

Digital Flows from TCM to FilmStruck

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Since its inception in 1994, Turner Classic Movies has operated much like a traditional broadcast network—using a “broad” programming flow to create themes for its daily schedule. The 24-hour programming is a flow that only changes when primetime begins—so audiences are receiving two separate narrative structures, more specifically a clear day and night part. This structure of flow has now carried over into TCM’s newest digital property; FilmStruck. While the site is not a constant streaming service, the film bundles are heavily curated, consisting of hosted introductions and bonus materials (replicating the TCM linear model). It was announced in February 2018 that FilmStruck would collaborate with the Warner Bros. Archive to now host the largest streaming classic film library—aptly called TCM Select. Warner Archive has now sunset its streaming services and all previous members have transitioned to FilmStruck—a flow in itself.

In an effort to bridge the gap between the predominantly younger, cable-less, cinephiles who gravitate towards FilmStruck and the Criterion Collection (whose entire library is housed within the service), and the intrepid cable-subscribing TCM fan, the TCM Select “channel” was added. This new channel allows exclusive streaming access to the Warner Brothers classic film library; golden age classics typically found on the linear network are now readily available to audiences that most likely no longer carry a cable subscription. With the video rental era quickly fading, streaming audiences today are arguably over served in accessibility to contemporary films—spanning all studios and countries. However, access to classic Hollywood studio titles are limited to either illegal downloads or physical purchases. I argue that under TCM’s “newest iteration of television,” TCM Select must operate much like the linear network it is based on to sustain itself and somewhat replicate the live viewing experience. As one of the last bastions for film preservation, TCM works to provide the digitally empowered public with access to rarely seen films through its existing digital supplements (i.e. WatchTCM, Filmstruck). By providing a sort of public service that is TCM Select, TCM is working hard to sustain a positive feedback loop involving the linear network fans, cinephiles, and digital streamers.

With FilmStruck approaching its second-year anniversary many titles that were originally on the service are no longer available. These curated “bundles” of titles are in active rotation and leave the site rather frequently—creating a sort of “liveness” factor that sets itself apart from the larger streaming giants Netflix and Hulu. While the constantly refreshed library of FilmStruck allows audiences to ostensibly binge a director’s entire catalogue, I believe that it also creates a sense of urgency viewing typically found in linear networks a la “event television.” Since audiences cannot download a title on FilmStruck (a feature available on Netflix) into their library, it is imperative that audiences binge quickly or they will have to wait until the same title is hopefully

repackaged in a later bundle. While the concept of “flow” may not have been the underlying principle in building the TCM Select channel, the landing page for TCM Select reads like a regularly scheduled night on the linear side. By aggressively highlighting Classic Hollywood titles on TCM Select, frequent FilmStruck viewers are more likely to know which Hollywood classics are being taken on and off the programming carousel. Their engagement with the site is like a cable subscriber checking the TV guide for upcoming programming—the more a viewer frequents the site, a greater pattern of flow is created between viewer and theme.

Since TCM is a paid television channel that only shows movies, the relationship between network and audience is different than one of a typical broadcast channel. The TCM channel is one for movie lovers programmed by movie lovers; who also know how to operate like broadcast producers. It is through TCM’s understanding of flow in both the linear and digital space that audiences can experience the liveness of television without actually having to watch television.