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## Disruptive Innovators

### Introduction

At this point in time, any examination of the classic Hollywood model of film distribution seems to be sorrowfully out of date. Ostensibly it might appear unquestionable that the distribution sector of the global film industry has been revolutionised in recent years. This surface image would seem to suggest that this transformation has ushered in an era of plenty, where a whole host of films and TV shows (not to mention books, computer games, web series and so on) are available within the blink of an eye. Furthermore, if we count the developing informal (and often illegal) channels of online distribution facilitated by the growth of the Internet, then the last 10–15 years has witnessed an explosion in the availability of films and TV programmes for audiences. At least, this is how it seems, and arguably there is some truth in this assessment of the current media distribution environment. However, I would argue that this veritable smörgåsbord of content is not universally available, nor is it presented in an unmediated form where audiences are free to pick and choose the content that interests them. As Finola Kerrigan has suggested, ‘on demand distribution is not the free for all panacea that some claim, as the structural impediments of the global film industry still prevail to a certain extent’ (2013).

It is important to acknowledge that our film-viewing decisions are funnelled, curated and directed by these new mechanisms of online distribution. As much as our film choice was once limited by the titles available in the high street video rental store or through our cable TV provider, online on-demand options are still shaped by the contracts and marketing arrangements discussed within Chapter 1 of this book. Furthermore, new distribution platforms are unevenly distributed

across the globe and, where they are available, they are subject to the vagaries of access to high-speed Internet connections, not to mention reliable access to electricity. Such a context is convincingly summed up by Knight and Thomas when they suggest that, 'despite the perceived benefits of the "digital revolution" for moving image distribution – and there certainly are very clear benefits – many of the issues governing the diversity of the film culture that we as audiences experience remain the same' (2012, p. 274).

To take one obvious example, many of the key players within on-demand distribution only operate in a few key territories.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Internet access itself is unevenly distributed across the globe. To illustrate this point, according to data available from the World Bank (2015), the East African country of Eritrea has the lowest level of Internet access, with only 0.9 people per 100 of the population able to access the world-wide web in 2013. This figure rises across the African continent with access in South Africa reaching 48.9 people per 100 of the population. However, such a figure is still rather low and, looking at the so-called BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China), nations specifically identified as undergoing advanced economic development at present, we can see that Internet access here is also uneven. Russia leads the pack with a figure of 61.4 per 100, while India exists at the other end of the spectrum with only 15.1 people out of 100 having access to the Internet. China and Brazil reside in the middle of the table with 45.8 and 51.6 respectively. At the top of the scale, the Scandinavian countries all boast access for around 95% of their population and Iceland has the highest figure with 96.5 people per 100 able to access the Internet. However, in the UK the number is only 89.8 and the US is even lower with 84.2. So, even if online on-demand companies offer their products in a certain territory, the variations in Internet access within that country may mean that such services are still only accessible to a proportion of the population. In addition, the costs required for an Internet connection and the premiums levied to access on-demand services may also prevent potential audience members from experiencing such content. As such, the idea that we are experiencing a *universal* era of plenty in terms of film and TV distribution is undoubtedly a fiction.

While never forgetting this global context, it is still true that in many parts of the world things have indisputably changed. I am fortunate enough to have had access to the Internet and DVDs from my late teens but, even in such times, cinephilia was still a troublesome pursuit. I spent large portions of my time perusing the shelves of the local Blockbuster video rental store frustrated by the fact that I seemed to

have viewed most of the films on offer multiple times. To counteract this lack of availability, I stayed up late into the night to record films programmed in the graveyard shift on the four terrestrial channels that were available in the UK through the 1990s. I amassed an extensive collection of poor-quality long-play VHS tapes that hosted two or three films each. This collection then required a complicated cataloguing system so I could identify (with relative ease) which VHS housed which film. This collection has long since been retired, as DVDs, and now Blu-rays, have replaced the format of my youth. Furthermore, these copies were played on so many occasions that they became almost unwatchable towards the end of their lives. Nonetheless, I remember them fondly and one or two still exist for sentimental reasons and/or to allow me access to films that I have not yet been able to locate through other means.

So, with this context still fresh in the minds of many, it might seem short-sighted to suggest that the introduction of Hulu, iTunes, Netflix, Amazon Instant and the like have not revolutionised film viewing in countries where such services (and reliable Internet connections) are readily available. Indeed, things have undoubtedly changed dramatically over the last 15–20 years (if they had not, there would be very little point in writing this book). However, I would suggest that this change does not amount to a revolution: a term that would imply that an alternative system has *replaced* the incumbent one. While Jordanova claims that ‘cinema is in the process of moving on-line’ (2012, p. 1), such phrasing, although acknowledging that such a process is still underway, also implies an inevitability that I would dispute.

This book does not pretend to claim that the experience of film spectatorship has not changed dramatically in recent years but, if we look back across the history of cinema, then it is clear that the methods and modes of consuming films have been forever changing and developing. To take one example, the architecture of cinemas has changed dramatically over the years, so much so that the majority of cinemas we attend now bear little resemblance to the picture palaces that were popular in the early part of the 20th century. Furthermore, the conventions of cinema viewing in the UK require that one sits in the dark in silent reverence while the film is screened, but this practice is very far removed from the way films were watched in Nickelodeons and is certainly not representative of the many ways that films are now experienced in public settings the world over. So, when concerns over the ‘death of cinema’ are raised, they seldom take into account the fact that cinemas and practices of film consumption have always been in a

perpetual process of change and adaptation. We must remind ourselves that to watch films collectively on a large screen is a convention and not a necessity of the medium. Furthermore, just because alternative film-viewing practices present themselves, it does not mean that audiences will all simultaneously reject decades of tradition surrounding film consumption.

As such, this book rejects the suggestion that the theatrical presentation of films will ultimately be *replaced* by online film consumption. While it must be acknowledged that significant changes to film viewing are being felt in certain countries, in other territories cinema attendance is in very good health. In this respect, one would be ill advised to claim that a wholesale global decline in theatrical film attendance is in evidence.

When examined from a global perspective, the health of the film industry is much more complex than might be inferred from the frequent news coverage suggesting an industry in crisis (*Daily Mail*, 2011). For instance, in 2013, global box office revenue rose to \$35.9 billion, an increase of 4% from 2012 (Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), 2014, p. 2). Domestic (that is, US and Canadian) box office receipts also grew in 2012, but only by 1% (MPAA, 2014, p. 9). Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that this slight enlargement was due to a rise in ticket prices and not an increase in admissions. According to the MPAA, 1.34 billion cinema tickets were sold in 2013, down 1% from the 1.36 billion figure of 2012 (2014, p. 9). However, to put this decline in context, the MPAA also point out that ‘movie theatres continue to draw more people than theme parks and major U.S. sports combined’ (2014, p. 10); with a mere 371 million tickets for theme parks and only 125 million tickets for sports events sold in 2013. When these figures are compared with the 1.34 billion tickets sold for cinema admission in the same year, the social pastime of cinema-going might be considered in much more than reasonable health.

We might also be forgiven for thinking that the European theatrical market is also performing poorly, with the European Audiovisual Observatory (EAO) publishing a press release in February 2014 reporting a 4.1% decline in European cinema attendance in 2013 (2014, p. 1). However, what this headline news does not mention is the fact that not all EU territories have experienced this reduction. Indeed, Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, the Netherlands and Romania have all witnessed an increase in cinema attendance over the same period. Furthermore, if non-EU European countries are included (as they are in the EAO’s release), then it is notable that the Russian Federation and

Turkey have enjoyed attendance increases of 10.5% and 14.8% respectively. That being said, I would no more wish to suggest that such growth in these territories is indicative of a wider upsurge in attendance than I would praise the use of the 4.1% statistic as symptomatic of an overall downturn.

The problem is that there seems to be a tendency to focus on the negative within such industry reporting rather than highlight the areas of growth and prosperity within the film industry. Indeed, I would suggest that the headline used within the EAO's press release could have just as easily focused on the fact that Turkish films represented 58% of cinema admissions in Turkey in 2013, a figure 'unparalleled in any other European market in the past few decades' (2014, p. 2). Considering the aforementioned 14.8% growth in Turkish cinema admission, this would seem to point to a Turkish film industry in incredibly good health. Again, that is not to say that we should take this case as evidence for the widespread health of cinema, but we should look at the issue for what it is, a complex picture of varying territories with differing and fluctuating practices of film spectatorship.

With this intricate understanding of theatrical distribution in mind, this chapter will examine the growth of new methods of online film distribution spearheaded by companies like Netflix, Amazon Instant and Hulu; those Stuart Cunningham has termed the 'disruptive innovators' (2013, p. 69). In doing so, I shall question the extent to which these organisations have already changed, and indeed may continue to augment, the reigning models of formal film distribution. However, this chapter is sceptical overall about the potential of these 'disruptive innovators' to reorganise existing power dynamics within formal film distribution and proposes that the 'revolution' they have facilitated has largely been overplayed. While it is certainly easier for some of us to access *popular* content using platforms like Netflix and Hulu, the films and TV shows offered from these providers is tantamount to the titles offered in the Blockbuster that I frequented in my youth. While these new platforms mean that one does not need to go to a physical video store in order to rent popular titles, I would argue that the *variety* of titles on offer in many respects remains the same. Extensive empirical work still needs to be carried out in this area but this chapter seeks to continue the discussion begun by a number of theorists (Kerrigan, 2013; Knight and Thomas, 2012; Perren, 2013) who suggest we should be cautious when claiming that cinema on-demand might give us access to more a more diverse film library.

While to claim a 'revolution' might be premature, there have undoubtedly been some substantial shifts in the media landscape of

late and the situation is changing very rapidly. In 2007, 'VoD services and Internet distribution attract[ed] so little consumer traffic as to be virtually worthless' (McDonald, 2007, p. 176); however, in the US, '[b]y 2011, VOD accounted for about a quarter of the \$8 billion consumers spent on video rentals' (Balio, 2013, p. 110) and the video-on-demand (VoD) market in the UK grew by 416% from 2002 to 2013 (BFI, 2014). Such statistics suggests that this sector of the market has grown dramatically in recent years and, if such a trend continues, then VoD could indeed represent a substantial source of revenue for film distributors.

One other significant change that has accompanied the growth of these new platforms is the increased convergence of our consumption of TV and film. However, as I have earlier identified, a significant method of accessing niche or hard to find films was, as least in the UK, often through the TV itself. Thus, the convergence of these two mediums is not as new as it might at first appear. In fact, UK television now broadcasts slightly *fewer* films than it did before. For instance, in the UK in 2013, 1,990 films were broadcast on terrestrial television (*BFI Statistical Yearbook*, 2013, p. 139) compared to 2,103 in 2002 (*UKFC Statistical Yearbook*, 2002). However, this is not a particularly dramatic drop and may seem even less significant if we consider the range of films available on non-terrestrial channels. While many of these might be subscription only (for example, Sky Movies), there are also freeview film channels (for example, Film4) and non-specialist freeview channels, like ITV2, ITV3 and so on, that broadcast a range of films during their scheduled programming. Indeed, the TV film audience in 2013 was just below 3.4 billion people, a figure over 20 times greater than UK cinema attendance in the same year (BFI, 2011, p. 138). Thus, scheduled broadcast television and associated catch-up services (for example, BBC iPlayer and itvPlayer), still represent a significant portal to films for UK audiences.

So, while we can see that film and TV viewing have long been intertwined, what is significant is that arguably the *manner* of convergence is changing. One can watch both films and TV on a television set through an application (app) available on a games console or smart TV. Furthermore, one is able to access such content at a time and place of one's own choosing. However, it is worth highlighting that what is available to watch is still curated for us, even if we are now free to view it at any time of our choosing.

In considering how these innovations have influenced film distribution in particular, the following section will establish what is meant by the term 'disruptive innovators': specifically, who are these new players and how do they operate? The chapter will then move on to a case study of the simultaneous theatrical, online and DVD release of the

film *A Field in England* (2013, Dir. Ben Wheatley). This case study will allow the examination of whether such simultaneous release practices are likely to become commonplace in the future or whether they will ultimately remain the preserve of films that would only otherwise enjoy a limited theatrical run.

### **VoD and SVoD online: Netflix and co.**

In their 2012 contribution to the edited collection *Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves On-line* (Iordanova and Cunningham, 2012), Stuart Cunningham and Jon Silver suggested that a new breed of content distributors/exhibitors has entered the film distribution market. These companies are said to be ‘disrupting’ the traditional patterns of film distribution by offering films and television programmes to audiences outside of the time-honoured window schedule outlined in Chapter 1. While business models vary across companies, what connects these ‘innovators’ is that they have ‘disrupted’ the distribution market by offering films and TV through a video-on-demand (VoD) model, to be watched at any time and on a variety of devices. These services vary between pay-per-view, subscription or combination purchase models. While it has long been possible to watch films at home through premium cable/satellite subscriptions and/or PPV services, what is different about these ‘disruptive innovators’ is that they have not simply been absorbed into the current windowed distribution system and allocated a place in the hierarchy of the release schedule. As content is available through these services ‘on demand’, that is whenever and wherever the consumer wishes to view it, then the almost sacred theatrical window appears increasingly anachronistic. While they are undoubtedly ‘disruptive’ in that sense, it remains to be seen whether these ‘innovators’ offer increased access to a more diverse film library.

#### **What is video on demand?**

When we speak of VoD, there are a number of practices and platforms that come under this categorisation. According to the BFI Statistical Yearbook (2014), online VoD services in the UK can be subdivided into four overall business models (see below). While the BFI understandably provides a specific UK analysis, their subdivisions do encapsulate the rough organisation of the online VoD models that exist the world over (Table 3.1).

As has already been mentioned, in many respects VoD is not a particularly new phenomenon, as the lineage of television-based VoD can

Table 3.1 UK VoD business models

Television-based VoD	Online VoD
Cable PPV	<p>Rental VoD – one-off rental, also known as download-to-rent (DTR), e.g. from Google Play or BlinkBox.</p> <p>Retail or download-to-own (DTO), also known as electronic-sell-through (EST), e.g. iTunes or Xbox Video.</p> <p>Subscription VoD (SVoD) – unlimited access to content for a fixed monthly sum, e.g. Amazon Prime Instant Video or Netflix.</p> <p>Free/advert-supported VoD from catch up services, e.g. BBC iPlayer or 4oD.</p>

Source: Adapted from *BFI Statistical Yearbook* (2014, p. 133).

be traced back to previous cable PPV models. This form of VoD allows consumers essentially to ‘rent’ a film title for a specific length of time or for a certain number of viewings. An example of such a service is Sky Box Office, which originally offered viewings at predetermined times but now conforms more accurately to the designator ‘on-demand’ by offering a number of titles that the consumer can download to their Sky box to watch within a given period of time (usually 48 hours). This practice has enjoyed a privileged position in the film-release window schedule for some time, with films historically being available on PPV within two months of cinematic release and up to four months before the film becomes available to buy on DVD/VHS.

While the cable PPV system had been established for some time, the introduction of online rental VoD has introduced new players into the game and made it clear that PPV VoD is no longer the sole purview of the cable providers. In 2012, the UK online VoD market overtook television-based VoD revenues for the first time, with television-based VoD bringing in only £111.9 million in revenue in comparison with the £124 million achieved by online VoD (BFI Statistical Yearbook, 2013, p. 132). In many respects, PPV VoD available through platforms such as smart TVs and computer game systems (for example, Microsoft’s Xbox One or Sony’s PS4) closely resembles more traditional cable PPV offerings. Typically a single film is purchased for a limited period of time using an interface accessed through one’s television. The fact that the technology that facilitates this process is somewhat different is largely invisible to the user. When accessing PPV VoD through a console or directly via a smart TV, audiences do not typically need to have a specific

subscription, but there are other requirements to access; for example, one has to have the appropriate hardware, the necessary subscription to an internet service provider (ISP) and an appropriate app on one's system. Example interfaces include Xbox Live and PlayStation Store that are tied to games console subscriptions and stand alone apps like BlinkBox (owned by the supermarket chain Tesco) that enable one-off purchasing. A further distinction from previous forms of cable PPV is that the apps that can be accessed through one's TV are also available through smartphones, tablets and computers. Thus, while the model mimics cable PPV in some aspects, it has developed far beyond this.

The online VoD market is also not particularly new and there have been a number of players who have attempted to develop businesses in this area.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Movielink was a non-subscription VoD service created as a joint venture by Sony, MGM, Paramount, Universal and Warner Bros. that launched as far back as November 2002 (McDonald, 2007, pp. 172–173). In August 2007, Movielink was acquired by the high-street rental chain, Blockbuster, allowing them to enter the movie download service market that had been populated by Netflix, Apple, Amazon and Wal-Mart in the previous 12 months (Bloomberg, 2007). While Blockbuster announced in November 2013 that they would be closing their rental stores and stopping their mail DVD operations (Stelter, 2013), the VoD service that Movielink had become, [www.blockbusternow.com](http://www.blockbusternow.com), still operates in the US offering PPV rental to audiences on TV, tablet, PC or phone for \$2.99 per title. Indeed, there have been, and continue to be, a range of PPV VoD options available to film audiences in some parts of the world. These vary in terms of price, catalogue and territory, and it is not the intention or purpose of this chapter to provide an overview of all of them. Indeed, detailed information on the rise and development of such services can be found in the work of Balio (2013), Cunningham and Silver (2012), McDonald (2007) and Pardo (2015). However, the fact that this early example of a venture into the online VoD market was largely unsuccessful, despite being backed by five major Hollywood studios, is a matter of some note and ultimately left space for companies like Amazon and Netflix to enter the arena.

Like rental VoD services, download-to-own options have also been available (in the US at least) for nearly ten years. The major Hollywood studios started to make their films available as 'download-to-own' from April 2006, priced in the same region as a physical DVD (McDonald, 2007, p. 173). However, there were restrictions on how these downloads could be used by audiences. For instance, on the platform CinemaNow, the downloaded film was restricted in such a manner that it could only

ever be replayed on the device that was originally used to download it. Movielink was a bit more generous, allowing purchasers to play the film on a further two computers and to make a back-up DVD. However, the backup disc could only be played on a computer and not through a DVD player (McDonald, 2007, p. 174). This effectively meant that for the casual viewer there were technological barriers that made it difficult to watch the purchased films on anything but a computer, which, according to McDonald, made such permanent download options unpopular with audiences (2007, p. 174).

However, since McDonald examined this issue in 2007, the download to own market has developed considerably. For example, iTunes, Amazon Prime and BlinkBox are all strong contenders in this market in the UK. Indeed, while not yet as established as rental VoD, by 2013 online retail sales had grown to 28% of the online VoD market in the UK. This amounts to revenue of £55.5 million, but it is important to note that these figures combine data for film and TV, and the disaggregated data is confidential (BFI Statistical Yearbook, 2014, p. 133).

While the Movielink experiment was ultimately unsuccessful, the studios returned with a more promising (and more extensive) collaboration in the form of Ultraviolet, a joint venture between 20th Century Fox, Universal, Sony Pictures and Warner Bros., and other Digital Entertainment Content Ecosystem (DECE) members such as Adobe, Cisco, Intel and AMD. The Ultraviolet website describes the service as a 'cloud-based digital rights library' (Ultraviolet, n.d.). When one purchases an Ultraviolet DVD/Blu-ray, then it is accompanied by a code that allows the customer to add the purchased film to their online Ultraviolet library. Customers within Ultraviolet's territories<sup>3</sup> can also buy films from participating online retailers (for example, BlinkBox) and as long as the user's accounts with both the online retailer and Ultraviolet are linked, then the purchased film automatically appears in their online Ultraviolet library. Theoretically, rights to view the film last in perpetuity but, if one has bought a DVD/Blu-ray with a digital copy included, there is a time limit for redemption – though this is usually a few years.

While the success or otherwise of Ultraviolet in the PPV VoD market remains to be seen, the growth of Netflix and subscription-based VoD (SVoD) seems undeniable. Indeed, the move towards subscription models for VoD perhaps represents an even greater schism between early VoD practices and their current manifestations. Such services allow customers to pay a monthly fee in return for varying levels and modes of access to a film catalogue. This form of distribution grew out of the postal DVD rental services that developed in the early 2000s. Companies such as Redbox and Netflix in the US, and LoveFilm in the UK, allowed

users access to a certain number of DVD rentals per month in return for a subscription fee. Users would then have titles posted to them and would either post them back (as with Netflix and LoveFilm) or drop them off in specific locations (as with Redbox). Netflix have long been the leader in this field, as since 2006 they have 'offered in excess of 60,000 titles, boast[ed] over 4.9m subscribers and ship[ed] from thirty-one regional distribution centres' (McDonald, 2007, p. 162).

When these companies were first developing, their film and TV catalogues were restricted to older titles that had already been available to buy for some time and were way past their theatrical window. Such early restrictions may be attributed to the reticence of the Hollywood studios to get on board with such services fearing that they would not only eat into DVD profits but would also provide ready-made digital copies for 'pirates'. As Finney suggests, 'any damage to the DVD window creates fear and hostility in the risk-averse Studio ecology' (Finney, 2010, p. 124). This is despite the fact that research from Warner Bros. and Comcast, the largest cable operator in the US, has suggested that the simultaneous release of a title on VoD and DVD does not reduce DVD profits (Balio, 2013, p. 110). Such research concluded that, in general terms, DVD purchasers were not interested in VoD and VoD subscribers were not particularly concerned with buying DVDs. Thus, potentially the concern is not with subscription models per se (or even online VoD in general) but rather with allowing new players like Netflix to threaten existing monopolies.

Before concluding this section it is important to mention that, while they are not typically thought of as VoD platforms in the way that BlinkBox and Netflix are, services like YouTube and Vimeo also allow users to search for content and access it 'on-demand'. While YouTube has not yet been a platform for the large-scale release of films, it is regularly used to promote films. That said, the difference between YouTube and other VoD services may largely be one of perception because, in 2012 and 2013, it was actually YouTube that 'was the most popular VoD provider among UK online film viewers aged 12 or over' (BFI, 2014, p. 134). It is certainly notable that, of the top six VoD platforms in the UK in 2012 and 2013 (YouTube, LoveFilm, Netflix, iTunes, Amazon and SkyGo), the most popular of these was also the only one funded through advertising and not subscription or PPV. Thus, it was also the only platform on the list where films could be watched for free and this fact might contribute to its popularity. So, although YouTube does not represent the kind of VoD that is the focus of this chapter, its place in the new ecosystem of film consumption cannot be ignored.

Overall, while the VoD market has expanded exponentially in a number of territories, one might argue that the biggest growth in this area is attributable to the ‘disruptive innovators’ like Netflix and Amazon and not the major Hollywood studios. As concerns over perceived increases in ‘piracy’ abound and traditional distribution mechanisms designed to boost the profit of the studio-based distributors are threatened, ‘the only growth area is the net’; yet, as Finney goes on to suggest, ‘the Studios are not servicing it proficiently to date’ (2010, p. 124). This point was made in 2010 but these words still ring true in 2015. So, while it was commonplace by 2008 to simultaneously release all titles on VoD and DVD, this was typically through the PPV model and not the SVoD model offered by Netflix.

It is fair to say that VoD and SVoD are still in their infancy. Furthermore, while the big players have successfully become household names in the territories where they operate, it remains to be seen whether Amazon Instant Video, Netflix, Hulu and the rest will go the way of Netscape, Ask Jeeves and Alta Vista. Nonetheless, via PPV or SVoD, streaming or download, accessing content ‘on-demand’ seems to be the future of film and TV distribution.<sup>4</sup> However, exactly *when* titles become available on demand, in particular, whether on-demand releases are available ‘day and date’ with the theatrical release is a hotly contested issue. As such, the following section of this chapter will consider a case study of one attempt at a multiplatform simultaneous release in order to examine whether such strategies might promise to be the future of film distribution.

### **In (online) cinemas now: *A Field in England* (2013)**

The future is here. This morning, we downloaded a copy of *A Field in England* hours before cinemas even opened.

(Radford, 2014)

As the above quote highlights, the 2013 release of Ben Wheatley’s film *A Field in England* was widely heralded as a ‘UK distribution first’ on account of its release on DVD, TV, VoD and in cinemas concurrently on Friday 5 July 2013 (Wigley, 2014). At the time, the UK newspaper *The Guardian* asked if this strategy amounted to ‘a bold new model, or a reckless experiment?’ (O’Neill, 2014). This chapter contends that the strategy is neither a vision of the future of film distribution nor is it a one-off phenomenon. While such release strategies may become increasingly commonplace, as their popularity grows, their

impact may also wane because (at this point in history at least) one of the primary benefits of such a strategy is precisely the fact that it is *novel*. As will be seen, by being able to claim loudly and publicly that this approach is just the beginning of a revolution in film spectatorship, then films like *A Field in England* are able to gain large amounts of publicity simply because of the manner in which they are distributed. However, if such multiplatform simultaneous releasing did become the norm, then arguably such strategies would also lose their promotional edge.

Produced by Rook Films, *A Field in England's* release strategy was made possible thanks to the specific remit of the BFI Distribution Fund's 'New Models' strand to finance such innovative approaches to distribution. According to the BFI's website, 'The film's multi-platform release is the result of a partnership between Film4, Picturehouse Entertainment, 4DVD and Film4 channel, enabling viewers to decide how, where and when to view the film' (Wigley, 2014). The BFI professed that such a strategy aimed to court viewers who live outside of major cities or who simply prefer to watch films in the comfort of their own homes (Wigley, 2014).

While the film's UK release was actively promoted as being a dramatic departure from the norm, it was actually only slightly bolder than previous attempts at simultaneous multiplatform releases and thus potentially part of a gradual disintegration of the traditional release window schedule rather than representative of a sea change in this area. Indeed, simultaneous VoD and theatrical releases were not uncommon by 2013, but *A Field in England* was reported as the first to have a simultaneous release on *free to air* TV as well as on DVD and online (Weedon, 2014). Indeed, it has been possible to purchase a VoD version of a film on the same day as the DVD release ever since copies of *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005, US) went on sale on 4 April 2006 (McDonald, 2007, p. 174). Furthermore, a full seven years before *A Field in England* was even made, Michael Winterbottom's film *The Road to Guantanamo* (2006) used a similar release strategy. *The Road to Guantanamo* premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2006 and it was then shown on Channel 4 on the 9 March of the same year before being released in cinemas, on DVD and online the following day (BBC, 2006).

However, while the novelty factor of the way *A Field in England* was released may have been somewhat exaggerated for promotional effect, we might still see this approach as indicative of the wider shift towards on-demand film spectatorship. For instance, Katie Ellen from

the BFI Distribution Fund promoted this strategy as an ‘exciting distribution model’ that offered audiences the opportunity to see Wheatley’s new film ‘no matter how they like to watch films’ (Ellen quoted in Wigley, 2014). Such a description implies that it is the audience (rather than industry or technology) that is somehow driving the changes within film distribution, suggesting that it is audiences who wish to have more options to watch new films outside of theatrical space and at a time of their own choosing. This sentiment is echoed by Sue Bruce Smith, Head of Commercial and Brand Strategy at Film4. When speaking of the release of *A Field in England*, she claimed that ‘we’ve wanted to do something like this for quite some time, to give the audience what they say they want: to be able to watch a new film when and where they want to’ (cited in O’Neill, 2014).

However, the BFI’s press release announcing the film’s distribution strategy also alluded to the industrial context for this approach. The situation for small distributors was presented in this release as rather bleak due to the fact that large exhibitors demand that films shown in their cinemas are not released on any other platforms for 17 weeks (Wigley, 2014). This four-month window, the press release claims, is a challenge for independent distributors who want their films to have a cinematic release because the gap between releases on different platforms means that promotional activities must be paid for twice. Indeed, Katie Ellen, Senior Distribution Manager at the BFI, suggests that:

Today’s film distribution landscape is as cluttered as a Bosch triptych and almost as treacherous, with up to a dozen new releases every week. Studio-made leviathans scoop up most of the attention and box office takings, while numerous smaller fish are left fighting over the scraps. Even independent films with a buzz about them can struggle to be noticed and many are left without a distribution deal.

(cited in Abraham, 2013)

Thus, it becomes clear why it might be beneficial in promotional terms to have a multiplatform release for films like *A Field in England* that would not normally have particularly generous advertising budgets. Because, as Anna Higgs, Executive Producer for *A Field in England* suggests, ‘by having all platforms working together, we generated a real buzz and put the film on the map’ (cited in Rosser, 2013). Indeed, much of the press coverage of the film’s release discussed it as an ‘event’ and, furthermore, pointed to the marketing potential of such a strategy. This can be seen in coverage from online magazines like *Little White Lies*,

which proclaims that the *A Field in England's* 'multiplatform release strategy ... has afforded the film an unparalleled marketing opportunity (Weedon, 2014).

Nonetheless, the distribution strategy of this picture is not only representative of shifts in distribution but also points to concomitant developments in theatrical exhibition of films, be that in traditional cinemas or on big screens in non-traditional settings. In both marketing terms and for the audiences, the film's release was structured as an event. Furthermore, while multiplatform releases of this type remain novel, the release strategy itself becomes instrumental in framing the film's release as about so much more than traditional cinema-going. Such a sentiment was ably summed up by one journalist from the VoD specialist review site VODZilla that hailed the release of *A Field in England* as 'the kind of event that normally only comes with oodles of marketing money and gigantic CGI robots punching aliens in the face' (Radford, 2014).

The 'event' status of the film's release was generated in a number of ways across the varying platforms. Those who watched the film in the cinema ... on the day of release were able to experience a Q&A session with the director at the Ritzy Picturehouse in Brixton, and this activity was also streamed to other cinemas showing the film on the day of release. The DVD release, of course, was accompanied by extra features: an interview with the director, audio commentary for the film, a camera test reel, a trailer, and what was described as a 'Digital Masterclass', that is, 'over 40 minutes of in depth interviews and explanation of the entire film making process' (How to See the Film, 2014). The Blu-ray contained the same extras but with a further 35 minutes of material included within the 'Digital Masterclass'. An introductory programme, including an interview with the director, preceded the showing of the film broadcast on Film4. Only the VoD release, it seemed, was truly the 'vanilla' version of the film, as this did not include any of the aforementioned 'extras'. From this one might presume that the very fact that audiences could choose when and where to watch the film was the 'added extra' provided by that particular option. The film itself was also screened over the summer of 2013 in various 'fields' in England. Furthermore, the construction of the film's release as an extraordinary event experience did not stop with the film itself but was extended on the film's website where audiences could view some of the aforementioned 'Digital Masterclass' videos alongside additional behind-the-scenes production information. Indeed, according to Phelim O'Neill from the UK's *Guardian* newspaper, 'there's even a limited edition VHS release being planned, so no one feels left out of the fun' (2014).

Although not part of the initial simultaneous multiplatform UK release, Drafthouse Films, the film's US distributor, are themselves renowned for employing some rather innovative practices when releasing their films. In the past, Drafthouse have partnered with BitTorrent to offer 'bundles' with extra content attached to films like Michel Gondry's *Mood Indigo* and Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*. For their release of *A Field in England*, the film was offered on Blu-ray or DVD with 'over 2 hours of bonus material' plus a Digital Rights Management (DRM) free digital download of the film for \$17.99 or a 'watch now' version that gives the customer the DRM-free download plus instant streaming of the film and 'permanent access to the film to download and stream' for \$9.99. With the DVD/Blu-ray package you can pay \$21.99 and get a theatrical one-sheet as part of the bundle, but this can also be bought separately for \$7.99 (*A Field in England*, n.d.)

So, one might suggest that the release strategy employed for *A Field in England* was about both marketing and audience demand; as the journalist O'Neill says, 'this is an experiment in distribution designed not only to turn the release into an event, but also to finally acknowledge that our viewing habits – how we consumers consume movies – have changed drastically over the past decade' (2014). While O'Neill is undoubtedly correct that the viewing habits of audiences have changed, he does also still refer to such a strategy as 'an experiment'. Indeed, Sue Bruce Smith, Film4's Head of Commercial and Brand Strategy, also referred to this strategy as an experiment when she commented in a 2014 interview that 'we're lucky to have found in Picturehouse Entertainment, 4DVD, the Film4 channel and BFI partners who share our vision to disrupt the status quo and experiment with new distribution patterns, to create this exciting event style release' (cited in Kemp, 2014). Their reference to the experimental nature of such a strategy reminds us that this kind of approach is still an oddity and not the norm. So, the question remains whether such strategies will grow in popularity and start to displace more traditional approaches, or instead are likely to be an addition to the status quo and not the all-out 'disruption' that Sue Bruce Smith proposes.

For some, this form of multiplatform release is undoubtedly the future and sounds a death knell for the current windowed releasing strategies that have dominated the film industry for so long. For instance, according to Andy Starke, one of the producers of *A Field in England*, 'in five years time when every single piece of entertainment is on a server somewhere that's being downloaded to your phone or to the cinema, it's just going to seem ludicrous that people gatekeep stuff' (cited in Weedon,

2014). So, it is clear that, for Starke at least, this future is not merely probably but inevitable.

Indeed, when defending the proposal that such a release strategy is the inevitable way of the future, one might point to *A Field in England's* financial success. For instance, the film generated £21,399 on 17 screens over the opening weekend, giving a screen average of £1,259 (Rosser, 2013). A modest amount by some standards, but the opening night showings at Brixton's Ritzy, Curzon Soho, Hackney Picturehouse, Edinburgh's Cameo and Brighton's Komedia were all reputedly sold out (Rosser, 2013). On Film4 and Film4+1 there was an audience of 288,000 on the day of release with the recorded viewing figures for Saturday and Sunday increasing that number up to an estimated 357,000 viewers (Rosser, 2013). A total of 1,462 copies of the DVD were sold on Amazon and at HMV over the opening weekend. Opening weekend purchases on 4oD and iTunes amounted to more than 1,000, and the film 'was also the most-mentioned film in social media terms for Film4 all week and was the number one trending topic on Twitter in the UK on Friday evening' (Rosser, 2013). While moderate in some respects, such figures point to a very good performance for an otherwise niche film release.

However, Gabriel Swartland, Head of Communications at Picturehouse, is less convinced that simultaneous releases that include free-to-air broadcasts are likely to catch on and suggests that they would be a 'massive hurdle for any distributor to cross for a more commercial title' (Weedon, 2014). Indeed, some who have suggested that multiplatform releases will be the wave of the future also suggest this will only be the case for those more 'esoteric' titles (O'Neill, 2014). Swartland further observes that for *A Field in England* there was a TV channel involved as part of the film's production. As such, he suggests that:

I don't think the same approach is going to be something that we see in the near future. We believe people will come to the cinema to experience film the way the filmmakers intended. If anything, we hope this experiment will confirm some of those assumptions.

(cited in Weedon, 2014)

So, it would seem that even those involved in this 'experiment' do not necessarily believe that such releases will be commonplace but, interestingly, also do not suggest that such strategies would necessarily undermine theatrical cinema attendance. Such sentiments echo Balio's comment that for films with 'only limited theatrical potential... the day-and-date release was just a way to increase awareness in ancillary

markets' (Balio, 2013, p. 111). In such respects it might seem that, for films that would be unlikely to reach a large theatrical audience anyway, a simultaneous release on all platforms has enormous potential.

Despite the confidence of some that such a strategy is ultimately promotional for the film as a whole, some have questioned whether the approach will subsequently limit the ability of the film to travel to foreign markets. This perspective is exemplified by a review in *Variety* which suggests that 'Drafthouse Films will have a far trickier time when it releases "Field" in the U.S. next year, since the most receptive potential viewers will have already sampled it via illegal means' (Debruge, 2013). Such a comment is based on a presumption that US audiences will have *already* watched the film (illegally) online rather than waiting for an official release. However, were this to be true, might this fact then support a further move towards *global* simultaneous multiplatform releasing so as to counteract audiences finding films through informal online networks before they are officially released in their own territory? This is a perspective that even some Hollywood executives are starting to espouse with the CEO of Time Warner, Jeff Bewkes, controversially suggesting in 2012 that it made sense for the industry to release films on all platforms early in their run because to not do so 'would create a gap for piracy' (cited in Child, 2012). Such a perspective would seem to suggest that multiplatform simultaneous release strategies will not be reserved for 'arthouse' films but might also enable more commercial films to combat 'piracy'. However, in such a scenario, the smaller independent films may then become lost in the mass of VoD content available online, as such simultaneous releasing strategies also lose their novelty and thus their promotional potential.

Indeed, before heralding cinema on demand as the future, we also have to consider the consequences for past films as well as for future ones. If film spectatorship were to move entirely online (a scenario I would argue is rather unlikely), then the film catalogue available to us would ultimately be shaped by which films have been digitised and which have not. As Knight and Thomas identify, 'despite widespread perceptions to the contrary, not all films *are* available online or even on DVD. Sometimes this is because of rights clearance issues, but even if they are online, there is no guarantee they will remain so' (2012, p. 17). Thus, online VoD, rather than representing increased access to content may actually create what Claudy op den Kamp (2015) refers to as a 'digital skew', whereby only the work that is digitised is remembered and viewed, and work that is not available online is ultimately marginalised and forgotten.

However, such a scenario is only really likely if we accept the thesis that theatrical exhibition is inevitably going to die out: a scenario I would suggest is very unlikely. As with the release of *A Field in England*, the VoD release *accompanied* the theatrical show of the film; it did not replace it. Indeed, despite the oft-mentioned early concerns, home video formats like VHS and DVD did not replace theatrical consumption of film even when they became more profitable than box office receipts. This is because 'real world exposure is still vital' and theatrical distribution attracts media and editorial coverage that effectively promotes the film in other markets (Knight and Thomas, 2012, p. 273).

Even Ben Wheatley, the director of *A Field in England*, does not present the film's release strategy as a move away from theatrical distribution when he claims:

A cinema is still the best place to see film. I don't think that what we're doing is an assault on the theatrical experience, I think it's saying that the theatrical experience is the pinnacle of this thing, and if you know your eggs and you like film, go and see it in the cinema. But if you don't care so much, then you can see it in all these other ways. You don't have to spread [the release] all over the year, because that doesn't really help. Also, if we give it away for free on the telly, it means that we've got access to a general audience which we'd never get. And once they see it, half of them might hate it, but then you've got a chance that half of them like it.

(cited in Clift, 2014)

## Conclusion

So, we go back to the 'also' and the 'and' proposition from Harbord (2007, p. 144) that was mentioned in the introduction to this book. What we are witnessing with VoD is the continuing proliferation of viewing options for films rather than the replacement of one window with another. That said, the difference with the current manifestation of online VoD is the manner in which it has disrupted the traditional windowed release schedule and moved us towards simultaneous releasing (although one could argue that such a strategy is as much about curtailing 'piracy' than anything else).

Furthermore, while VoD is certainly an attractive option for many, part of the problem with it at the moment is precisely the sheer amount of choice that is on offer; not of films themselves but of platforms through which to view them. At present, if I buy a DVD at

Tesco, I also get an electronic version through my BlinkBox account, and Amazon offer me the same service but through their own system. If I buy an Ultraviolet Blu-ray elsewhere, then I can link this with my BlinkBox library but not with my iTunes, Amazon, Sainsbury's Entertainment or Netflix catalogues. I may be able to find all of the films I 'own' or the catalogues I subscribe to through my smart TV or games console, but ultimately the films I have at my disposal at any given moment are dispersed across a number of platforms. Thus, just as Finney identified in 2010, when talking about legal VoD services, 'one overriding problem[s]... is that the choice of what is legally available remains less impressive and slick' (Finney, 2010, p. 124) than what is available through informal channels. Therefore, the following chapters will consider in detail some of these informal distribution methods and how they too are potentially disrupting current models of media dissemination.