images, unless they are particularly iconic, and not all *that* old. Older and obscure titles, including many in languages other than English, are technically available on particular platforms, but only if users actively look for them by title, by studiously reviewing “coming to Netflix, Hulu, etc.” lists published at the end of every month, or by checking sites like Justwatch.com. On the interfaces of all the major platforms, the notorious “long tail” of online commerce is seemingly exemplified: new, more expensive high-profile titles (increasingly original film and series) are loudly promoted, while older, cheaper, lower-profile content makes up the vast bulk of offerings but is relatively invisible. Come for the featured attractions, but stay for the buried treasure. As Karen Petruska states about Amazon Prime, the rhetoric of endless streaming functions “as a brand builder, and as a reward for loyalty.”¹

While viewers, if they search hard enough, can still find a wide, if variable and fluid, array of titles on major platforms--Amazon Prime has a particularly deep and varied library relative to Netflix and Hulu--older titles reach the audiences that most want them today through boutique platforms: smaller DVD and Blu-Ray publishers, streaming and download sites, and narrowcast TV channels. As with small book and magazine

¹ Karen Petruska, “Amazon Prime Video: Where Information is Entertainment,” in Derek Johnson, ed., *From Networks To Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 357.

publishers and record and home video labels in earlier eras, these platforms cultivate a much smaller, but more focused audience, who are either willing to pay premium rates for effectively curated content, or, in the case of digi-nets and low-end streaming platforms, are willing to put up with lower-quality presentation and advertising in exchange for free access to obscure titles.

DVD and Blu-Ray publishers like Kino Lorber, Criterion, Warner Archive, and Shout Factory offer an array of classic films and television shows that have either not otherwise received release or emphasis from major distributors, or (in the case of Criterion specifically) are receiving premium treatment for a collector market. Similarly, genre-specific publishers like Arrow and Vinegar Syndrome offer up rare titles in premium packaging, but in their emphasis on horror, erotica, and exploitation films, cultivate a more paracinematic connoisseurship in their consumers, overlapping with the sensibilities and market stoked by cult collectible firms like Mondo and Waxworks. Despite the wane of DVD and Blu-Ray on the broader video market, this marginal but dedicated consumer base favors disc ownership (and the collection and display of material cultural objects in general) and helps maintain these publishers.

On the non-physical boutique side, streaming platforms offer an on-demand catalog of titles in exchange for a subscription fee, while digi-nets, as old-school TV channels, air a schedule of advertiser-supported programming free to viewers. But as with the physical boutique labels, each still fosters distinctive brand identities and are maintained by viewer loyalty. Brands vary widely, taking in general global cinema (FilmStruck), horror (Shudder), science fiction (Comet), African American-focused film and TV (Bounce), and even specific narrative universes (DC Universe). Users of Roku devices can access an even vaster universe of channels and streaming platforms, with generic names like “Old Time Movies” or “TV Favorites,” which provide cheap and/or public domain titles of varying vintage, genres, and quality (and sometimes dubious legality).

As the dominance of Netflix continues to grow, and the physical market continues to shrink, the cultural fate of older materials that can't find viable commercial markets is likely to continue narrowing to only fans and scholars. The algorithmic “curatorial culture” of 21st century television viewership that MJ Robinson describes will likely be the only thing keeping most older films and TV shows in circulation.² Meanwhile, audiovisual materials of all forms and levels of prominence that haven't already been preserved or migrated to newer formats are increasingly vulnerable to disappearance. We need to mitigate the rhetorics of both the digital long tail and the older audiovisual canon, and more critically engage with the idea of media impermanence.

² MJ Robinson, *Television On Demand: Curatorial Culture and the Transformation of TV* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

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