**Investigating the materiality of cinephile catalogues with small-scale and cobbled together methods**

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My talk offers a quick look back at the method I developed for my doctoral thesis on cinephile SVOD catalogues. I studied nine services situated in North America and Europe.

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*BFI Player* (UK), *LaCinetek* (France), *Fandor* (North America), *Filmatique* (North America), *FilmStruck* (US), *Mubi* (worldwide), *SundanceNow* (US), *Tënk* (France), *The Criterion Channel* (North America).

Those nine catalogues stand out for their film programming and curation efforts. They produce cinephile paratexts and work to create sociocultural value around the subscription formula.

SVOD catalogues are *cultural meeting places* in the sense given by Luc Pauwels (2012), where streams of subscribers and movies interact with each other. My thesis makes the case that studying the digital materiality of those catalogues (by materiality I’m a mean here an approach that considers the technical, discursive and formal aspects of a cultural production ), opens up a window to a better understanding of how movies and the *idea of cinema* (Casetti 2015) circulate online. I now look at a few strategies and tools that I cobbled together to form a blend of qualitative methods, web scraping and small-scale data visualization.

For one part of my thesis, I applied a multimodal framework to study how the websites were structured, how long it took to reach the movies and what kind of visual and textual elements were used to build what Lobato *et al.* (2024) rightly call the VOD interface.

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I settled for the “manual” capture of webpages, using a browser add-on to fully capture the entire page and to create what I call metaphorically *Ice carrot*. The aim wasn’t to drill in the past of the web, but to build an archive of the way different elements and modalities were used in the catalogues. I worked with a multimodal framework, reverse visual search engine and close examination of the pages’ source code. I also studied the structure of the catalogue (what place was granted to the movies) but also which paths the catalogues made available for viewers. This method let me track the changes applied to the layouts and the fate of contentious features such as dedicated festivals pages or comment sections.

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Moreover, it allowed me to highlight the role played by thumbnails. They are present everywhere in tables, lists, filters and so on. They tend to *stand for* the movies and let people browse them and manipulate them (in interactive filter systems or in subsets, semi-automatically produced collections, lists created in-house or by subscribers themselves).

Thumbnails are assembled each time a page load to populate lists and tables that form the core of the catalogues’ websites; they also function as signposts to guide the subscribers to their movie of choice. They have been studied by Etienne Candel and his team (Candel, Jeanne-Perrier, et Souchier 2012) as “small forms of the web”. In my research, I described how they transform one core relation of cinema, the one linking a photogram to the entire movie. Within the thumbnail, the photogram - often one of the few traces of the film's visual material within the catalogues’ pages - this photogram becomes the film's surrogate. It needs to represent the entire film. In the theater-based system, the photogram is seen more as a fragment of the work, a puncture in the flow of images. The thumbnail transforms this relationship to facilitate the movies’ “mobilization”, to use the term put forth by Bruno Latour. Thumbnails then form the visible part of a process in which movies are mobilized online to facilitate their accumulation, retrieval and sorting (by human and machine alike).

For another part of my thesis, I created a method to assess the selection of titles in the catalogues under analysis.When conducting my research, I was confronted with the lack of reliable data on VOD services. In Quebec, those statistics were inexistent at the time. In France, the catalogues just disappeared from the CNC graphs about VOD consumption due to their small footprint in terms of subscribers.

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I have sought to overcome these limitations by gathering information on the movies selected (mainly their title, date, director, country of production). Two methods were used for this purpose: the importHTML and importXML of the Google drive software, and small capture scripts that I developed in Python. I used the Anaconda development tools and the Beautiful soup library to scrape data from websites. I built a *homemade* database through a series of back-and-forth operations, from the custom programming of small capture scripts to data cleaning (harmonization, finding missing information through Authority File systems and Wikidata), to aggregating the various data sources, and finally, visualizing the data in tables and graphs produced on the Tableau software.

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Here's a chart showing the breakdown of selected titles by decade and catalogue. 40% of titles come from the so-called classic period, roughly between 1950 and 1980, a majority of titles (54%) if we exclude those offered by Fandor.

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This second graph shows the concentration of titles in three main areas: North America, Central Europe and Japan. Not surprisingly, those are by far the main sources of titles offered in the catalogues. Perhaps less expected, Brazil, India and China account for less than 2% of all titles. The graph also led me to look closely at one service strategy which blends title selection and web design. We can see that Fandor had a small quantity of titles distributed all over the map. When going back to the site’s interactive filter, I realized that each group of movies (even single title) made their country of origin appeared on the interactive list presented in the website. This strategy then made Fandor’s international reach look stronger.

To conclude I would say that cinephile catalogues use less dynamic layout that the constantly rearticulated interface of Netflix (Pajkovic 2022) and are, in many ways, far away from AI’s big data shuffling, described for instance in Somaini’s *Grey Room* article (2023). Studying SVOD catalogues then requires appropriate methods, both low-tech and tailor-made, to capture their precarious and marginal place in cinema online distribution.

**Martin Bonnard** is adjunct professor at the School of Media of the Université du Québec à Montréal. His doctoral thesis in communication (UQAM) deals with the actualization of the cinema experience by cinephile SVOD catalogues. He is co-directing a research project on documentary film mediation and circulation online (SSHRC, 2023-2024).

Recent publications include : “[Cinephile Film Catalogues Grappling with Web Technology](https://encyclo-technes.org/en/parcours/all/catalogues)“ (TECHNES 2023), “[Webdocumentaire et enjeux historiographiques](https://journals.openedition.org/cm/5661)” (with Rémy Besson, eds, special issue of the journal *Conserveries mémorielles*, 2024), “[Civil Society and Online Exchanges: Some Digital Contingencies](https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119694885.ch11)” (2020), and “[(Re)monter le cinéma sur le web](https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/cine/1900-v1-n1-cine05122/1067495ar.pdf)“ (*Cinémas* journal, 2018).

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