

## **NETFLIX DISRUPTS CANNES DISBARS NETFLIX**

The recent announcement by Cannes Film Festival director Thierry Frémaux that all films submitting for this year's competition must have theatrical distribution in France to qualify has sparked a Godzilla Vs King Kong arm wrestle that suggests a battle for supremacy on multiple levels between two very different approaches to the distribution of feature length screen stories.

Last year, two Netflix original features screened in competition at Cannes. The Netflix logo was booed. Croissants were choked upon on the Croisette. As a result of cultural pressure, the Festival established its new 'theatrical distribution in France' rule. Although Netflix was not mentioned in the edict, everyone knew that the streaming giant was the target: French law has a theatrical window which delays release on streaming platforms by three years. Netflix's model is a premiere on its platform; at worst a day and date release in a handful of US cinemas to qualify for the Oscars.

According to Netflix chief Ted Sarandos, it is untenable to disadvantage Netflix subscribers, who subscribe for exclusivity of original content, in this way. His retort has been to withdraw all non-competition Netflix features from Cannes screenings as well. Bat, ball, home.

It's a layer upon layer dispute: Film vs Television; Old World vs New; Cannes vs Hollywood; Auteur vs Studio; Tradition vs Innovation; Past vs Future; Linear vs Digital; Theatrical vs Streaming; Stay Home vs Go Out.

It is an economic as well as a cultural wrangle. The French cinema industry has always had a protectionist streak. The TSA (la 'taxe spéciale additionnelle') is levied upon all cinema tickets sold. It creates a funding pool that supports French filmmakers to a level we Australians can only fantasize about: more than 250 films produced each year, and the second most successful exporter of films to the world, just behind, you guessed it, the US. Protectionism is generally a bit of a dirty word, but we can't deny that in this case it has helped create and preserve a vibrant and distinct screen culture.

So there is a lot at stake, at home and abroad, for French cinema. Some have suggested that Frémaux, who did allow Netflix to enter last year's Festival, has been pressured by distributors and exhibitors to make the policy change.

And there is a lot at stake for Netflix, too. Their disruptive technology and business model has been hugely economically successful. It is hastening the emergence of a global screen culture in television. But it would no doubt dearly love the artistic and creative prestige that only selection at Cannes can bring. Not just for itself, but for the filmmakers it has chosen to support to produce for its platform. Both Cannes and Netflix, in their own way, argue that they are about preserving creative freedom for their filmmakers as much as advocating a distribution model.

This polarization will reach way beyond the French Riviera, and last way longer than the two weeks of this year's Festival. As practitioners , teachers and students of screen storytelling and culture, we will each sooner or later be forced to choose which way we want our particular screen story to go.

In the Australian situation we will also be faced by factors neither the French nor the Americans have to deal with: our cinema production industry obviously struggles to compete with blockbuster Hollywood content. Year upon year, the aggregate box office revenue for original Australian product decreases. The theatrical half-life of most Australian films is very short. There will always be a *Priscilla* or *Kenny* or *Dressmaker* that creates queues around the block, but as a rule, Australian filmmakers will see cinema release as a promotional platform for its longer life on alternative outlets, usually on-line: *I-Tunes*, *Google Play*, *You Tube* and ironically, *Netflix* and its streaming competitors like *Amazon* and *Apple*.

We would all love our work to be screened on a big screen. Having had the great privilege of producing a number of successful theatrically released features, I would have to say there is nothing quite like that moment when you sit down with your creative team to watch the finally-graded, fully-mixed, Dolby-ized first print of your work on a 20 meter screen with a huge sound system. Just a few of you in a big dark room, signing off on your efforts before you let your baby go.....

But I fear that the days of a 200 screen 8 week release for an indie Australian screen story are almost gone .Faced with the choice of that admittedly thrilling experience - which will now more than likely be short, and attract a relatively small audience - and the possibility of the more long-term, more diverse, and perhaps larger audience that may be out there in the on-line never-never, the story-teller in us will be torn: red pill or blue pill?

I have used the word 'film', sparingly here, to make this final observation. Sometime in the last 10-15 years we have had one technology revolution which has meant that celluloid delivery of a story to the screen does not happen anymore. Most of the stories seen on our theatrical screens today are not 'films' in the old sense. We have learned that the technology of delivery is not the essence of the art form. But we still call them 'films'. Perhaps ; zithout our even noticing; a similar alchemy might come into play to blur the dichotomy between the methodologies currently represented by the terms 'Cannes' and 'Netflix'.

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Link to Published version  
*Cannes vs Netflix: a screen battle of Blockbuster proportions*  
<https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/cannes-vs-netflix-a-screen-battle-of-blockbuster-proportions>

