

Netflix Original Films – Hollywood Disrupted by Streaming Success
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ABSTRACT

This thesis uses a media industry studies framework to address the question of how discourses of streaming success surrounding Netflix' Original film slate are related to the construction of streaming lore. By applying critical discourse analysis to popular and trade press publications, along with publicly available data from Netflix' investor relations, this thesis' findings showcase that while Netflix invests in strategies that trigger discourses of success of their individual Original films, such narratives are not backed by (publicly available) data, but are directly related to the overall success of Netflix as a whole. The construction of streaming lore is achieved through a holistic intertwining of stories of success that position Netflix favourably as an industry disruptor that seemingly innovates in a multitude of ways, but in reality participates in traditional industry logics in order to achieve industry recognition. Furthermore, this thesis concludes that by limiting data availability regarding content performance, Netflix presents films that hold varying strategies within their library as successful without specifying the particular success metrics for that film. By doing so Netflix profits from the discourses of innovation and industry disruption, without revealing that the intent and justification of large financial investments is exactly those discourses.

KEYWORDS: *Netflix, Streaming lore, Success, Discourse*

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1. Introduction

Netflix, as the subscription video on demand (SVOD) pioneer, is a staple in pop culture. The company's name has become more than a brand, it is a cultural phenomenon associated with specific activities such as binge-watching and Netflix and Chill (Pilipets, 2019, p.9). The streaming giant's original productions and the branding strategies surrounding them have been pivotal for Netflix's global growth and its positioning within the film and television industries (Lotz, 2022, p.141). Having released its first Original Film in 2015, Netflix is a fresh face in the film industry, relative to the Big Five studios (Universal Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Warner Bros., Walt Disney Studios and Sony Pictures) that have dominated the market for the past century (Cuelenaere, 2024, p.2). Nevertheless, Netflix has managed to take a seat on the proverbial table alongside these established production and distribution companies, and most importantly, has done so while prioritising the subscriber in terms of release strategies.

In November 2019 Netflix released *The Irishman* on its streaming platform. Before Netflix bought the film's rights and greenlit the production in 2017, the film's director Martin Scorsese had been struggling for years to come to an agreement with a production studio, largely due to the high costs required (Hibberd, 2019a, para.4). With a 159 million budget and a 3,5 hours running time, the film made the industry question, how does Netflix derive and navigate value from such pricey investments, and furthermore, how does one determine success rates for a film that does not aim to simply trigger individual transactions (Metz, 2020, para.10)? After a limited three-week theatrical window, the film was watched by 17.1 million U.S. Netflix subscribers in the first five days of its platform release – an impressive amount, yet far from the Netflix record holder at the time - *Bird Box* (2018), having a U.S. audience of 26 million in the first week of its release (Spangler, 2019, para.1-2). Nevertheless, *The Irishman* was well received by critics, with a 95% score of Rotten Tomatoes (as of 2024). Its 10 Academy Award nominations boosted the discourses of Netflix as a disruptor in the film industry, having renowned directors like Steven Spielberg open conversations regarding whether made-for-streaming films should be classified as film or television (Lang, 2019, para. 3). Netflix had its fair share of defenders, underlying the value the streamer's disruption is bringing (Lang, 2019, para. 5). It is these narratives that build into Netflix' public image as an innovator that produces quality content that does not adhere to the Hollywood business model. This innovativeness however, comes together with a certain mystique regarding the success metrics Netflix uses, due to the streaming platform's subscription-based business model. The film industry has always focused on box office performance as the indicator for commercial success and when that data is not available or applicable, the industry observer is left with few answers, for example regarding how Netflix justifies expenses like *The Irishman's* budget (Holbrook & Addis, 2008, p.89).

Netflix has stated to their shareholders that this strategy of large financial investments in

their film slate that bring in big industry talent is indeed successful, growing both revenue and member satisfaction (Netflix, 2020, p.10). However, when looking into the performance of an individual film like *The Irishman*, Netflix has not revealed any data aside from viewership. This is not for a lack of tangible data, as Chief of Original Film Scott Stuber has stated that he is aware of the exact number of subscriptions triggered by *The Irishman's* release (Spangler, 2019, para. 13). Stuber and Netflix choose not to disclose this information so they can exert control over the discourse surrounding the performance of the film (Spangler, 2019, para.14). Revealing numerical data of that sort would isolate a singular metric that represents only part of the Netflix measurement for success and predispose industry observers to make value judgements, thus initiating discourses that could affect the public perception of the film and Netflix overall (Spangler, 2019, para. 14). This is a display of the importance of trade stories for the construction of the Netflix brand through streaming lore.

Streaming lore, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter can be defined in simple terms as the accumulation of trade stories that construct the perceived definition and societal role of streaming (Burroughs, 2019, pp.3-4). In a post-truth society, where factual objective truth is blurred in the context of misinformation and fake news, discourses are at the forefront of the formation of public opinions and consequently the success of socio-cultural players such as creatives, politicians but also companies or any outspoken public figure (Newman, 2023, p.13). According to discourse theory, the widespread thoughts and associations that are brought up when the words 'streaming' and 'Netflix' are mentioned, can have direct correlation to the actualization of what Netflix and streaming actually are (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.16). In other words, if streaming and Netflix are publicly seen as a revolutionizing medium for creative freedom and quality content, this narrative will become the baseline upon which further discourses are built, hence solidifying the validity of said narrative. Consequently, the actions of all participants in these discourses can be affected by the discourses, thus actualizing them. This can mean a new subscriber, a new investor or a new creative seeking to work with Netflix.

When it comes to the evaluation of an individual motion picture as successful or not, one needs to look holistically at the correlation of the numerical data, the discourses that surround it and how it all builds into the overall Netflix brand (Netflix, n.d., Measuring Success section). Due to the difficulty of measuring and managing this value for Netflix, and even more so for the outside industry observer, one needs to consult the discursive construction of streaming lore as a means to comprehend how discourses of success can play into Netflix' overarching goal of offering subscriber-retaining value and achieving growth. This raises the question that will be addressed through this research - **how are the discourses of streaming success surrounding Netflix' original film production related to the construction of streaming lore?**

By delving into this topic, this thesis aims to contextualize the implications of Netflix'

subscription-based business model within the established practices of legacy film production. The findings contribute to the streaming lore framework, outlined by Burroughs (2019, p.2), thus adding to the academic understanding of the inner-workings of Netflix and how streaming success of film is re-defined in a manner that simultaneously makes use of traditional industry practices *and* disrupts them. This paper will thus focus on the discourses surrounding a number of Netflix-commissioned films between 2019 and 2021 and by analysing trade press publications, earnings calls from Netflix, interviews with executives and creatives, reveal the underlying processes of achieving growth as a SVOD platform. Netflix has been the topic of a substantial amount of research, most of which is centred on discussing Netflix as television, leaving the SVOD platform's film slate under-researched.

2. Theoretical framework

As this thesis is focusing on Netflix' success stories, the first question that needs answering is – what is success? The literal definition of the word, it is “the achieving of the results wanted or hoped for” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Meaning that success is context-based, it has different iterations depending on perspectives. Two players executing the same action are not necessarily reaching for the same goal. In the context of capitalism, a company's goal is to be profitable. However, as there are different iterations of profit-making, the measures for financial success also vary. In the traditional U.S. film industry discourses, success is determined by box office, a monetary indication of the revenue the film generates during its theatrical release (Cuelenaere, 2024, p.5). This success metric indicates the cumulative amount of monetary transactions that have been processed based on one product, or how many people have purchased theatre tickets for the film in question. However, this is merely the commercial perspective, which gives more weight to the financial success of the product.

Addis and Holbrook (2018, p.882) conceptualise movie success as multidimensional with three distinct components – box office (commercial), critics reviews (artistic recognition) and awards performance. When it comes to quality judgement, the average consumer takes into account primarily critics reviews (Addis & Holbrook, 2018, p. 887). However, quality is not the sole driver for audience choice of film to engage in watching. For U.S. audiences in particular, artistic recognition is not the leading factor for film choices, but rather the actors who perform in the film (Hadida, 2010, p.74). Thus, while U.S. audiences may share critics' opinions of what a quality film is, they have the tendency to be pulled towards more excitable and easily digestible films.

All motion pictures aim to entertain but they do so in different ways - some focus on getting the audience to reflect, while others excite on a surface level. Spectators can thus choose what type of entertainment they seek to be engaged in. In the past decades there has been an incline in the wide consumption of thrill-evoking films due to their accessibility and excitability (Holbrook, 2005, p.77). This is a result of the commitment institutional logic that leads to a cinema culture that focuses more on commercial success and distracting rather than reflecting, or what director Martin Scorsese famously refers to as “theme parks” rather than an art (Bell, 2019, para. 2). The commitment institutional logic refers to the traditional Hollywood strategy of financing films through a combination of investment from production studios, distributors, investors and others, thereby forming a direct link between the potential success of motion pictures and theatres (Cuelenaere, 2024, p.6). Due to the theatrical release being the determinant of a film's success, production studios prioritize strategies that will boost ticket sales and media attention. These strategies tend to be risk averse, thus employing high marketing investments, working with famous actors, special effects and relatable themes that have seen previous success (Hadida, et al., 2020, p.225). Consequently,

Hollywood has seen a decline in original and auteur films, and an incline of recycled content – franchises, sequels and adaptations (Hadida, et al., 2020, p.226). Streaming services disrupt the Hollywood modus operandi by functioning in a convenience institutional logic (Hadida, et al., 2020, p.214). This term refers to the streaming platforms’ prioritisation of the consumer through accessibility to a content library at the user’s convenience (Lotz, 2022, p. 92). Due to the lack of theatrical focus and the subscriber-funded model, SVOD companies do not need to adhere to the Hollywood strategies of wide-audience appeal. This creates more space for investment in taste-specific content that aims to provide value to a taste community, rather than maximize viewership (Lotz, 2022, p.58).

When it comes to streaming services the metric for commercial success is more ambiguous compared to box office, as their profit streams are less straightforward and universal than in the traditional industry. The most popular streaming platforms like Disney +, Amazon Prime, MAX (HBO Max) and Netflix all have different profit-streams and thus have different success metrics (Lotz, 2022, p.111). Up until 2022 when it launched an ad-based tier, Netflix held up its pure-play strategy by running a primarily subscription-fuelled business (Lotz, 2022, p.25). Objective success metrics thus do not refer to how many people watched a film, but how many people are motivated to continue paying their monthly subscription because of that film and the larger library of films offered on the platform (Lotz, 2022, p.58). This opens up the big question that Netflix has refused to answer in detail – what success metrics is the streaming company applying to evaluate individual projects? There is no complete answer to this question that is publicly shared by Netflix. They selectively present viewership data to their audiences to highlight the most popular releases on a weekly basis, but when addressing shareholders, the Netflix executives speak of “engagement” as the primary metric (Netflix, 2022, p.15). Both of these aspects are discursively malleable when not backed by extensive data. The ambiguity of these metrics and their holistic relation makes discourse analysis particularly important, as Netflix’ success stories are that prime determinant of the public’s perception of the platform’s performance.

2.1. Tracing the Rise of Netflix in the Film Industry

In order to address the question of successful streaming film, how discourses correlate to it and how Netflix is redefining the traditional understanding of success within the context of the feature film industry, one must examine the streaming company’s background, position in the market and track how it has thus far affected the traditional movie production and distribution industry. The company has a unique position in the market as the leading pure play service, having evolved from a DVD-delivery service to an online video streaming platform that has in the past decade also expanded onto a production studio (Lotz, 2022, p.106). This remarkable growth can be attributed, amongst

other things, to Netflix' success in addressing consumer needs as well as branding and most of all, the company's ability to be agile and readjust its structures, services and strategies based on market fluctuations (Hadida, et al., 2021, p.220; Wayne, 2021, p.3; Tryon, 2013, p.26).

Prior to Web 2.0 developments, which are defined by the participatory nature of online spaces (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012, p.537), video distribution technology was bound to the television and cinema mediums, creating a scarcity of available visual entertainment (Lotz, 2022, p.24). The consumer was limited by the physical and temporal constraints of schedules and network curation on television and in movie theatres. Control over when, where and how content was available, was held by the industry and the consumer had to adhere to these restrictions and plan their spectatorship accordingly. While this meant the market was not able to tap into the full potential of consumption, this scarcity of entertainment did provide buzz amongst audiences that drove them to theatres within the window of initial release (Lotz, 2021a, p.102). Thus, the industry exerted control over audience consumption, leaving spectators wanting more – more accessibility and more freedom of choice.

Fast-forward to the early 2000s, when a new tendency emerged - an increase of sci-fi, action films in theatres, largely due to their ability to attract large audiences and build up significant box office. With technological innovations and optimisations, studios and theatres now had an increasing ability to offer audio-visually pleasing content, which consistently appeals to the wide audience. Consequently, due to their ability to drive up box office numbers, such action-heavy cinematic endeavours have been favoured in production choices, often at the expense of more niche films that represent specific spectatorial tastes (Rosewarne, 2019, p.12). This is a result of the capitalism-driven business model established in Hollywood that seeks to maximize profitability at every stage of release for each new project (Hadida, et al., 2021, p.217). It is these practices that Netflix disrupted with its subscription-based model, complemented by the company's original content production. In a time when spectators were seeking a means to watch more taste-specific and easily accessible film, Netflix provided a solution. For a monthly fee, subscribers gained access to a rich library of content that was consistently and globally available to them - the proverbial ball was now in the consumer's court.

Historically, Netflix has evolved from a DVD delivery service, to an online subscription-based streaming platform that initially offered exclusively feature films, before turning to serial television content and posing itself as a direct competitor to linear television (Wayne, 2018, p.726). In that period the steaming service was largely viewed as complementary to the cinematic experience, and not at all threatening to the traditional commitment institutional logic (Parlow & Wagner, 2018, p.3). However, after 2016 the demand for cinema tickets has been declining due to their increasing prices, the growing convenience and variability of content offered by SVODs, and the COVID-19 pandemic which bound audiences to their homes. With Netflix tapping into the 'quality' film market by

producing critically-acclaimed films and collaborating with award-winning artists and industry professionals, the streaming giant is now also in direct competition with Hollywood.

Both in 2020 and in 2021, Netflix was the studio to receive the most nominations for Academy Awards, thus taking a seat at the 'quality'-content-producer table – an important factor for Netflix' brand building through success stories (Lang, 2021a, para.9). Quite the impressive development, achieved in a relatively short period of time, by a company that up until 2013 had not commissioned any projects and was maintaining the narrative of being a complimentary service to the film and television industries and not a competitor (Wayne, 2018, p.726). This (seemingly) stark change in strategy is more easily understood when contextualized in the emergence of competitor streaming platforms and Netflix' ongoing struggle with maintaining subscriber growth rates. Netflix' strategy now seems to be focused on customer retention (and partially acquisition) through the offer of an exclusive product that gives access to a library of diverse content, inaccessible elsewhere.

Netflix, along with other streaming services like Amazon, HBO Max, Disney+ etc., offer their subscribers online access to content, thus disrupting the commitment institutional logic and forming a new convenience logic (Hadida, et al., 2020, p.214). Streaming platforms allow global access to film and television content on any device, facilitating consumption and freeing audiences from the boundaries of scheduled theatrical cinema and giving access to a rich library of films and series. This way SVOD platforms are creating a new form of spectatorship, one that reflects the individualistic values of its audiences (Tryon, 2013, pp.11-12). SVOD companies offer access both to their original productions and licenced content from traditional studios, all with the freedom of streaming on any device with an internet connection and a screen. This leads to television and cinema "losing their medium-based specificity" (Friedberg, 2000, p.443), which provides content creators with more creative freedom regarding the structure and artistic choices.

This brings us back to Netflix' overall motivation of curating a branded product that attracts subscribers and continuously proves valuable to existing customers, all with the added benefit of no advertisements. Unlike its legacy studio competitors, Netflix does not aim to address the wide audience all at once, but to satisfy diverse taste preferences through a rich content library. This opens up the doors for more opinionated content, video that implements specific, sometimes politically-charged tone such as social justice and discourse that would elsewhere be deemed too one-sided. While legacy producers cannot risk implementing such discourse so as to not distance parts of their audiences, Netflix' strategy permits them to address such topics and adhere to a wide variety of opinionated spectators. In an increasingly polarized society, this business model aims to profit from all sides of a variety of spectrums. The algorithm enables the recommendation of taste and tone-specific content that appeals to a particular type of user and does not aim to be seen by all

subscribers. Thus, the success of a single piece of content is not defined in respect of how many individual times it has 'sold', i.e. been consumed, but how much value do customers (and industry professionals) attribute to the overall brand due to that film or series and how much more time and capital will that customer spend on the platform because of that (Lotz, 2022, p.58). While this value attribution is defined by personal spectatorial experiences, it is discursively malleable through the trade stories that surround the cultural asset and subsequently construct streaming lore.

2.2. Streaming lore

Burroughs (2019), as the pioneering scholar to coin the term 'streaming lore' defines the term as the collective body of stories, narratives and discourses that surround streaming platforms and thus construct their public perception and relation to industry practices (Burroughs, 2019, p.3-4). Burroughs draws on established academic arguments regarding the traditional 'industry lore' theory and embeds that into the context of Netflix and SVOD services as disruptors (Burroughs, 2019, p.4). This phenomenon refers to the role of industry discourses in the re-articulation and value construction of streaming media industries. By streamlining success stories of quality content and algorithm performance, Netflix positions itself as an innovator and disruptor that has calculated methods for managing uncertainty and negotiating growth. Regardless of the accuracy of that industry image or lack thereof, the Netflix subscriber's perception of the ability of Netflix to manage uncertainty through implementing user data is a pivotal force in the Netflix story. From a user perspective, personalization of the Netflix experience is essential for the subscriber-attributed value. All recommendations present of the landing page are presented as curated to service the user's individualistic values. The perceived individuality and ease of content discovery derived from a customized home page with user-specific recommendations promotes the user to attribute more value to the recommender, i.e Netflix (Konstan & Riedl, 2012). All of these factors and narratives feed into the overarching streaming lore.

Due to the commitment institutional logic's favoring of blockbusters and remakes (Hadida, et al., 2020, p.225; Rosewarne, 2020, p.19), auteur film creatives have in turn struggled to find financial backing for motion pictures that do not have the wide audience appeal that brings in box office revenue (Lang, 2019, para. 9). Netflix has exploited that opportunity by supporting such niche films and providing them with a world-wide platform, thus profiting from the subsequent discourses that position the SVOD platform as a disruptor of Hollywood's conservative practices (Lotz & Lobato, 2023, p.283). Nevertheless, Netflix has been criticized for engaging in similar practices as what it aims to disrupt within Hollywood, with Cuelenaere (2024, p.16) revealing a trend in Netflix' original film productions of growing its library reliance on recycled content. That includes sequels, remakes, spin-offs, reboots and adaptations of established textual stories (Cuelenaere, 2024, p.2). Engaging in these

traditional Hollywood practices does not negate the simultaneous implementation of emerging strategies, so that Netflix can provide its subscribers with a diverse library that can satisfy any taste.

The imagined framework of factors that make a film successful in the context of the Netflix library can fluctuate based on its assigned role, as each film contributes to the overall narrative of the Netflix brand. Despite the profitability of offering niche content that may prove more satisfying to its viewers than blockbusters (Lotz, 2022, p.144), Netflix' branding strategy also relies on audience and critics recognition of its content's quality, that makes use of famous Hollywood artists and their respective brands' transferable attributes of attracting discourse and audience attention. Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up* (2021) is an example of such expenditure priorities, with more than two thirds of the film's budget being dedicated to the salaries of the two main stars (Staff, 2021, para.4). Such practices aim to engage trade stories that contribute to Netflix' aim to discursively construct an audience as an effort to negotiate uncertainty and consequently produce streaming lore (Burroughs, 2019, p.4).

Central to the success of the streaming platform is the Netflix Recommendation System (NRS), which is comprised of a set of algorithms that implement a user's viewership data in order to produce a suggestion of content that the viewer is likely to be interested in. This works based on taste communities, wherein users' viewership history is fed into a large data pool and then produces recommendations based on other accounts which have had similar interactions with the content available (Gaw, 2022, p.713).

Through the viewership data such platforms gather, they can not only offer personalized recommendations, but also when producing new content, they can tap into the big data they have gathered regarding audience preferences and engrain those into the new productions. Due to the value of this data, Netflix has kept it secret, only starting to share selective data in 2018 which led to the 2019 launch of their 'Top 10' list of most popular content (Wayne, 2021, p.9). For years, industry professionals and academics have demanded Netflix shares more viewer data, but it took a while before the streaming giant decided to release even the most superficial, selective data that simply promotes their brand (Wayne, 2021, p.9). Prior to June 2023, these lists were formulated based on hours viewed (which favours content with longer runtime), while rankings post June 2023 are driven by number of full views, or the hours viewed divided by the total runtime of the piece of content (Netflix, 2024a, Methodology section). Furthermore, the extent to which Netflix implements this data into the production processes is questionable. While the company undisputedly profits from pushing the narrative of having the competitive advantage of 'knowing' its audience (Burroughs, 2019, p.9), in practice executives have shared that they rely on gut more than anything else and only partially consult the algorithm (Lang, 2021, para.52).

2.3. Netflix Library Strategies

The primary way Netflix promotes their content to existing subscribers is the user interface (Cuelenaere, 2024, p.6). Once having opened the platform, everything one sees is a recommendation under the overarching Netflix experience. A catalogue of content curated based on previous viewership practices. This is most often rationalized based on taste preferences, as film as an art form is subjective. It is more complex than the binary of “good” or “bad”. Each individual as an audience member has the capacity to discern what they deem to be of quality and of value to them. While there are systems in place for defining what constitutes quality art, that is not always the leading factor that defines success and it is only a small part of the way Netflix recommends content to its users (Hadida, 2010, p.74).

Netflix curates its library based on the interplay of two qualitative modes of categorization - verticals and taste clusters (Lotz, 2022, p.124). Vertical refers to content classification, primarily based on genre with additional specificity that goes beyond the usual single-word references such as ‘drama’ or ‘action’. Taste cluster, on the other hand, is a concept used by Netflix to categorize through parameters based on viewing patterns, rather than textual ones (Lotz, 2022, p.124). While there are some commonalities between these two categorizations, taste clusters provide a specific metric that focuses on the spectator’s overarching sensibilities goes beyond textual factors by obtaining the ability to address the spectator’s overarching content preferences, or potential future preferences, based on collected data from other users with similar viewing practices (Barett, 2016, in Lotz, 2022, p.125). Netflix then groups the users who belong to particular taste clusters into the so called ‘taste communities’ (Lotz, 2022, p.126). Thus, by transcending the traditionally prioritized textual-centric data and attempting to embed that into demographics, Netflix is tapping into behavioural patterns, which enable the streaming platform to better address audience preferences. Furthermore, such data may also help executives make more audience-informed decisions in production, which will be discussed by this paper in more detail later.

In one of her recent publications, Lotz (2022, p.128) introduces two concepts that address content and audience specificity, necessary for the comprehension of Netflix’ commissioning strategies and success metrics. Firstly, sensibility refers to an audience member’s subjective taste preferences that go beyond genre, *“it is what puts you in particular taste communities”* (Lotz, 2022, p.128). Secondly, Lotz brings attention to tone beyond Netflix’ content labelling such as ‘goofy’ or ‘witty’. Tone as a concept that refers more to emotion, rather than story, allows Netflix to directly identify and address audience sensibilities, by investigating the intersection between tonal and genre preferences (Lotz, 2022, p.129). Thanks to this in-depth understanding of how to serve a wide range of sensibilities through a variety of taste clusters, Netflix curates a diverse library that offers value to a multitude of different subscribers. Otherwise said, each subscriber belongs to a number of taste

clusters and Netflix' recommendation system curates a personalized library that addresses said user's sensibilities. Therefore, this hypothetical subscriber attributes value to their own 'perceived' Netflix that caters to their personal tastes, thus justifying the monthly cost.

Being able to identify specific sensibilities is crucial for the value proposition that Netflix makes to users on a monthly basis. Content that caters to particular tastes is more satisfying to viewers than a blockbuster that aims to address wider audiences (Lotz, 2022, p.144). Thus, what content truly keeps subscribers motivated to pay Netflix month after month is not universal, but through Netflix' holistic library strategy, this motivation can stem from different content for a variety of users and result in a diverse but vast pool of satisfied consumers. In order for this to occur, Netflix has built up its recommender system, which implements user viewership data to push for titles that according to the NRS' criteria are within the taste preferences of the end user.

Taste is a central concept to these processes. Bourdieu (1984, para.1) as the leading scholar on the topic conceptualises taste as a disposition – capital and the product of cultural and socio-demographic processes. It is the effectuation of social background and orientation, on a sub-conscious level, where its realisation is automated (Bourdieu, 1984, para.18). Scholars have had contradicting conclusions regarding the cultivation of taste and the extent of its holistic relation to socio-cultural factors (Bennett, et al., 2009, p.252; Peterson, 1992, p.254; Gaw, 2021, p.711). However, the intersection of these varying theories is the role of taste in negotiating the classification of societal groups based on social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984).

Having a vast pool of subscribers with varying taste preferences, Netflix personalizes their library so that it reflects the taste cluster that is associated with the user. This personalization brings more value to the individual user as stated by Lotz (2022, p.144): "the most mass hits are often less satisfying to consumers than those that are able to service more specific tastes." Fewer people will have seen a certain film, but the ones who have, will have more reason to want to continue their Netflix subscription. Of course, this is reliant on the algorithm successfully pushing that film in the personalized libraries of the users belonging to its taste cluster. The presence of the addressable audience, which trusts that the algorithm's recommendations are accurate, is essential in this process (Burroughs, 2019, p.11). By offering niche content to the exact spectators who will appreciate it (and they do so because the algorithm tells them they will) Netflix fills a gap in the market that the traditional industry had previously left (Hadida, et al., 2020, p.226). However, despite having this unique role in the market, Netflix still needs to participate in the blockbuster business in order to attract new subscribers and to generate media buzz (Lotz, 2022, p.144). Thus the SVOD platform offers content that holds varying strategic roles within their library and hence requires varying success metrics. Since a niche film aims to serve a different purpose than wide audience appeal, it needs to be evaluated with different metrics that focus on how well the film has served the intended

purpose, rather than comparing its streamed hours with a blockbuster film or even another film on the same streaming platform.

2.4. Tonal Shift and Woke Capitalism

As argued above, the subscription-based business model seemingly negates the necessity for wide audience appeal for each individual project and consequently success metrics vary depending on the strategic role that a single film takes on. Nevertheless, despite this versatile nature of Netflix commissioned content, there is a noticeable unifying trend that Lotz (2022, p. 148) defines as 'shifted 45 degrees'. In order to distinguish itself from legacy competitors, Netflix implements a subtle shift in tone within its in-house produced content. This tonal specificity of content, when reaching the right taste communities, provides for more viewer satisfaction, than content that has a wide-audience appeal tonality (Lotz, 2022, p.144) Tonal distinctions can be identified in regards to how stories are told and what type of characters are emphasized. This shift is also reflected in the verticals that Netflix films fit into, that have not been addressed by Hollywood sufficiently, such as teen romantic comedies and stories revolving around female characters (Lotz, 2022, p. 151). There are of course exceptions to the 45-degree shift within Netflix' library of commissions, namely Hollywood-style films, but those represent verticals that seek to provide the diversity that Netflix prides itself on.

This 45-degree shift in terms of tonality has allowed Netflix to address stories of marginalised groups, who have not been given sufficient voice by legacy producers due to their incompatibility with the mass attitude that is being pushed within Hollywood. Furthermore, alongside the vast technological advancements, we witness in the 21st century, issues such as social justice have become central in the global west. This is largely reflected by the consumer culture, which in an attempt to maintain social relevance engages in discourses of inclusivity and defines itself as 'woke' (Kanai & Gill, 2020). As a result, while a lot of content prides itself for having diverse representation, it often remains superficial, employing stereotypes and failing to contextualize marginalized groups in relevant cultural and behavioural values (Costera Meijer & de Bruin, 2003). What it succeeds to do however, is provide audiences with the illusive, gratifying feeling of engaging with progressive content and thus reinforce consumerism. Nevertheless, there has already been progress in respect to representation as companies such as Netflix actively address and self-reflect on social justice issues both in respect to the content they offer but also behind the scenes in production and management. While being a step in the right direction, the company still actively participates in woke capitalism, as it constantly elucidates its efforts of working towards more diversity and inclusivity and consequently profits from the progressiveness it aims to construct. Furthermore, such efforts might be futile as van Tine (2021) argues that in the context of capitalism, as a concept that prioritizes profit, equal, non-

superficial representation can never be achieved. Nevertheless, the key practice here is the ability to address such marginalised audiences and by discursively appealing to them, minimize uncertainty of audience reception and thus navigate discourses of success.

Another challenge that Netflix faces in its efforts to provide diverse stories with varying viewpoints is criticism from the opposite side of the spectrum that does not value such 'woke' content. While the algorithm might successfully filter some of the content displayed on a user's interface based on their viewpoints, social media and industry discourses reveal the contradictory nature of Netflix' varying standpoints. In a time when society is increasingly polarized, Netflix' attempt to profit from opposing camps can be a challenge. Thus while Netflix' strategy of ameliorating user value perception of content through emphasis on tone might improve the relative potential for success within target audiences, it also risks alienating other audiences who perceive the platform as pandering to opposing sides.

This theme is also present in the different ways a film can be recommended to different users. Netflix personalizes recommendations by bringing to the forefront aspects of the film that reflect the data gathered on the user. The artworks, or thumbnails, are the main mediator in this scenario. If the user has watched a number of films with actor A starring in the cast, then the artwork will showcase them. Another user may be presented with an artwork that underlines a different actor, even if they do not hold a main role. Netflix has been subject to criticism as this recommendation sometimes focuses on attributes like race, gender and sexual orientation (Gaw, 2022, p.715). A film with a predominantly white cast may be advertised to a person of colour with an artwork showcasing the one non-white person in the film, even if their role is not that big. Through these methods, Netflix aims to achieve more social relevance – feeding into niches and providing various groups with content that addresses their lives.

3. Methodology

In order to address how streaming success is defined for streaming film and how Netflix uses the surrounding discourses to navigate the commissioning choices of the production studio, this thesis will be drawing on existing literature on streaming success and embedding that in the context of Netflix as a film production and distribution company, rather than only a television one. A lot of the phenomena discussed, such as the development of Netflix' anti-transparency policy and the company's strategy of presenting selective audience data, can be extended from the conception of Netflix as television and applied to the broader idea of Netflix, where the company taps into the 'quality' motion picture industry (Wayne & Uribe Sandoval, 2021, p.6).

After thus introducing and contextualizing streaming success this thesis will implement a critical discourse analysis on the collected texts. The information contained in these statements, social media posts, interviews with company officials, etc., needs to be processed and assessed through a qualitative textual analysis lens in order to reveal the underlying connotations within the texts and further contextualize them in order to make sense of them and reveal the power interests within (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.40). This will be achieved through three levels of analysis – word choice, the way words and phrases relate to one another and the themes that are brought to the forefront. These tools aim to uncover the motivation of specific lexical choices, suppression, and structural oppositions. Discourse analysis entails the use of such tools with the purpose of providing a holistic understanding of how statements are produced from a set perspective, which upon delivery is left contextually detached from the signifier, i.e. the authors or speakers of the texts examined. This method then proceeds to uncover the institutionalized patterns of knowledge through categorization and reveals the power structures within (Havens, et al., 2009, p.240). The reason for the implementation of the media industry studies methods is the opportunity they offer to critically analyze trade stories that reveal what industry insiders and in this case Netflix executives do not disclose publicly (Havens, et al., 2009, p.247).

This thesis will further examine the discourses surrounding (mainly) three of Netflix' productions that attracted audience and/or critics attention, identify the way that Netflix was portrayed in these contexts and trace these narratives as they become transferrable to the company's overall brand. On the industry side, texts were collected from Netflix' investor relations website, and include quarterly statements to shareholders and accompanying transcripts of earnings interviews. The analyzed texts range from the first quarter of 2019 up to the latest release, which to the date of writing is first quarter of 2024. Due to the wide range of topics discussed in these texts, the analysis will be performed selectively on parts of the texts which discuss themes relevant to this study, such as success, quality, innovation and industry disruption.

Furthermore, this thesis makes use of media articles from popular and trade press,

discussing industry developments and events as a way to track occurrences and projections for future success and compare those to the actual turn of events. One industry insider whose interviews will be taken as insider data-points is Scott Stuber – Netflix’ Chief of Film, due to his key executive position. Stuber joined Netflix in 2017 with the purpose of boosting the company’s film slate through his experience with Hollywood productions at Universal Studios. In 2023 Stuber was appointed as chairman of Netflix Film, only to announce a year later his leaving from Netflix in order to start a new company (Fleming, 2024, para.1). In his time at Netflix, he was interviewed for a number of press releases that reveal some inner workings of the Netflix Film department, thus making his statement valuable for this research. The films whose success stories will be tracked were selectively chosen, based on the discourses related to quality, innovation and disruption, they have brought up.

As Netflix outlines the success rates of films publicly only through a list of top 10 most watched, this thesis will use that data as a starting point for potential samples. Naturally, this presents some limitations as this very basic data only provides an overview of the most seen films, while leaving out the rest, which prevents the possibility of comparisons and embedding data in context and thus obstructs analysis. With this in mind, this thesis will employ a cherry-picking method to select films that represent diverse strategies and can thus help build an argument for the holistic understanding of varying streaming film success metrics from the perspective of Netflix. Due to the limited data available, each of the projects discussed has been at some point presented as successful through the hours viewed metric. Nevertheless, when embedding this superficial data within industry discourses, extracted from interviews with company executives and public shareholder letters, a clearer picture emerges – one that better reveals what success means from Netflix’ perspective. One must also consider the limitations of this second layer of data applied, as when addressing shareholders, Netflix’ agenda is boiled down to presenting strategies, decisions and results with the means of justifying investments. Thus, content reception is rarely addressed in further detail than in the framework of the same numerical success metric. This data does however present some strategy-revealing statements and provide context regarding the motivation for funding specific projects.

The Irishman (2019)

The Irishman is a three-and-a-half-hour long crime drama by renowned director Martin Scorsese that became the center of the theatrical window debate and triggered questions regarding Netflix productions' right to be nominated for cinema awards (Sperling, 2019, para.2). The director had been working on the story for years and was struggling to find a production studio, willing to finance the expensive budget and provide him with full creative freedom. Eventually Netflix agreed to these terms, but not without conditions of their own – the film was to be released almost directly on the online platform, only offering a 27-day period of exclusive theatrical screenings. This was not met well by the large movie theatre chains, a lot of whom turned down the motion picture. They were insistent on withholding the traditions of a 90-day window with two chains offering to compromise on the shorter period of 60 days, but Netflix was reluctant (Sperling, 2019, para.10). In this case while the industry professionals are criticizing Netflix for not giving Scorsese's mob epic the wide screen exposure it supposedly deserves, they seem to be going back to familiar discourses of the death of cinema that have repeatedly been proven wrong. However, these seemingly negative discourses surrounding Netflix do nothing more than position the streaming platform as the innovator, the inevitable future that threatens the old ways. This film is a relevant data point for this research thesis due to its strategic role within the Netflix library. Its large-scale budget of 160m which was especially at the time unprecedented in the context of an auteur film with a slow pace and 3,5 hours of running time (Meir, 2023, p.284). Nevertheless, the following chapters will argue that it played a key role for Netflix' development as a 'quality' film producer.

Don't look up (2021) - climate change discourses and woke capitalism

Don't look up is an apocalyptic black comedy by Adam McKay that received a limited theatrical release on December 10th 2021, before becoming widely available on the streaming platform two weeks later. The film's release was delayed by COVID-19 pandemic. Upon its release online, the film attracted millions of viewers, becoming Netflix' most streamed film in a week (Grater, 2022, para.1). Its cast was praised for their performance, while critics had overall mixed feelings about the film, resulting in average scores on review websites like Rotten Tomatoes. Due to the film's political charge, US right-wing publications were predominantly critical, while supporters of the film claimed that the critics who dismissed it, did so because they missed the point of the film and went as far as saying "no wonder journalists have slated it... it's about them" (Monbiot, 2022, para.1). Furthermore, the film triggered a lot of discourses in the academic world, as scientists praised it for its mix of satire with realism. These discourses are not only attention-grabbing due to the relevance of the climate-change narrative, but also position Netflix as the progressive activist, supported by scientists and criticized by conservatives. These are narratives closely aligned with the concept of woke capitalism, i.e monetizing on superficially presented, socially relevant issues. With its 75 million budget, the film is one of the cheaper Netflix projects to reach and sustain a position in the top 10 most watched English language films on the platform. However, considering that the larger part of that budget was allocated to paying the cast, the film showcases a Hollywood-style strategy of investing in talent with established names within the industry. Thus, this film is representative of a type of strategic investment for Netflix, and for that reason it is selected as a data point in this thesis.

6 Underground (2019)– success stories of the Hollywood-style blockbuster

In 2018 Netflix announced its collaboration with Skydance Media on the project that was intended as setting the ground for a franchise. Directed by Michael Bay and starring Ryan Reynolds, the action thriller *6 Underground* had a \$150million budget, which was seemingly justified by the film's performance with audiences as Netflix reported it being the most watched for its time. Nevertheless, Netflix has decided against the production of sequels, as the film was reportedly somewhat of a disappointment (Lang, 2021a, para.49). This provides an interesting case of a project that in Hollywood's success metrics did more than well, while in the context of SVOD service Netflix the film did not achieve what was intended.

Furthermore, other films whose surrounding discourses will briefly be discussed are teen films *To All the Boys* (2018) and *Kissing Booth* (2018) and action sci-fi *The Adam Project* (2022) and murder mystery franchise *Knives Out* (2019-). All four films were selected due to Netflix portraying them as successful, with the two teen films being the most rewatched on Netflix and receiving two sequels each (Welk, 2018, para.2). Additionally, the murder mystery whose intellectual property belonged to Lionsgate, saw its sequel rights purchased by Netflix (Flatau, 2023, para.1).

4. Results

Before delving into specific case studies of discourses of success and how Netflix constructs streaming lore through them, this chapter will examine the general narrative surrounding success and the implemented metrics that Netflix (publicly) reveals for measuring it. Addressing shareholders and hence speaking from a direct profit-oriented perspective, Netflix reveals a picture of internal analytical practices that comprise evaluation metrics and consequently decision-making processes such as which project to be renewed for a sequel and which not. Providing answers for their “top investor questions” Netflix states:

We evaluate the performance of our originals several ways. We measure the impact of our originals on our ability to acquire new members and engagement, which is correlated with retention of existing members. We also seek reasonable economics relative to other exclusive content on a cost per hour viewed. We also take into account critical acclaim and awards for our originals and the impact original series may have on enhancing our brand and attractiveness of our service which helps with member growth. (Netflix, n.d., Measuring Success section)

While this analytical framework suggests the holistic implementation of sophisticated data that outlines a seemingly objective success metric, no such data is shared outside the company. Nevertheless, as an industry observer, one is left with the impression that Netflix manages uncertainty and addresses audience needs based on empirical data, instead of relying on gut feeling as producers traditionally do (Zafirau, 2009, p.190). Managing uncertainty (or at least appearing to do so), is a highly important aspect of Netflix’ venture capital business model as it is a key attracting point for investors.

When addressing the audience, Netflix elucidates a different perspective on defining and evaluating success – a rather simplified, but heavily discourse-oriented one. By distributing its content separate from the conventional framework established by legacy actors, Netflix exerts key control over reporting viewership data. Currently, they do so in a limited manner through a ‘weekly top 10’. Due to the scarcity of public data, the company has acquired the exclusive ability to present objective reports of audience reception, thus establishing a market-defining power of influencing the discourses of success. This is further complicated by the fact that the information that Netflix does share is restricted to the “top 10 best performing” films in that week, based on hours streamed.

However, when addressing the question of how the company manages to maintain the ratio of financial investments to subscriber-attributed value at a healthy equilibrium, Netflix executives speak of engagement. They highlight two points, stating that titles that promote conversation and buzz are the dominant attracting factors for new subscribers, but “[e]ngagement is that primary

leading indicator that we have for retention and sort of value delivered” (Netflix, 2022, p.15). Engagement is however a broad term that includes but is not necessarily exclusively referring to viewership hours. What specific metrics Netflix includes in their internal engagement evaluations is not clear, however what can be critically discussed is how the company isolates this one metric to be presented to the public as the leading indicator for success. By doing so Netflix is able to provide audiences with an indication for popularity, sufficient for users seeking to watch the most socially relevant films, while not revealing the true scope of data that drives their commissioning decision-making processes.

When asked about how success is measured for the Netflix films, the now ex-Chief of Film Scott Stuber stated that in practise there are a lot of similarities to the traditional industry:

I ran it just like I ran Universal. I have a P&L. I have an addressable audience of 250 million people. I have a budget on a movie that is, say, \$100 million. I have a marketing component of what I’m going to spend and all those things. And then I go, ‘OK, I need X amount of people to complete it.’ (Earl, 2023, para.31)

The above-stated metrics paint a clear but one-sided picture, as Stuber’s statement is only partially aligned with the previously discussed quote at the beginning of this section, regarding the ‘top investor questions’ – “reasonable economics relative to other exclusive content on a cost per hour viewed” (Netflix, n.d., Measuring Success section). This is the first-hand producer’s perspective that focuses on immediate financial rationalization of an individual project by utilizing a method that resonates traditional box office formulation. It evaluates the direct financial impact and audience performance, without taking into account the larger scale impact on the overall Netflix brand. Thus having underlined the universality of these processes within streaming and traditional film production, the film executive then goes on to show the differences within:

... as an audience member, you can leave that theater by pressing exit very quickly. If you exit my movie before a certain time, I don’t get the ticket. So if you go to AMC and you buy and you leave, they get the ticket. I don’t. And if five of you watch ‘Rebel Moon,’ I get one ticket. And if you go to AMC, I get five tickets. (Earl, 2023, para.31)

Despite Stuber’s underlying point that the translation of viewership data to profit in streaming is less concrete and thus harder to evaluate, this struggle on Netflix’ side is an integral part of the platform’s value offer to audiences. If a household has to make the choice of whether to pay \$20 for a monthly Netflix subscription, which will allow for the whole group to watch multiple films and series, or to collectively see a film in theatres, where each person has to purchase a ticket in order to be granted access to a single viewership experience, the monthly cost of a subscription is

quickly justified. Thus, to take this ambiguity of viewership numbers into account, the Netflix business model has to include more variables into their success metrics. Industry discourses, awards, branding and public opinion can be a driving force for navigating this ambiguity.

Success can relate to a variety of factors and aspects, thus enabling Netflix to push the narrative that benefits the public perception of the film. Was *The Irishman* with its large budget successful in the context of the SVOD business model? Did it have “reasonable economics relative to other exclusive content on a cost per hour viewed” (Netflix, n.d., Measuring Success section)? Did they see a sufficient increase in subscribers relative to the financial investments? Did they reduce churn? These are the crucial questions that cannot be answered, but what can and will be argued by this paper is that the film did succeed in adding to Netflix’ streaming lore and thus opening up more doors for growth.

4.1. History of Netflix’ Growth and Development – From Licencing to Producing

The product offered by Netflix, and consequently the strategy, has been evolving since the launch of the SVOD platform in 2007. Having started with exclusively offering licenced film content, a decade later Netflix penetrated the television industry by further investing in serial television rights. It did not take long for the growing company to realise that the most lucrative and sustainable opportunity was to produce original content, to be distributed exclusively on their platform. As in any start-up business, finding a gap in the market is not an insurance for success - one must, amongst other things, establish a branding strategy that underlines the unique features of the product, thus differentiating itself from competitors and drawing in subscribers. 2012 saw the production of the first original series by Netflix, thus marking the start of a new era of streaming lore.

Original content has been pivotal for Netflix. In its starting years as a distributor the company was being labelled as an OTT (over the top) by the rest of the industry. While linear television and Hollywood insiders would identify the streaming service platform as a disruptor, they differentiated Netflix from themselves by framing it as a third-party distributor and far from a viable competitor, due to its lack of content production (de Waard, 2020, p.37).

Especially when it came to the production of Hollywood-style films exclusively for Netflix, one of the challenges for the platform was to establish relations with renowned talent (Earl, 2023, para.11). For this reason, they hired experienced executive Scott Stuber, who had already worked on a commercially successful slate of films for industry giant Universal Pictures. His network and understanding of the business were pivotal for the Netflix journey to the Academy Awards and thus to establishing itself as a quality film producer and direct competitor to the cinema experience. Speaking about his early days at Netflix, Stuber explains:

So you're dealing with 100-year-old studios that have IP and have development. And so you're really starting from scratch. And it was fun. It was a challenge. You had to go to your friends and beg, and sometimes they would say, 'No, I like you. I'm going to have dinner with you, but I'm not going to work there.' And you're like, 'Ah, can we do it?' And you keep coming back and you keep coming back. (Earl, 2023, para.11)

The familiarity with which Stuber speaks of interactions with industry leaders underlines the role he took within Netflix. In an industry where knowing the right people and having the right portfolio can open or close doors for a person, money can sometimes not be a sufficient factor to attract talent. In Netflix' early days of film production, the only way to convince A-list talent to take a risk by associating their brand with a starting producer which is attempting to disrupt the Hollywood norms was an experienced and trusted executive. This came into effectuation in the likes of a snowball effect, where A-list talent felt more comfortable working with the relatively young production company when other respected creatives had already done so and Stuber's task was to initiate the process.

Building a brand that consumers turn to for their filmic entertainment, talent finds attractive to work with and industry leaders recognise as a competitor was essential to the growth and establishment of Netflix as a disruptor. In combination with the production of original content, Netflix has been developing their brand identity by de-branding externally produced content (Wayne, 2018, p.735). The strategy of building a platform-based user experience that entails the removal of network logos and promotional branding in licenced content proved beneficial to the company. By doing so, in the eyes of the audience, Netflix alienates content from any attachments to production studios and curates a spectatorial experience framed by the streaming platform itself (Wayne, 2018, p.735). This resulted in the widespread perception of the Netflix experience as a cultural phenomenon, and even escalated into popular internet slang such as Netflix and Chill (Pilipets, 2019, p.2). Furthermore, since the early years of fast growth for Netflix, the company stood out as the leading streaming service which constantly kept growing and exploring content production along with distribution. Being the leader in an industry with few other platforms offering the same service, Netflix could easily acquire the licences for established film and television content. This was at a time when linear television networks had just started to identify Netflix as a disruptor but were far from believing that developing their own streaming service platforms would be a lucrative endeavour.

In 2020, only five years after releasing its first original film (which included Netflix solely as a distributor but not producer), Netflix proudly received more Academy Award nominations than any other Hollywood studio (Solsman, 2020, para.1). Despite the controversies surrounding Hollywood's divide of praising and excluding Netflix, the disruptor has established itself as a serious competitor.

Furthermore, 2020 saw an unexpected spike in subscribers for Netflix due to the home-bound world, seeking entertainment throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This growth not only boosted Netflix' stock value to yet unprecedented heights (only to later on fall considerably) but also provided an illusive indication for fast growth, despite predictions for market saturation. Thus at a time when many industries suffered, both young and established businesses were forced to morph into digitally-driven entities, others had to file for bankruptcy, but Netflix was able to profit from its digital nature. Apart from the practical benefits in this period for Netflix, there was one other aspect that was crucial – the cultural world-wide recognition for the need for digital distribution of entertainment.

Prior to the pandemic, the streaming company was somewhat discredited by Hollywood traditionalists and cinephiles who bound the concept of cinema to the medium-specificity of the movie theatre and accused Netflix of bringing about “the death of cinema” – an accusation previously aimed at VHS and television (Roxborough, 2022, para.12; Benson-Allott, 2013, p.7-8). The Covid-19 pandemic elucidated the fragility of the human experience and the value of digital distribution (Vlassis, 2021, p.967). All of a sudden Netflix (and SVOD services altogether) was no longer the disrupter – it was the saviour, the only option for reaching audiences, thus sparking the mass-transition of established studios to developing their own streaming services (Siegel, 2021, para.2). Licencing content to Netflix no longer seemed attractive, when there was the opportunity to instead be a direct competitor to them.

Having started their massive growth by providing access to licenced content and applying strategies such as de-branding TV networks' content of their platform so as to 'curate the Netflix experience', the streaming giant is now seeing itself pushed away from such strategies as more and more networks develop their own streaming platforms and consequently pull their content from Netflix. As the company is losing licenced content from its platform, the Blockbuster-killer is desperately trying to shift the audience's attention to their original productions, firmly believing in the priority of consistently releasing new content (Netflix, 2022, p.8).

With the additional push from the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw massive parts of life shifting to the online realm, there has been a spree of emerging streaming platforms. Many of these newcomers are held by conglomerates of television networks and film production studios, holding the rights to culturally paramount films and series. Thus with the growing streaming platform proliferation, Netflix has gradually been losing the rights to key content. The famous sit-com series *Friends* is the perfect example of this occurrence, as instead of renewing Netflix' licence for the show in 2020, *Friends* rights holder Warner Brothers Television launched the series on their own brand new platform – HBO Max (Eklund, 2022, para.11). This gradual loss of key licenced content has since left Netflix relying more and more on original content to sustain subscribers. Once the original content production strategy was a way to differentiate the streaming service from

other competitors, but since 2023 more than half of Netflix' content library consists of Originals (Heinzman, 2023, para.1)

4.2. Netflix in a Sea of Competitors

Netflix' spokespeople have through time changed the company's classification within motion picture entertainment, initially labelling the platform as the world's leading internet television network, distinctive from regular television, it provides a personalised experience, it is *your* television. Nowadays Netflix prefers to not associate its brand with a specific traditional industry classification, underlying its unique position in the market. Classifications constructs boundaries, which is why Netflix does not characterise itself as film or television, it does not belong to either industry and is not merely a combination of the two – it is a phenomenon of its own. Amanda Lotz, a leading scholar for SVOD, characterizes Netflix as “a zebra amongst horses” due to its sole focus on content production and distribution, as opposed to its competitors (Lotz, 2022, p.15) Despite the multitude of digital streaming platforms, there is no other pure play company that has reached such scale. Since the launch of Disney+ in 2019 the company has made available to their users an extremely large library of content and has consequently been identified as a significant threat to Netflix' thus far stable market domination. Nevertheless, the two industry leaders are not as comparable as one might assume, due to the divergence of company purpose, structure and thus strategy. Disney, as a large corporation with various revenue streams perceives its SVOD service as a “corporate extension” that can be leveraged within the broader perspective of the media giant (Lotz, 2022, p.12). Furthermore, in the past couple of years Disney has managed to add on to the already extensive library of content. Through the acquisition of multiple studios, including Marvel, Lucasfilm, Fox and Pixar, Disney not only offers fan-favourite content, but also holds the rights for further production of content within the established fictional worlds. These blockbuster franchises further increase Disney's market share, which already in 2020 was close to reaching 40% (de Waard, 2020, p.36). This showcases the financial capacity of Disney to invest in large-scale projects and intellectual properties, while not exposing itself to any risk that could not be handled by the overarching entertainment giant. Netflix on the other hand is only now starting to establish intellectual property that can be remembered by audiences as culturally relevant and consistently profitable when extended onto sequels (Cuelenaere, 2024, p.9). This struggle for durable content in respect to film can be identified more clearly in the past few years as Netflix has been outspoken about creating films that have potential for sequeling.

Amazon Prime, the other leading competitor for market domination, is also far from a pure play platform – as part of the Amazon services, Prime seeks to promote user subscription as a means to increase revenue streams in the retail sector. Lotz (2022, p.12) defines this service to

overarching company relation as a “corporate complement”, similar to Apple TV. Thus when identifying this underlying strategy Amazon is revealed to not be in direct competition with Netflix, apart from in terms of consumer attention. While this may seem like a fact that shrinks Netflix’ competition, reality couldn’t be further away. In the age of digitalisation, competition is in this way exacerbated as actors in the market who seemingly have nothing to do with each other are all competing for the same thing – consumer time and money. This occurrence, labelled as attention economy, puts all leisure activities as competitors of the same category (Pilipets, 2019, p.4).

...[w]e compete with all the activities that consumers have at their disposal in their leisure time. This includes watching content on other streaming services, linear TV, or series/film rentals or purchases but also reading a book, surfing YouTube, playing video games, social media, messaging apps, going out to dinner with friends or enjoying a glass of wine with their partner, just to name a few. We earn a tiny fraction of consumers’ time and money, and have lots of opportunities to win more share of leisure time, if we can keep improving (Netflix, n.d., Competitors section)

So Netflix is not just fighting to convince the viewer that their content is more attractive than other films and series, but that their content is more attractive than human interaction. They need to convince the viewer to choose to dedicate their time to watching. This obviously has a lot of social bearing, so in order to stimulate this activity and make it be perceived as a relevant manner of participation in society, the content needs to be somehow relevant for the audience. There can be many reasons why someone chooses to watch a film - it may be for the sake of passing time, a distraction. But you may do it to gain a different perspective on life, one that will allow you to not only have a new understanding of life on a personal level, but one that will provide you with a better connection with other people. Shared stories bring people together. Watching a film positions the spectator within the conversation of social circles around them, but also unreachable circles – namely famous talent. They may find themselves engaged with the people who are discussing a film or the press surrounding it – news articles, interviews, advertisements, merchandise, etc. That is the lore - the fluid interaction between shared stories and people’s everyday discourses and lives. But how can that public attention be established to begin with? Connecting users with the stories they find engaging and relevant is an essential part of Netflix’ value proposition. In this scenario, the lowest hanging fruit is a story or character which has already gained a spot within the audience’s life – a children’s story you grew up with, a beloved character from a successful film or simply a part two of another story.

4.3. Addressable Audience

Established stories can be attractive to audiences due to a pre-existing personal relation with the narrative. For example, a famous children's story that a lot of people have grown up reading or hearing will trigger associations of past experiences and will consequently hold value for people. Thus such a story is just another way to address the audience, to engage them with a part of the film that they may relate to already before they have made the decision to watch it. The NRS can achieve that pull-factor for spectators on multiple levels – through taste communities, history of following a certain artist, and most importantly, through the discursively-constructed by Netflix belief of the user that the algorithm's recommendations are data-driven, personalized and thus accurate.

A vital part of a film recommendation is the first impression that the potential spectator gets, as it can be the deciding factor of whether that person will want to commit to watching it. The advantage that the NRS has in that respect, compared to traditional Hollywood marketing, is the opportunity to bring forward the exact features of the film that the collected data shows will be the convincing points for a specific user. This is primarily realised in the artwork displayed as representative for the film. It is the first point of contact for the user and can have a decisive role in whether that user will choose to click on the film. Thus if the user's history of content choices displays an interest in films starring Margot Robbie, then the NRS may put her image on the forefront of a film's artwork even if she does not have a main role in that film (Gaw, 2022, p.714). But regardless of the scale of her role in this hypothetical film, a fan of hers would at the very least be curious. This core of strategy is in no way innovative, placing famous actors in movie posters has long been used in the traditional film industry. The NRS just has the opportunity to do so in a more personalised way that addresses their audience directly. Furthermore, representation in media is seen as an important factor for audiences as taste may be driven by socio-cultural factors (Bennett, et al., 2009, p.252). This has led to the NRS being criticized for racially personalizing the way content is advertised on their user interface via artworks (Berkowitz, 2018, para.6; Gaw, 2021, p.715). By doing so Netflix is engaging in and profiting from woke capitalism in a measured manner that reflects the user's profile.

Highlighting the right pull factor for the audience can be essential to the resulting viewership hours of the film in question. But if the audience is already invested in the story that the film will be telling, then the marketing becomes easier. Meaning that if an audience has already seen *Knives Out* (2019), that audience will be easier to convince of watching the sequel to that film than another murder mystery whose cinematic universe they are not acquainted with yet. For that reason, both the traditional film industry and Netflix invest in films that can lay the base of intellectual property (IP) that could generate further profits. However, for Netflix there is an extra layer of discursively tying the established IP to their overarching brand so that when their users think of a beloved story,

they associate it with the name Netflix. Thus striving to establish a trust in the user base that the Netflix brand is the common denominator of the films they like. This intent can be seen in the third 2019 quarterly earnings interview where then Chief Content Officer (now co-CEO) Ted Sarandos stated:

I think established IP has a leg up with consumers. They know what they're getting into. There's a prebuilt-in excitement. It makes the marketing a little easier. But in general, don't forget the power of brand creation. And what is the value of a franchise? It's really the value of brand creation and can you scale off of it. (Netflix, 2019, p.10)

This statement by Sarandos points towards a strategy of building a user-loved cinematic universe that can generate buzz and boost viewership in a cost-efficient way and then take that a step further by tying that individual success story to the Netflix brand. By identifying that cinematic universe as a sub-brand of Netflix, a proverbial puzzle piece is added to the larger brand story of Netflix. In the case of the *Knives Out* franchise some industry reporters suggest that this strategy does not only aim to further Netflix' brand, but to also "keep the franchise away from other studios who might give the films a cinematic release" (Flatau, 2023, para.6). After the first film's box office performance of \$311 million, Netflix outbid all other studios for the sequeling rights with the sizeable sum of \$469 million. This has thus far yielded good viewership for the second film of the planned trilogy. By doing so Netflix has succeeded in translating proven theater-goers to instead watch the sequel on its platform. So in this way Netflix is not only boosting its viewership, generating media buzz, but also directly moving a cinematic universe from theaters to its streaming platform.

Outside of licensing, there is also a spot in Netflix' strategy to create its own in-house intellectual property that can be built up to a franchise, especially within their blockbuster slate. Films like *The Gray Man*, *Red Notice* & *Extraction* that have the Hollywood-style action-heavy plots with an easily digestible plot and excitable visual appeal, fall within the category of sequel potential. When it comes to greenlighting a sequel or not, the company executives need to make some hard assessments regarding the performance of the initial film and decide whether the financial investment is reciprocal to the audience-derived value. In the context of such "go"/"no go" decisions, the industry observer gets the unique opportunity of peeking through the discursive veil of success stories. The action-heavy blockbuster *6 Underground* was one of the most watched films on the platform when it came out (Clark, 2019, para.2). Nevertheless, despite this apparent success Netflix has decided to not continue the production of a sequel, with Scott Stuber stating that "[w]e didn't feel like we got there on that one creatively... It was a nice hit, but at the end of the day we didn't feel like we nailed the mark to justify coming back again. There just wasn't that deep love for those characters or that world" (Lang, 2021, para.50). Nevertheless, the film's reception was

presented as a success to shareholders, stating that “83m member households chose this crowd-pleasing action film through its first four weeks” (Netflix, 2020, p.3).

The ‘deep love’ Stuber is referring to is not measured in numbers, if it were this film would be considered one of the fan favourites, considering its place in the top charts. Albeit the following statement’s speculative nature due to the lack of public data to support it, Stuber seems to be referring to audience discourse, and social media buzz that would usually point towards such ‘affection’. Furthermore, Netflix is speculated to have more intelligent metrics that indicate a scale of affinity, capable of evaluating the relative value users attribute to a variety of content (Lotz, 2022, p.158). Such a satisfaction coefficient could provide a more specific metric that could pinpoint something as abstract sounding as an audience’s ‘deep love’ for a film.

4.4. Content Structure & Durability

In the context of the Netflix experience, the categorization and distinguishing between film and television is gradually becoming more and more blurred. While the medium-based specificities of both motion picture art-forms are stripped by the universality of the platform-based viewer experience, the cultural associations remain. Television tends to be anything serialized (with episode length sometimes reaching feature film standards) while film is a single piece of content, whose narrative takes place within the confines of the 1,5 to 3 hours long visual experience. Film series, or films that are based in the same cinematic universe, and sequels, take up a middle ground of such definitions. When producing series for an SVOD platform, the viewing practices that are structurally incorporated in the content become more similar to film than to what is traditionally the formula for television episodes (Petridis, 2021, p.1). Netflix series like *Stranger Things* are an example of such content that is distributed as television series, but actually follows the three-act approach that is typical for long-form film (Petridis, 2021, p.3).

When put on a streaming platform the content’s essence is boiled down to its ephemeral or durable nature in terms of cultural relevance. A film is innately ephemeral as it actively engages its audience once – the audience watches it and depending on their experience and perception they might remember it, forget it, engage in conversation about it, re-watch it, etc. In terms of business transactions, it is a done deal. The traditional theatrical release strategy drags out the time frame within which the film is advertised, released in cinemas and then available for direct retail, which partially compensates the ephemeral nature and hence extends its period of cultural relevance and profitability. A desire is built in through marketing, the exclusive cinematic release drives people to theatres, and finally once the film is made available for watching at home, it has acquired a sort of mysticism. While from the consumer’s perspective this might be seen as frustrating, it is also what drives up the monetary value. Netflix, as the consumer-oriented service aims to tackle these

consumer frustrations by putting their wishes first, which consequently underlines the ephemerality of said film. The period between desire and excitement for the release and the platform-wide release is short, resulting in a big audience watching in a short period of time but consequently the content losing cultural value. For this reason, it is necessary to employ supportive strategies that bring titles back to the attention of the viewer. Discourses and awards being the largest manner of achieving this. The media attention directed at the large festivals such as the Oscars in the US and Cannes in France, provides just that necessary extra push to audiences. This brings along a somewhat of a strategy paradox for Netflix – what to prioritize – the fast online distribution they pride themselves on since day one, or the requirements for theatrical windowing that festivals impose in order for a film to be an eligible competitor.

4.5. Theatrical Windows and Awards

Since its start in the early 20th century, the film industry has gradually established a business model that works around the affordances of the movie-theatre-centred industry. A model that seeks to ensure maximum profitability of the cultural goods that are being produced. This entailed regulation in terms of production and distribution such as production studios being restricted from distributing their own content, talent agencies being restricted from production and an elaborate timeline for release including theatrical windows, box office, etc. All of this formed a well-oiled machine that financed the necessary sectors and through the elaborate release provided a means of evaluating audience reception, based on which further business moves were implemented. Box office, or the amount of revenue that a film produces, is the defining measure not only for how well a film did in the first theatrical window, but also in the future how well it will sell for any following distribution deals. Thus, this value became the overall measurement for success in the industry.

Gatekeeping practices in the film industry in terms of what defines ‘quality’ cinema have predominantly been relating to theatrical exhibition. Since the boom of television and later on VHS and other distribution technologies, films have become further available outside of the movie theatre, thus resulting in a wider, but harder to measure, audience reach. However, those films that have been produced exclusively for television, immediately cancelled out their potential to be viewed as quality. Television, despite its wide consumer reach, requires specific formatting, for example in terms of advertisement breaks, which goes against the cultural and aesthetic values of the cinematic experience. Because of this distinction, television films have never truly threatened Hollywood (Lotz, 2021a, p.106). They have always been categorized separately and despite theatre owners simultaneously suffering from the stagnating number of theatregoers, television films were never seen as competition.

Netflix' entrance into the film production industry, with the company's previous penetration of the televisual production, had a crucial defining moment. In the context of the company identifying itself as internet television, one might assume that Netflix' original films would be regarded as TV movies – intended for the specific medium, never to reach theatrical release and thus never to be considered as “quality” cinema. However, Netflix had other plans for the public regard of the company as a producer. Despite its digitalized distribution model that did not entail theatrical windows, Netflix still had its eyes on the “quality” label and was prepared to compromise its otherwise strict release strategy of being the sole distributor of original content. The Academy Awards, Hollywood's most highly regarded recognition of quality, only require a week-long theatrical release in New York and Los Angeles for a film to be eligible for a nomination. For various projects Netflix has negotiated theatrical releases, provided not with a wide release in big movie theatre chains, due to the studio not being able to offer a release window of over 4 weeks.

Traditionally theatrical windows provided theatre owners with the insurance that for the agreed period (usually 3 months in the U.S.) they would have exclusive rights for screening a film. This way audiences were enticed to go to movie theatres, knowing that if they missed their window of opportunity, they would have to wait a while before being able to watch the film at home. This justification for the industry practice was the reasoning for movie theatre chains to not accept distribution deals with Netflix, that only offered 3 weeks of exclusive rights.

Nevertheless, even with a smaller release, this way Netflix fits its films within the Academy's requirements. Once that barrier has been passed, Netflix' films dazzle with their high production value, cinematography and big industry names, all of which are deemed “quality” factors. Critics have been appreciative of the content produced by Netflix, which is reflected in the amount of nominations the studio has been receiving for the past years. Consequently, this critics recognition elevates the Netflix name and grants it the “quality” label necessary for the studio to position itself as not just a viable competitor, but one that out-performs all other studios. While this might seem threatening to Hollywood's established modus operandi, Netflix is still reliant on the traditional industry for talent, promotion and quality assurance through public discourses. And while producing award-worthy content with critics-recognised talent is a pricey endeavour, it is a viable investment for Netflix' growth arc. When addressing shareholders in their fourth 2019 quarterly earnings call, Netflix executives state: “so think of all of our awards work as a really smart way to make us the best home for talents in the world.” And additionally “some of our members around the world use the awards pieces as a sign of what they wanted to watch” (Netflix, 2020, p.9).

These statements point towards a strategy of attracting talent and audience through traditional industry tactics. Thus justifying large-scale talent-centered investments such as the star-

heavy *Don't Look Up* (2021). With Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Lawrence in the main roles, and a star-heavy support cast, the film is a magnet for audience and industry attention – in Netflix' fourth quarterly earnings call Ted Sarandos stated regarding *Red Notice* and *Don't Look Up*: “[t]hey may be the most watched movies anywhere in the world this year” (Netflix, 2022, p.6). Netflix might be disrupting the practices of Hollywood, but it still relies on traditional strategies to promote its brand to the audience.

Furthermore, in the first years of Netflix' Original films receiving awards attention, the majority of press discourses were revolving around the split in opinions regarding the categorisation of the Netflix film. As briefly discussed in the introduction, Spielberg was one of the leaders in the criticism of Netflix' Academy Award nominations in 2019. The director's insistence on the theatrical experience as a defining feature of what distinguishes cinema from television showcases a distaste in the disruption of SVOD companies' push to detach cinema from its medium-based specificity (Lang, 2019, para.4). Instead of being hurtful to the Netflix brand, these discourses were framed by media publisher *Variety* as out of touch (Lang, 2019, para.2). Further quoting filmmakers who dismiss Spielberg's stance as one that is prompted by his high status in the industry and his lack of struggles with finding financial backing, thus not finding appreciation for the opportunities Netflix offers (Lang, 2019, para.6). Furthermore, one can clearly trace the evolution of the industry perception of Netflix and the streamer's growth in Spielberg's shift from dismissing the streaming platform and categorizing its motion pictures as television, to two years later having his production studio Amblin sign a partnership with the streamer (Lang, 2021b, para. 2). Spielberg further shifted his narrative to being more accepting of the new medium of streaming due to its value of bringing great stories to everyone. This signifies a clear bi-directional correlation between trade stories and the growth of Netflix.

4.6. A New Era of Spectatorship and Creative Potential

Detaching cinema and television as motion picture art-forms from the boundaries of their respective mediums may seem at first hand as merely the re-definition of formatting, but it has led to a shift of spectatorship practices. Of course, these practices are also closely tied to the shift in revenue-streams that goes along with the shift in mediums. Television and cinema, both heavily reliant on advertisement and ticket sales respectively, need to attract the attention of specific demographics of viewers and direct their attention to the paying advertisers - revenue sources (Lotz, 2022, p.38). While in the age of the attention economy the profit streams have shifted and thus the business model has changed, still every minute one can keep the user on their platform is valuable. From an early stage of their development, Netflix has been investing in promoting this behaviour in their customers. Binge-watching is a form of long spectatorship, where the audience is

watching two or more episodes of a series back to back (Pilipets, 2019, p.2). Despite how normalized this spectatorial practice is nowadays, it has only been made popular with the wider audiences in the past 10 years. In order to further stabilize its place in the market, Netflix started providing and promoting the potential for long-form spectatorship on its platform, thus elucidating the opportunities its innovative affordances provide, tying that to its brand and consequently becoming a cultural staple. For the audience this meant a more cohesive experience of storytelling, but for the creatives such as screenwriters, directors and producers, this provided more room for creative freedom. By removing the medium-specific requirements for episodic entertainment that entail a scheduled weekly, by-weekly or daily release of episodes, creatives were no longer bound by the implicit and explicit formatting that linear television demands – specific duration, length of scenes, acts, episodes. Practices such as having to end each episode or commercial break with a cliff hanger, hoping to not lose the consumer to a competitor, were no longer necessary.

In the context of traditional film production, these formatting constraints might not be as obvious, but when looking specifically at Hollywood blockbusters, there are plenty of similarities. Traditional film studios also have their set of baseline requirements that are (allegedly) associated with better audience reception, particularly in cinemas. This includes putting a cap on a film's length and having specific parameters regarding the inclusion of tropes such as a car chase or a dramatic, moving end, sometimes resulting in a film having an additional director's cut, made available to audiences at later stages of the release. These practices are not universal but up to the production studio and are not widely discussed by industry insiders. However, one prime example of this and outspoken creative is director Martin Scorsese. Despite his established name and impressive award-winning portfolio, Scorsese has consistently struggled with negotiating formatting requirements with studios. *The Wolf of Wall Street (2013)*, one of his more popular films, is exactly 180 minutes long with speculations that there was a 240-minute cut that Scorsese had to drop (Jagernauth, 2013, para.1). The director's latest film *The Irishman (2019)* was facing similar issues already in pre-production as the envisioned span of the project was deemed too lengthy for studios to agree on a deal with Scorsese. It took a full decade for the director to come to terms with a studio that would agree to the hefty budget whilst not taking away his creative freedom (Hibberd, 2019a, para.4). Scorsese has later disclosed that the budget, running time and finishing 20 minutes of his project would not have been allowed by any traditional studio (Hibberd, 2019b, para.33). For this reason, Scorsese settled on working with Netflix, thus compromising on things such as a small theatrical release in order to get the creative freedom that only the streaming platform could offer him. This sort of narrative that elucidates the advantages to creatives working with Netflix, was pivotal for the shift of perception of Netflix's entry into the film production business.

The Irishman held up its spot in the Top 10 most viewed films on Netflix until June 2023 (Chapman, 2023, para.2). The film supports the 45-degree shift in tone that Netflix aims to reflect in its commissions as its slow pace provides a tone, never before seen in Scorsese's movies. The three-and-a-half-hour slow digestion of this mob drama offers a viewership experience, reliant on continuity that does not provide the action thrill ride typical for a blockbuster. Nevertheless, with its contested budget with various sources stating numbers between \$159 to \$225 million (Libbey, 2020, para.2; Coster, 2019, para.13), *The Irishman* makes the industry observer wonder how Netflix justifies such expenditures for ephemeral content. The value proposition this film offers to the Netflix subscriber is admittedly significant with its A-list cast and crew, but is that truly proportionate to the necessary financial investment? That is a question that cannot be precisely addressed due to the lack of public data. What can be discussed however is what additional motivation does Netflix have for backing such a project. How else is Netflix benefiting from this picture? Burrough's conceptualization of streaming lore provides the necessary framework that explains the manner in which Netflix profits that is less straightforward than simply boosting engagement on the platform.

Scorsese's mob epic brought along discourses that were pivotal for the streaming giant's entry into the 'quality' film production industry. Scorsese, as a world-renowned director, who is outspoken about his affinity for the big screen, had a decisive impact on the perception of Netflix as a 'quality' film producer. Provided that *Okja* (2017) had already disrupted the perception of Netflix as a television-centred over-the-top (OTT) distributor, the discourses surrounding *The Irishman* entered the discussion as criticism on the (creative) disadvantages that legacy studios often bring along. Scorsese's statements regarding the creative boundaries traditional studios construct position Hollywood as a stagnating system that seeks to make profit over art. The legacy industry is seen as lagging behind in terms of affordances and obstructing the director's potential for artistic expression, they are "putting art in the margins" (Hibberd, 2019b, para.20). Netflix on the other hand is seen here as the new alternative that favours creatives by stating that in situations where legacy studios and theatres refuse to support films that fall out of the mainstream, "filmmakers still have an opportunity with streaming" (Hibberd, 2019b, para.21).

Another reiteration of this statement that audiences have witnessed in 2023 is the collaboration between Wes Anderson and Netflix. Considering the director's stern opinion on the importance of the theatrical experience of film, this may come as a surprise (Buchanan, 2023, para.22). Anderson had long been pondering on the idea of bringing Roald Dahl's stories to the silver screen (Buchanan, 2023, para.1). The biggest struggle being the length of a feature film. Once Netflix had obtained the rights however, on the one hand that left Anderson with no other move but to develop the film(s) with the streamer, but on the other hand this also allowed the director to

translate the story without having to adhere to the length requirement of feature films (Zuckerman, 2024, para.1).

4.7. Blockbusters, Thrill Rides and the Formula for Hollywood Success

Hollywood and overall the filmmaking industry have very complex inner workings that can be brought down to some basic stages of production and distribution that define the format. Ultimately after the completion of a project, a film gets multiple stages of release including an initial theatrical one, followed by a public release including streaming services, DVD and selling the rights for screening and retail. However, the box office is primarily defined by the initial theatrical release, which therefore pushes producers to catering to elevating the cinematic experience by filming in higher quality, making use of the audio-visual affordances of the cinema and enforcing thrill-based experiences. Technological innovations have provided the opportunity for a certain level of insurance regarding the cinematic experience – the audio-visual affordances of the theatre guarantee audiences a certain degree of satisfaction that is not tied to the particular screened content (Recuber, 2007, 324). This development, that has been coined by Tim Recuber as immersion cinema, offers studios, film producers and distributors (including theatre owners) a framework of cinematic tools that comprise the baseline of a well-selling film. A subjective formula for success, that sets the maximum running time of a film to 3 hours and calls for particular themes, often action-based, that aim to stimulate the spectator's senses and immerse them into the fictional world of the displayed content.

Hollywood's practice of pushing for content that is popular with wider audiences is part of the criticism Netflix build their brand around – it differentiates itself from such practices and presented a new alternative – a subscription based model that would allow the production of a bigger variety of content, that caters to niche audiences. There would be space for more than just the mainstream. Why aim to please all audiences (or only local ones) with the same content if one can produce multiple projects that each individually address the taste preferences of separate audiences. While this depicts an enticing scheme to boost creativity by dismantling the boundaries built by the prioritization of making profit with each individual project, the reality is there is still a need for big titles to keep audience, industry and shareholder attention. Netflix relies on more than a bundle of niche audience-appeal library, the holistic library aims to be as versatile as possible, especially at a time when the streaming platform is losing culturally significant licences for content distribution to other platforms. "We have to have an Adam Project and a Bridgerton every month and to make sure that that's the expectation of the service constantly" (Netflix, 2022, p.8). These two pieces of streaming content serve the role within the Netflix library of attracting consumer discourses and media buzz. *The Adam Project* (2022) represents the vertical of Hollywood-style

action films that aim to solidify the perception that Netflix also offers the type of film audiences would usually see in cinemas. It blurs the lines between cinema and streaming, which is essential for the establishing of the Netflix brand as a producer and distributor that directly competes with Hollywood. It drives a shift in the cultural value of cinema going and establishes a new standard where online streaming can replace the theatre. That is why then-CEO Reed Hastings highlights the importance of delivering such content continuously.

6 Underground (2019) is another example of such library strategies. Its purpose as part of the Hollywood-style films is primarily to create promotion through discourses on social media and to thus spark a feeling of missing out to those who do not yet have subscriptions (Lotz, 2022, p.144). While it aims for a wide appeal, the film is not in any way particular to the Netflix '45-degree shift' that Lotz points towards. It fills a gap for the type of film one would usually see in cinema, but perhaps is looking for a night in. The film's intention of starting off a franchise did not go through, pointing towards the lack of value Netflix and its subscribers have for films that do not exert a particular tonality and/or taste cluster positioning (Hough, 2019, para.4). Other films have set up franchises that have been received well enough by audiences to justify sequels. *Kissing Booth* and *To All the Boys are* two of their teen rom-com films to have been complemented by two sequels. The two films were highlighted by Netflix as the most re-watched films in 2018 - the year of their release, claiming that 50% of the films' viewers re-watched the films (Welk, 2018, para.2). At a time when Netflix was releasing close to no viewership data publicly, a statement like that held a lot of weight. *To All the Boys* was well-received both by critics and audiences, while *Kissing Booth* became subject to a lot of criticism, despite the audience's indisputable love for it. This positive reception amongst the young audiences is largely accredited to the lack of teen films produced in the last decade (Rowles, 2018, para.6). As the genre suggests, the main audience of these films are young adults, who are not a box office favourable demographic, as they are largely not financially independent, while simultaneously, being in an age where they seek more independence from their parental figures. So if a teen can't pay for a movie theatre ticket themselves, while also being deemed less likely to drag their parents to watch the film together, the traditional producers are financially not incentivised to individually address these audiences. Thus, this makes for a perfect opportunity for Netflix to service such a niche, which provides a strong enough fan base for the franchise's success to not be affected by critics' reviews and favour further sequeling.

Lotz (2022, p.65) points out that one must not get misled by the legacy success metrics we are used to, when evaluating Netflix. While for legacy producers making a sequel or multiple sequels is the ultimate sign for success, for streaming services that is not always the case. This argument refers to the practice of aiming for sequeling with every production, thus making the sequel as the ultimate sign for success, which is indeed not the case with Netflix and other SVOD's.

SVOD projects may have performed well enough on the platform to be deemed successful, without constituting the creation of sequels. Nevertheless, when it comes to films, and particularly action films, Netflix has undisputedly been favouring films that may allow sequeling, due to the value of established IP.

In Hollywood, production choices are made by individuals who use their expertise and cherry-picking data to justify decisions and predictions, primarily based on subjective factors. The big-data based algorithm provides Netflix with an apparent insurance for success, and most importantly, addresses the audience directly, personally. In practice the algorithm provides Netflix with a lot of data about viewership, but the way that information is translated into the production of future projects that have this supposed success insurance is entirely dependent on the innately subjective producers' interpretations of that data (Burroughs, 2019, p.9). Scott Stuber, the Netflix Chief of Film up until March 2024, shared in an interview that "[i]t's all gut, the data stuff is hugely overstated. At the end of the day, you have to ask: Do you believe in it? Do you have passion for it? Do you think it's going to work?" (Lang, 2021, para.52). Despite the somewhat underwhelming reality of what such an algorithm offers, Netflix still profits from the discourses surrounding it. Ultimately what we are dealing with is taste, a subjective human expression, that cannot simply be broken down by an algorithm and used to make assumptions of the future. Nevertheless, by publicly presenting its original productions as content that reflects and addresses its audience directly, Netflix positions itself as an innovative leader. Audiences and shareholders alike are enticed by the idea of a breakthrough technology allowing for the subjective decisions of producers to be transitioned into data-driven decision-making that can remove any arbitrary assumptions. This adds to the overall brand narrative of Netflix differentiating itself from its legacy competition and underlining its capability as an innovation-driven trailblazer that is initiating a new chapter within the film industry.

This sentiment is reinforced by the creatives who Netflix works together with. Considering the widespread opinion within Hollywood that film belongs in the theatre, directors seem to have only resorted to approaching SVOD producers when backed into a corner – often due to legacy producers not being able to justify the required budget for the audiences it addresses. Michael Bay had such struggles with the production of *6 Underground*, which once again brought up discourses that display Netflix in favourable light:

I appreciate Netflix for doing unique and different content and for giving voice to so many filmmakers and storytellers out there," Bay told The Hollywood Reporter. "Our movie was an R-rated movie, and I wanted to keep it R-rated, but the price point was a little high for an R-rated movie. One studio kind of balked at the costs. They said, 'We want to do it so bad, but it's just a little too expensive for us.' But Netflix just said 'We'll do it.' I didn't have to change

anything. I didn't have to make a PG-13 film. (White, 2019, para.10)

Michael Bay's statement above adds to the narrative that *The Irishman* (2019) brought to the public's eye. Hollywood's alleged inability to support large budget productions that do not address the wide audience obstructs the creative visions of directors and more importantly opens a space for innovation, one that can better address the creative aspect of film production. Netflix is portrayed as the internet disruptor who offers a different vision for what constitutes a big-budget-justifying value proposition and is interested in content that narrows down the scope of addressed audiences by catering to more specific sensibilities. Netflix thus took on the completion of Michael Bay's action thriller and along with that benefited from the following discourses, framing the company as the deep-pocketed supporter of directorial creative freedom. These are the success stories that construct the streaming lore necessary for Netflix' brand growth as the new age entertainment platform.

5. Conclusion

Streaming lore, or the accumulation and interrelation of trade stories that define the public perception of streaming platforms, implements the individual discourses of a film's streaming success as building blocks that come together to form the overarching story of Netflix as a successful platform that produces quality content catered to all tastes. In a post-truth society, discourses are the force behind the formulation of the status quo. Thus, by strategically investing in niche, auteur and blockbuster films that otherwise struggle to find financial backing in the traditional industry, Netflix positions itself as an innovative disruptor and the leader of the streaming revolution. The streamer's entry into film production was an essential part for its recognition as an all-round quality media producer, distributor and most of all, competitor to industry giants. Each film Netflix has produced is an extra puzzle piece added to the narratives of innovation, creative freedom and disrupting Hollywood's hegemony. This way Netflix aims to position itself as the future of entertainment, leaving the traditional industry in the past. One of the key ways of achieving that is hindering the industry's ability to objectively evaluate, and compare the performance of individual Netflix films to Hollywood motion pictures, leaving discourses as the leading medium for indicating success.

Netflix has always deterred the industry observer from gaining full access to and publicly discussing the data-driven success metrics that showcase more than just the viewership of an individual film on the platform. Not because gatekeeping data from journalists and academics is profitable in itself, but because the industry's century-long habit of evaluating commercial success of singular films through box office numbers has resulted in a climate where discourses tend to isolate the performance of a film to the first few weeks of release and produce value judgement based on that. This sort of logic is skewed in the context of Netflix' SVOD business model, due to the variance in content amortization processes. Since the primary source of income for the SVOD company is subscriptions, to rationalize its budget per content piece, Netflix seeks an equilibrium between the financial investment to the viewership, engagement and brand growth realized by discourses surrounding critical acclaim, awards and overall trade stories. Netflix' goal is not to market each of their motion pictures to the largest possible audience, the way that traditional film industry logics dictate, but rather to curate a holistic library of content that caters to diverse tastes and establish a brand that triggers associations with disruption, innovation, algorithmic personalization, quality content and customer convenience and prioritization. In other words, the Netflix library becomes a shapeshifter that is imagined by each user in a manner that is driven by the user's tastes and sensibilities (Lotz, 2022, p.144). This business model has successfully attracted an audience of 269,6 million world-wide subscribers, who for a monthly fee they gain access to a mix of licensed and original content unified by the Netflix library branding (Netflix, 2024b, p.7).

In a market of growing competition for attention, differentiating the Netflix brand through unique content has been essential, as intellectual property is a valuable currency for subscriber retention and acquisition. But that content can only serve its purpose if it reaches the audiences who will appreciate it. That is why the Netflix Recommender System (NRS) is essential to the personalized curation of each user's library. Within that personalized interface that already caters to the user's tastes, the content being recommended is further personalized by bringing to the forefront aspects of the motion picture that the user has displayed past interest in. In other words, various users that are being recommended the same film may see different thumbnails that showcase an actor or socio-cultural that their profile signifies interest in. The unifying factor of these personalized libraries within all subscribers is the overarching Netflix experience.

Next to the platform's branding strategies, Netflix invests in content that triggers industry discourses that further signify quality and innovation. Within their film slate, one way they achieve that is by investments in auteur films that have struggled to get financial backing from legacy producers, thus prompting those creatives to initiate narratives of successful and uniquely valuable collaborations with Netflix. Furthermore, by bringing such auteur films to its platform, Netflix is consequently taking them away from the wide theatrical release these directors' previous works have taken part in. This trend has played a substantial role in the shift of perspectives regarding the medium specificity of cinematic content. Thus, moving towards a public discourse that acknowledges streaming as a viable alternative for the theatrical experience and disrupting the hegemony of Hollywood practices. This has been possible due to Hollywood's favoring of blockbusters, which has left a gap in the market. Thus, despite auteurs still valuing the theatrical experience, they are prompted to disregard that and find financial backing by Netflix. This can be traced in the growing portfolio of Netflix' work with auteur creators and thus Netflix' further discursive acceptance in awards such as the Oscars. Presence in these awards is essential due to the discourses they engage in and the "quality" label.

Aside from auteur films, Netflix' holistic library strategies offer niche content that caters to specific tastes. An example of that are teen films. Furthermore, in order to generate buzz around wide audiences Netflix also invests in blockbuster-style intellectual property, that aims to attract new subscribers. However, even in the case of such wide-audience appeal motion pictures, Netflix-exclusive films can have a more defined tonality, or what Lotz (2022, p.148) calls a 45-degree shift. These blockbusters serve the purpose of further reiterating the idea that any cinematic taste and mood can be satiated by Netflix.

All these factors intertwine in the name Netflix. Within the Netflix library, films serve varying strategic roles – some aim to attract new subscribers, some service particular taste communities and others aim to initiate industry discourses that shift narratives. Consequently,

Netflix applies success metrics relative to the strategic role served. The success metrics of individual films varies per piece of content and is evaluated relative to the strategic role served. The relative success of any individual film is only valuable to Netflix so long as it can construct streaming lore and feed into the larger public perception of the Netflix brand.

While this thesis focuses on Netflix as a film producer, further research is necessary to embed the findings into the concept of Netflix as a series producer, Netflix as a licensor, Netflix as a video game producer, and thus obtain a more well-rounded, holistic understanding of how these processes affect each other. A question that could be raised is, how does the success of a Netflix film, having fed into the streaming lore, correlate to the success of an original series? Furthermore, as of 2022 Netflix offers an ad-supported plan for a lower price of subscription, which could entail a different success metric, similar to that of television. These questions require further research that is not within the scope of this research thesis.

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