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Notes

1. Quoted in Thompson 2002, p. 12.
2. Chion 1994, 2009.
3. Sterne 2012; Bijsterfeld & Pinch 2011.
4. Several writings collected in *The Sound Studies Reader* challenge assumptions underlying his conception of acoustic ecology, along with Sterne in his earlier work *The Audible Past*. See also Waldock 2011.

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Shadow economies and digital disruption

Chris Baumann

Judging by the titles of Dina Iordanova's and Stuart Cunningham's edited volume *Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves On-Line* (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2012) as well as Ramon Lobato's *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (London: British Film Institute/Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), one could be forgiven for thinking that the movie theatre as we know it has ceased to exist. Both books are concerned with the many alternative ways moving images are experienced outside of the controlled confines of multiplexes and art house cinemas, yet both books tackle this subject differently. Whereas the contributions of the nine authors that appear in *Digital Disruption* centre around the digital technologies and formal online circuits that condition today's film culture and challenge a film industry whose distribution system has long relied on revenue generated by the box office and ancillary markets, *Shadow Economies of Cinema*

looks beyond the official channels of the international film industry in order to shed light on informal distribution networks, both offline and online. This divide in focus has wide-ranging consequences not only for the books' different analytical approaches toward distribution, with *Digital Disruption* making use of a more traditional top-down approach and *Shadow Economies of Cinema* looking at distribution from the bottom-up, but also for their perspectives on issues such as piracy and democratisation.

Digital Disruption is one of the outcomes of the Dynamics of World Cinema research project, which was based at the University of St. Andrews between 2008 and 2011.[1] The volume is concerned with 'the novel ways in which people can experience a cinema conditioned by digital innovation and the wider possibilities for the global circulation of film' (p. 1); for this purpose the book is divided into two parts, 'Digital Disruption' and 'Cinema Moves On-line', with five chapters in each of them. The first section features more comprehensive offerings: five essays that explore the current and admittedly complex state of online film distribution and function as a foundation for the several case studies and interviews which are featured in the second section of the book. In this sense, Stuart Cunningham's and Jon Silver's extensive essay on the global history and complexities of online film distribution works particularly well as it not only presents us with a very useful overview of the different players in the online distribution world but also provides valuable contextualisation for later case studies on Internet companies such as Jaman, IMDb, and MUBI. Similarly, Marijke de Valck's essay on the digitisation of film festivals which concludes the first part of the volume and puts forth a convincing argument for the ongoing importance of physical (i.e. offline) festival space helps to contextualise Alex Fischer's case study on the Amazon-owned digital festival intermediary Withoutabox.

In the introductory essay in *Digital Disruption* Dina Iordanova remarks that traditional distribution is in the process of being 'radically undermined by new technologies' and that the result of this phenomenon will be a 'plethora of circuits and, possibly, revenue streams' (p. 1). For Iordanova this shift is accompanied by disintermediation, a process which facilitates direct access to content and renders the traditional film distributor as an obsolete intermediary. Peer-to-peer (P2P) technology, which enables individual peers to act simultaneously as suppliers and consumers of material and is often used for the purpose of illegal file sharing, can be seen as the ultimate manifestation of disintermediation and is rightly mentioned by the author in this context. However, Iordanova's prime interest lies with the services that constitute the legal sphere of the online film economy and with that she echoes the other authors in *Digital Disruption*.

Overall the essays and case studies cover a wide range of online film services and help establish the picture that online distribution in its current form is indeed

a messy affair, yet they avoid taking an extensive look at the disruptive effects that the informal counterparts of these services can have. Of course with its varied offerings the volume still manages to offer new insights for anyone interested in the question of what happens when (formal) film distribution moves online, but given that the book sets out to 'survey advancing models and technologies that condition the changes of the global landscape for commercial cinema within the new film economy' (p. 23) the absence of an article on informal distribution seems like an oversight.

This gap is filled by *Shadow Economies of Cinema*, which builds on the author's previous research on informal film distribution.[2] Aiming to answer where contemporary cinema is located and how it is accessed, Lobato decides to look at the many informal film viewing practices that 'are integral to everyday life around the world but marginal to film studies as a discipline' (p. 1). The author makes a point of distancing his work from the type of industry analysis which has dominated media studies for so long, taking Hollywood as its point of departure and producing narratives of the United States film industry dominating the rest of the world. Instead, he focuses on informal film economies – shadow economies, which are not 'regulated, measured, and governed by state and corporate institutions' (p. 4) and do not involve revenue-sharing or windowing, a business model that maximises revenue by releasing the same content multiple times (first in theatres, followed by DVD/blu-ray, pay-TV/video-on-demand, and finally broadcast television).

Throughout *Shadow Economies of Cinema* we are provided with case studies that give evidence to the book's central argument that 'informal distribution is a central rather than marginal feature of film culture' (p. 19). Taking inspiration from economic, anthropological, and urban studies, Lobato analyses the straight-to-video film distribution of the late 1970s and early 1980s; explores Nigeria's video industry (Nollywood), which is built around informal pirate street markets; visits a trader at a Mexico City street market who builds his business on the sale of pirated DVDs; and closely examines 'grey' online distribution circuits: intermediaries that operate in-between the formal and informal realms of the Internet. *Shadow Economies of Cinema* is filled with a wealth of simulating examples and case studies from around the world and encourages a new way of thinking about film distribution beyond formal networks.

Digital Disruption also takes into account examples of audience aggregation beyond national borders. Iordanova speaks of trans-border flows when she finds that 'more and more audiences are turning to the Internet for cultural consumption that transcends borders' (p. 7), and both Michael Gubbins and Michael Franklins address the Brazilian company MovieMobz, which operates a cinema-on-demand model that integrates social media to measure the demand for certain films and in this way gives access to film screenings to people who are not fortunate enough to

live in a location that features regular viewings. In their case study on Jaman, the specialist online distributor of non-Hollywood films, Jon Silver, Stuart Cunningham, and Mark David Ryan also address trans-border flows, outlining how the Internet service tries to reach out to prominent film festivals like Tribeca and a worldwide community of cinephiles but faces challenges from both piracy and the territorial restrictions on rights availability, which leads to the unfortunate situation that Jaman is able to provide access to certain films in one country but not in another.

Despite sharing a desire for global case studies the two books differ immensely in their overall approaches toward distribution. The essays in *Digital Disruption* employ a top-down perspective on distribution, a perspective which is in line with the works of political economists like Janet Wasko and Thomas Guback and criticised by Lobato for being 'in part a product of the methodological norms of film industry research' (p. 12).[3] Indeed, various authors in *Digital Disruption* take traditional film distribution as the point of origin for their analysis and judge online distribution services predominantly on their potential for disruption. For example, in his essay on the significance of Internet-enabled dissemination for the Film Value Chain, Franklin stresses the potential of tools such as crowd-funding or social media tracking for traditional (i.e. analogue) entertainment companies, as they will be able to better analyse and manage the risk involved in the various stages of film production. Similarly, Gubbins focuses on studio distribution when he highlights Hollywood's newly-found 'potential for mining and exploiting existing value' (p. 76) through audience monitoring and data accumulation over the Internet.

Lobato argues in favour of a bottom-up approach toward distribution. He suggests that 'there are other stories to be told about distribution' (p. 10) and shows that from early on there was a market for distribution from below. He identifies the distribution of pornography as a particularly well-suited example, with travelling showmen distributing adult films from the 1910s onwards and mail-distribution networks taking over in the 1930s. Throughout his book Lobato stresses the centrality of informal markets for the global distribution of film; he demonstrates that Nigeria's film distribution network is built almost entirely on the basis of informality and the distributive power of pirate street markets, and he takes a close look at the Brazilian film *Tropa de Elite* (José Padilha, 2007), whose financial success was helped greatly by the fact that buzz was generated on street markets where pirates sold illegal copies months before the theatrical release.

Although both *Digital Disruption* and *Shadow Economies of Cinema* go to great lengths to present the reader with a variety of case studies there is a stark dissimilarity in who exactly is given a voice in the two books. Whereas the final contribution in *Digital Disruption* features Paul Fileri and Ruby Cheung conducting two interviews with Efe Cakarel, founder and CEO of the online film service MUBI, *Shadow Economies of Cinema* includes the story of Juan, a street vendor operating

a pirate DVD store in Tepito, a borough of Mexico City. Thus, where Fileri and Cheung invite an executive to expand on 'the relationship of MUBI with the other, more conventional distribution channels' (p. 176), Lobato gives a street trader the chance to explain how far his piracy operation helps to give distribution to some rare Mexican films which 'have been "orphaned" when studios changed hands or ceased operation' (p. 89).

Indeed, Lobato's handling of piracy is one of the strong points of *Shadow Economies of Cinema*. As polarised as the topic is he makes a great effort to problematise and contextualise the ongoing piracy debate in a transnational frame and to not fall back on the all too prevalent industry perspective rendering piracy as a 'mortal threat to film trade' (p. 76). Instead, he stays clear of making a value judgment and introduces what he refers to as 'six faces of piracy' (p. 70): a wide array of perspectives which see piracy, depending on the context, as theft, free enterprise, free speech, authorship, resistance, or access. Lobato succeeds in opening up the piracy debate and, as he does so remarkably well throughout his book, includes the perspectives and voices of the ones who are normally not part of the discussion.

Untangling the many facets of piracy is not the focus in *Digital Disruption*. In their chapter discussing the global complexion of online film distribution, Cunningham and Silver address the interdependence of informal and formal services and argue that 'free downloading and P2P filesharing forms a major part of film culture' (p. 58) that 'needs to be analysed in its own right' (p. 59) – yet neither Cunningham's and Silver's essay nor any other contribution in the volume substantially tackles the subject. Franklin states that 'in its illegal form, Internet-enabled dissemination of film poses an existential threat to the film industry' (p. 101) but never expands on this issue, and both Fileri and Cheung in their interviews with Cakarel circumvent questions about piracy, sparing the CEO of MUBI potentially uncomfortable answers.

Given the volume's overall perspective on distribution it comes as no surprise that Iordanova et al. describe the process of cinema moving online as a democratic one. Iordanova brings forth the idea that finally, 'film becomes liberated from the "tyranny of geography"' as 'the new distribution set-up permits unrestrained availability of distinctive products' (p. 23). Along similar lines Gubbins argues that the 'wealth of content choices, accessible on-demand on multiple platforms and devices, has created what can be characterised as an "active audience"' (p. 68), and de Valck asserts that 'the democratisation brought about by the direct availability of, and better accessibility to digital media has had radical consequences for both institutions and individuals' (p. 117). Gubbins and de Valck in particular refer to Chris Anderson's model of the 'long tail' which argues that niche products can collectively outsell blockbusters given that the distribution channel is big enough to allow for this.[4] For them online film distribution platforms are the ideal

vessels to offer abundant choices and cater to diverse tastes, making it possible to democratise film distribution like never before in the history of cinema.

However, there are good reasons not to take the democratising effects of these new distribution models for granted. As Chuck Tryon has shown elsewhere, today's digital delivery of content is indeed characterised by ubiquitous and immediate access, but it is also conditioned by the control mechanisms of major media companies that decide what, how, and where content can be consumed.[5] Lobato seems to agree when he concludes his book by arguing that 'we need to be aware of the risks presented by loose talk about the democratisation of distribution' (p. 113). It is certainly fair to say that we live in an age of abundant choices, but by no means does that imply even and fair access to media on a global scale. As Lobato so convincingly writes: 'proliferation is not the same thing as political participation' (p. 115).

Both *Digital Disruption* and *Shadow Economies of Cinema* succeed in showing how traditional distribution can be undermined by alternative circuits. The difference in approaches in these books makes for contrasting views on important issues and poses the rather intriguing question of how future research on media distribution should position itself. Surely a good starting point would be to acknowledge the importance of informal circuits and complement a discussion of distribution from above with a consideration from below. Lobato has shown us what an exploration of some of the many informal distribution networks around the world can look like. Scholars must ask themselves how they can tackle the subject systematically and move beyond what *Shadow Economies of Cinema* has done. Are we, on the basis of the very nature of informality, forced to deliver innumerable accounts of varying informal distribution circuits? These are important questions and further research, particularly on informality in the context of media distribution, is needed. For now both books are valuable contributions to an academic field that is still in the process of making sense of the many ways the digital environment impacts media.

Noten

1. For more information on the Dynamics of World Cinema project see http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/worldcinema/.
2. See, for example, Lobato 2010, 2012; Lobato & Thomas & Hunter 2011.
3. Wasko 2003; Guback 1985.
4. Anderson 2006.
5. Tryon 2013.

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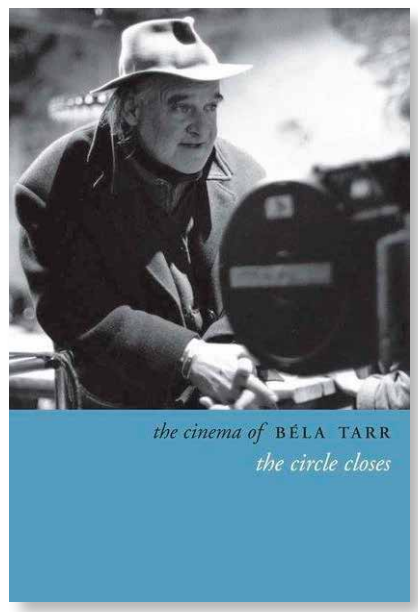
The cinema of Béla Tarr

The circle closes

Miklós Kiss



'Much of the available commentary on the films of Béla Tarr is often confused and confusing.' I could not agree more with John Cunningham. His words, written on the jacket of András Bálint Kovács' book (New York: Wallflower Press/Columbia University Press, 2013), remind the reader of those essayistic writings on Tarr's cinema which often try, without success, to imitate the movies' elusive poetry through their own vague and impressionistic language. By carrying out an accurate and elaborate analysis before arriving to its sober interpretations Kovács' highly-anticipated book[1] blazes a trail through the jungle of such questionable contributions.[2]

Throughout my reading I was particularly interested in three aspects of the book's focus and range. First of all I was expecting a thorough and clear elucidation on Tarr's