

# Unpacking Our Library: Media Collections in the Age of Streaming

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I recently added over a dozen new Blu-ray discs to my collection during Barnes & Noble's semi-annual Criterion Collection sale, in spite of the fact that I can access most of the films that I purchased on the streaming sites Filmstruck (through my personal subscription) and Kanopy (through my institutional subscription). My decision to purchase physical copies of these films points to the persistence of strategic redundancy as an archiving and viewing practice for scholars and cinephiles. While most streaming sites showcase the films and television shows that they have the exclusive right to stream, viewers (especially those with the means and the motive to expand their access to films and television shows as broadly as possible) may engage in two forms of strategic redundancy - subscribing to multiple streaming services and purchasing films and television shows in multiple formats.

The Criterion Collection offers a productive point of entry into a consideration of format redundancy in part because its DVD and Blu-ray releases are widely recognized as collectable objects and in part because their films are available online through two streaming services – Filmstruck and Kanopy – that challenge Netflix-driven assumptions about the business and culture of streaming. Filmstruck and Kanopy promise to be more stable streaming archives than Netflix because they operate with business models that favor deep and predictable catalogues.

Billed as the “exclusive streaming home of the Criterion Collection and classics from TCM Select,” Filmstruck is a focused archive marketed explicitly to cinephiles. Filmstruck offers both programming stability (with a collection that is expanding rather than contracting) and added value (by including many of the digital bonus features that have long justified the higher purchase prices for Criterion's physical media and that remained conspicuously absent on Netflix and Hulu when they streamed Criterion films.) Filmstruck's library is smaller than Netflix's, but the site engages cinephiles through its curated collection, its inclusion of special features, and its production of original paratexts (such as the Filmstruck Podcast).

Kanopy arranges subscriptions with university or public libraries, and subscribing institutions then make available all or part of Kanopy's vast catalogue of over 30,000 films to their patrons. Kanopy operates through a pay-per-view model, charging institutions only for the titles their patrons watch and paying film distributors or filmmakers for each time their films are viewed. Kanopy's distribution partnership with the Criterion Collection has been a major marketing

point for the streaming service, with newspaper headlines announcing that readers can “watch the Criterion Collection for free” when the local library launches a Kanopy partnership. Less than half of Criterion’s films are available on Kanopy, but the company has successfully distinguished itself as a resource for “Thoughtful Entertainment” with Criterion sharing online shelf space with other boutique distributors, including Kino Lorber, New Day Films, and California Newsreel.

I feel relatively confident that the films I recently purchased at Barnes & Noble will remain available on Kanopy and very confident that they will remain available on Filmstruck. So why buy the Blu-ray when you can get the film for “free” or at least for the price of a monthly subscription to Filmstruck (currently \$10.99 per month)? First, while Filmstruck includes many of the special features available on Criterion discs, the other features that distinguish Criterion releases are not available online. Criterion understands the value of these features to their market of cinephiles, continuing to commission essays from film critics and scholars and to seek permission to reprint reviews, interviews, and other texts in the books that accompany their discs. Second, for Criterion’s collectors, the disc covers are also important. Criterion has capitalized on the popularity of its covers by releasing a coffee table book called *Criterion Designs* and by selling posters and postcards featuring disc covers. The covers circulate independently of the films as extensions of the Criterion brand and the taste culture it promotes and as artefacts of Criterion’s emphasis on the production of physical media. The quality of the Blu-ray image is superior to its streaming counterpart, and the packaging of the disc is superior as well. Finally, streaming services such as Filmstruck and Kanopy do not enable the development of personal collections. The films I own in physical formats (Blu-ray, DVD, and VHS) form a library that I can display, browse, rearrange, sample, and share at will. Online these films are spread across a vast streaming media ecosystem that extends beyond Filmstruck and Kanopy to popular sites such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon and to niche film archives such as Mubi and Fandor. As I visit these archives, convinced that I must maintain subscriptions to all of them, I accumulate lists – viewing histories, queues, favorites, etc. – but I am not building a collection. When I move, I will have not have a digital library to unpack.