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Some epistemological considerations about the theories of film and cultural consumption in the Internet age: revisiting superstardom models, long tail phenomenon and quality appraisal

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Edited by
Wojciech Dyduch
Małgorzata Pańkowska



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Katowice 2012

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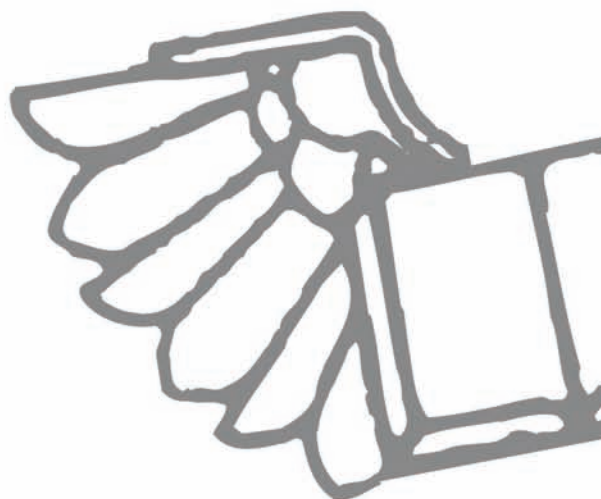
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Frederic Gimello-Mesplomb*

SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE THEORIES OF FILM AND CULTURAL CONSUMPTION IN THE INTERNET AGE: REVISITING SUPERSTARDOM MODELS, LONG TAIL PHENOMENON AND QUALITY APPRAISAL

Introduction

If the uncertainty phenomena are not the latest in economics, the combination of the ADSL Internet accessibility and opportunities to share/download/watch in streaming film in a whimsical chronology has substantially amended the work of the researcher in the last fifteen years. Film economics can be considered as the cultural economics subarea interested in economics of the film industry, movies economics or cinema marketing. Film economics is no longer limited to statistically record the phenomena of trade in the cinema exhibition market (i/e domestic box office results), but to analyze the hazards of an individual consumption of cultural goods via downloading or streaming practices during an age where only management studies or sociology of cultural practices prevailed.

The traditional models of film marketing, largely influenced by the behaviorist tradition (for example questioning the *effects* of criticism on general entries or the trailers *effectiveness* on audiences), yet effective ten years ago, are no longer enough to interpret today the disconcerting versatility of the cultural consumer on Internet, washed up there where the new media leaders and cultural influencers such as social networks take over. The economist of culture has mutated by obligation into a socio-economist. The significant evolution of the Internet technical skills (networks, free or legal downloading platforms, in-

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dependent consumer labels raising funds for online artists...) encourages the economists to revisiting the traditional economics models of cultural goods. From our point of view, the technological challenges that experienced the audiovisual sphere with the digital switchover of the whole chain of production, distribution and dissemination of images engendered three questions that have profoundly influenced the economic thinking on the cinema during the past fifteen years.

Internet Communication and the relevance of the perimeter of the movie market

In film economics, the actual tendency is to use a socio-economic definition of the market as a place of interactions^{*}, considering not only like it was the case in the past the value of economic exchange, but also the value that individuals in this market attribute to objects in circulation. It's a definition borrowed from both the economic geography and interactionist theories of Becker or Latour, i.e. not limiting the market to the simple recording of the process of objects' flow, but integrating the actions of individuals who participate in the process, their input and output [Duval, 2006]. For the economist Roger Guesnerie, the term market is more a concept that covers the "intermediate abstractions called 'markets'" [Gesnerie, 2006].

The paradox is that socio-technical innovations affecting film (particularly the digitization of cinemas and the multiplication of distribution channels via the Internet) have only slightly modified the image still conceived by researchers on the movie market. To have a vision as broad as possible of these intermediary abstractions and their interactions, we would have to avoid the reduction of the size of the cinema market to its "movie theater market" dimension, and take into consideration other areas of films' diffusion (TV broadcasts, DVD Rental, VOD, P2P download, streaming, viewing on mobile devices, etc.) in order to be able to estimate the total number of individuals who interact with the object. Using a set of films made between 1950 and 1970, one of the most interesting articles in theoretical economics published in recent years on the issue of measuring the quality of film concludes that it is necessary to combine theater entries, TV broadcasts, awards received at festivals or the presence of the film in ordinary viewers' judgment tools such as journals, fanzines, dictionaries and film encyclopedias to demonstrate the qualitative importance of a film. For the authors, this would be

^{*} Creative professionals, broadcast spaces (theaters, but also festivals, TV, DVD, etc.), critics, viewers, instances of consecration, etc.

linked to formal games being adopted towards the film by the individuals after its theatrical release [Ginsburgh, Weyers, 1999]. Contrary to the Canadian/US approach, in Europe, film studies seem to hang on this interactionist paradigm.

For a frequent example, to measure the success of a film, rarely is there made an approximation between theater entries, TV audiences during (re)broadcasts and Internet uses (download, streaming, or online Video on Demand rentals). Of course, in the academic area where the artistic value of the long feature movie helped to structure film studies as a discipline, a hierarchy of values within the film distribution channels helps to distinguish the theater as the place of the emotional experience with the “media” often judged unfit to participate in the esthetic adventure. So, it would be motivating to use a less orthodox dimension of the market. Taking the case of so called “niche” films, it’s even an unavoidable approach. From the mid-eighties, the market for genres primarily known via video generates more spectators and revenues than the diffusion of these films in theaters. The large-scale experience is confirmed, moreover, with the comedies of *Nollywood* (Nigeran productions), objectively oriented and distributed for the video channel, and now making Nigeria one of the leading centers of film production in the world, a fact that is beyond the economic geography of film still based only on theaters [Barrot, 2005]. For numerous film genres, from the most popular such as fantasy, horror or science-fiction to the most legitimate such as art-house films or social documentaries, Internet provides a specialized market intended for video, completely independent of theaters, with its own publishing houses, studios, agents, distribution, websites, online magazines, prices, instances of legitimization, audience, etc. [Gimello-Mespomb (Ed.), 2011]. Along the same lines, illegal downloading (P2P, F2F and other methods of file-sharing) or simply streaming, is a phenomenon that could be more applied to the question of the success of films or tastes of the audience, as it is shown in certain studies conveyed on downloading, indicating film genres primarily viewed through this means [Wojnas, 2005].

The (re)discovery of the concept of uncertainty in film economics

The 1990s academic literature has finally led to the awareness that the film market is a market characterized by deep uncertainty, what was already known, but so far, noted sporadically in the works on the subject. This finding did not come from film economists themselves, who have instead focused on the challenges of the real and underground economy of a profession in which shopkeepers and employers daily attempt to stave off this attribute, but rather from sociologists and political scientists [Callon et al., 2001].

Before the Internet age, the notion of uncertainty was gradually emerging in the analysis of cultural products. In the 70s, one begins to talk of “experience goods” and “credence goods”. The field is relevant as the unequal relation of information (or asymmetric information) between the user and the business is normally weaker in the cultural sector as the user and the business are expected to work together for the same cause (one motivated by pleasure, the other by profit). These phenomena can be observed in markets as different as markets of wine, doctors, lawyers or art [Moulin, 1967; 1989; 1992; 1995]. It is well known that the lack of information on the genre of the film contributes to overall uncertainty about the quality of this film. Uncertainty will lead the viewer to make choices to prevent against the risk to pay for a bad quality product.

Game theory shows that getting information about the game from another stems from an effort to reduce the risk factor. However, some researchers such as Pierre-Michel Menger or Bruno S. Frey believe that information on the quality of a film is not asymmetrical. For cultural goods, uncertainty, *a priori*, is a given data integrated by both the audience and by the professionals [Menger, 2009, pp. 17, 33-100] as an essential component of a calculated risk, specific to the job (for professionals) or the cultural entertainment (for viewers). We can also assume that some market players, particularly film and video distributors, opt for a purely functional display to avoid the risk, and thus “hide the game”. It would therefore be considered relatively convenient to use generic categories usual in the distribution of films such as “drama” or “thriller” until they can gather a number of genres from comedy to a crime film, in the hope of broadening the initial presumed base, composed of a public of specialists.

The same strategy of veiling and unveiling the genre also drives the applicants for grants allocated by European public selected film funding systems (i.e. National Cinema Center in France, CCA Film Fund for the French-speaking Belgium, Luxemburg, Israel and Korean Film Funds or UK Film Council), which would explain the dominance of the “drama” and comedy dramas, categories among the screenplays selected by such mechanisms [Gimello-Mesplomb, 2000, pp. 201-244]. Other films benefiting from such public support appear to be less “genrified” than the films in circulation on the local markets. But the opposite also can be observed with Internet. In France, for example, is not uncommon to see French films, not the beneficiaries of public subsidies and clearly “genrified” since destined for foreign markets, or simply other canals such as television and Internet*, as it is observed by Françoise Benhamou: “The profile of the

* It is also not forbidden to consider that one of the causes of the lack of recognition in the symbolic space of a firm such as Europacorp (Luc Besson's company) on the French market comes in part from this process of genrification given to works it produces, the process long remained unusual, if not marginal among renowned French producers.

Advance on receipts system is surprisingly slightly less eclectic than that of France 2 and Canal + TV channels (...) with fairly clear attraction to the drama of all kinds” [Benhamou et al., 2009, pp. 101-112]. It appears that the recognition of genre norms, which works perfectly for the global market for recognize foreign films distributed on local markets, functions badly across local scale, when it comes to mobilizing the same categories of observation to identify the films produced by the same market.

However, genres easily identifiable within the Hollywood studio system (musical, western...) can give rise to categories highly unlikely when one tries to locate them. But this single explanation does not seem sufficient to grasp the extent of the problem. To this weak identification of genres in domestic markets a major influence in the cinema market word of mouth is added, which causes a ripple effect specific to cultural industries, and that can be described as an effect of “social contagion”, as it is shown in British studies conducted in the late 90s [Kretschmer et al., 1999, pp. 61-72]. Social contacts that result in exchanges between spectators about the films enable positive feedback that feed a virtuous cycle to promote the products already known, as evidenced already by Rosen in his well-known model of the “superstars” [Rosen, 1981, pp. 845-858; MacDonald, 1988, pp. 155-167]. But, surprisingly, it can also result in negative feedback. This is shown particularly by George Akerlof in his famous article on the market for used cars (“lemons” market) which earned its author the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2001 [Akerlof, 1970, pp. 488-500].

The asymmetry of information on quality feeds the mistrust of consumers and may lead either to obtaining more information in order to protect themselves from a bad purchase (*anti-selection* or *adverse selection*) or simply to leaving the market as demonstrated by Albert Hirschman in a famous essay on consumer loyalty published the same year of the Akerlof paper [Hirschman, 1970]. In this case, the market size is reduced, which automatically increases the number of items available and forces the price to drop (which amplifies the distrust concerning the quality of the remaining objects as it now takes longer to find a buyer, even despite a lower price than before). The asymmetry of information on quality can therefore contribute to narrowing or even a complete disappearance of a market [Akerlof, 1970, pp. 488-500]. In fact, the problem raised by Akerlof is not so much the information asymmetry as the lack of information. The strength of the Akerlof model lies in its ability to show that the absence of information creates the appetite of individuals to develop by themselves tools to produce information, in order to be able to judge the quality of the objects involved, or at least to demand that such devices are provided to them. Often reduced to a proposed neo-classical mechanism for a market to regulate itself, Akerlof’s model, since it suggests ways of interpreting the mechanisms that govern

the action of consumers making a qualitative choice, provides a minimal definition of sociology of *quality* similar to the Albert Hirschman's theory of *loyalty* [Ethis, 2006]. In both theories, to ensure balance and restore confidence in an environment dominated by uncertainty, Akerlof and Hirschman emphasizes the need to send signals to individuals about the quality the items in question (prices, labels, awards, etc.). The model is more transferable on Internet than the cultural markets characterized by uncertainty (concerning the public success, the reactions of critics, revenues, etc.) have always been working with the reliance: the presence of stars on film posters plays an important role in reducing uncertainty as already shown by De Vany and Walls [De Vany, Walls, 1999, pp. 285-318], but also "(...) the awards in festivals, critics, advertising or word of mouth among viewers represent multiple channels of information, reassuring consumers and reducing their uncertainty" [Dantec, Levy, 2005, p. 8].

This proposal echoes the observations made during the same decade by Lucien Karpik regarding the markets of experience goods and more generally of singularities, which are bound to disappear if they are no longer able to produce by themselves the tools of differentiation generating a "positive" definition of the singularity [Karpik, 1989, pp. 187-210]. Karpik reminds us that there is a major distinction between risk and uncertainty. The risk may be subject to a probability calculation to reduce it (for example by increasing the information generated via statistics of past performance), while uncertainty remains random and thus escapes any probability calculations [Karpik, 2009]. A single consecration of a film at a festival or a professional ceremony (Academy Awards, Golden Globes, Bafta, etc.) is not enough to reassure the audience and contribute to the reputation of a film. It can be seen regarding the *Palme d'Or*, the highest prize awarded at the Cannes Film Festival for the best feature film of the official competition but generally not a box-office success in movie theatres after the prize. If unanimity is a factor generally accepted by historians and philosophers of art to assess how to measure the consecration of a work, the time factor, however, is put forward by a number of economists who worked on the issue of a film's reputation [Ginsburgh, Weyers, 1999, pp. 269-283; Hutter, Throsby (Eds.), 2008, pp. 179-199].

If the main limit of this proposal is to undervalue the importance of the box office (deemed ineffective for assessing the quality of a film, because it would allow everyone to qualify the American blockbusters as "quality goods"— a sensitive issue because it would not account for the "specificity of cultural goods" such as claimed by Françoise Benhamou [2002, p. 106]), the efforts introduced in order to measure the time variable deserve to be examined. Internet provides useful skills to this collective memory (movies databases, rankings, list of movies awarded in festivals, etc.). Basing their study on a vast body of films made

between 1950 and 1970, Ginsburgh and Weyers have not only demonstrated that the success of a film might not be consistent with judgments of quality given by film experts, but they also show that these judgments vary with time. Therefore a distinction should be made between two types of awards: those collected in the short term (prizes in festivals and professional awards, film criticism reception) and the recognition signs in the long term measured by the presence of these films in league tables of the ordinary cinephilia available mainly on Internet (such as “the most significant films of film history”, “the best films of the decade”, “top movies”, “AFI’s 100 Years...100 Movies”, etc.). They identify a number of tools that enable the public to measure this “resistance to time” as the reference of films in thematic dictionaries of cinema or in the program listings of TV channels several years after their theatrical release.

Internet and the long tail of niche cinephilia

The socio-economics of the demand for films can partly decipher the behavior of ordinary spectators, who are not finding on the theater market the objects for a more refined taste born from television, DVD and the spread of ADSL. The fame phenomena now pass by two vectors: on the one hand, the recognition of the quality of the objects by the expertise of the viewer himself*, that which undoubtedly a bit unfairly puts the emphasis on the cultural influencers in the past, in the choice of film, as shown by Bernard Lahire [2006; 2008, pp. 166-188], and on the other hand, the effectiveness of systems of online mutual recommendations such as those established in the early 2000 by Amazon in the US or dedicated platforms such as Allociné in France. Facing a greater film offer and no less uncertainty, the differences between reputation and notoriety are larger. The multiplication of the offer now leads the film viewer to be more sensitive to trial devices, aimed at reducing uncertainty, and in particular to the markers of quality of the items in circulation [Cf. English, 2008].

Chris Anderson marked the first decade of 2000 with his work on the Internet Long Tail [Anderson, 2006]. The principle raised is simple: because it avoids the problem of storage, any title of an online catalog properly valued and referenced has an infinite potential to reach a consumer somewhere on the planet and over a period much longer than the period the catalog and the object will remain available online. It was realized that this new economic context led to the revaluation of antiques (i.e. eBay) and olds catalogs (Anderson also suggests a real

* For further developments on viewer’s expertise, see Jean-Marc Leveratto, 2006. *Introduction à l’anthropologie du spectacle*. Paris: La Dispute.

“potential market” for the documentary film on video, difficult to sell in “hard” surfaces (*bricks*) but profitable for online sellers (*clicks*). Studies conducted to verify this assertion indeed show that the long tail of online sales benefits the genre cinema and niche films. The hyper-segmentation of items illustrated by the increasing number of already legal editions (DVD, VOD accessibility) as well as non-legal downloading for movies not distributed or not available for distribution, is a result of their rarity in traditional distribution channels.

Pierre-Jean Benghozi and Francoise Benhamou remain cautious as far as books and music is concerned, stating only that “(...) the effects may only hold to a dematerialization and therefore would be self-evident” [Benghozi, Benhamou, 2008]. However, they attest to the existence of a lever for niche films on Internet. Another study conducted by Pierre-Jean Benghozi reveals a “long tail effect” on the video market: sales of videos with low sales are relatively larger (six times higher in the thinnest part of the tail) on the Internet than the sales of the same movies on videotape in the retail sector: “If this is confirmed in the download and video on demand (VoD) sectors, these data may suggest a wider range for online shopping of video than music, thus opening a more favorable outlook for small productions” [Benghozi (Ed.), 2008]. It must be stated that the increasing number of titles published belonging to catalogs demonstrates the existence of a consumer market for these titles, greater expertise of individuals for niche products (film classics, documentaries, genre films) is undoubtedly linked to a virtuous circle combining devices of artistic education, the spread of ADSL, opportunities for viewing and downloading, and finally to opportunities to inquire by other means, thus redesigning the logic of fame and reputation.

Conclusion

At the end of 1990s, the theory of Akerlof began to interest the media economists, as evidenced by the presence of a chapter devoted to the phenomena of adverse selection in the cultural industries in a book of 2009 on *The economy of symbolic exchanges* [Dolgin, 2008, pp. 69-144]. Other works outside the mainstream film economics and economic geography have also attracted attention, such as those of Allen J. Scott. Allen Scott has spent most of his career in North America, first at the University of Toronto and since 1981 at the University of California in Los Angeles, where he has established himself as the one of the best world specialists on territorial dynamics. Allen J. Scott incorporated the cultural industries as a new field of study, because he believes that the sector is representative of the new frontiers of capitalist development, since they are particularly selective carriers of territorial dynamics. *The Cultural Economy of*

Cities [Scott, 2000a] lays the foundations of the model he intends to apply to this sector, work followed by a number of case studies (including a specific one on French cinema [Scott, 2000b]) preceding a second opus devoted to the geography of Hollywood [Scott, 2005].

Also in the United States, American economist Moshe Adler, convinced that a strong link exists between choice of film and talent, worked from the mid-eighties to pursue the works of Rosen and MacDonald on issues of economic valuation of talent and on the demonstration of the opinions of the spectators. The purpose of the work of Adler is to penetrate the mechanisms linking quality of the films and cinema attendance. Finally we cannot conclude this overview without mentioning the research of the famous American-Canadian duo De Vany/Walls who, for more than fifteen years, have marked the releases of international journals on cultural economy and cultural policy. We can say that, while the work that marked the 90s has often been marked, in the wake of management science and the fascination with the influence of traditional cultural influencers (film critic) on cinema attendance [Eliashberg, Shugan, 1997, pp. 68-78], those of years 2000s seem to move away from behavioral considerations to be more interested in internal judgment devices of the viewer and their cognitive determinants in Internet context, that is to say, roughly, to integrate a more anthropological and sociological dimension to economic analysis of cinema online.

Jean-Marc Leveratto and Laurent Jullier confront the socio-technical features of cinema with the model of expertise of the viewer and ordinary cinephilia [Leveratto, Jullier, 2010]. What is common, finally, between the work published at the beginning of the nineties in the field of film economics and the current researches? The search for meaning of exchanges between films and individuals, even though Internet and the digital revolution would make it appear that the “era of the possible” had made the understanding of these exchanges easier.

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