The audiences contribution on alternative VoD platforms: An unthought of online participation?

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Translator: Gabriele Stera
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Introduction

1 The fierce competition between the global SVoD companies (Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime and the more recent Apple TV+, Disney+) concerns, of course, catalogs, licensing or creation policies, but also the attraction of audiences through packages and subscriptions. Even if Netflix’s global expansion strategy still ensures its domination of the market (in 2018, Netflix accounted for 52% of the SVOD revenues generated in Europe\(^1\) and in March 2020, 63.2% of French VOD consumers said they had watched a program on Netflix\(^2\)), the offer is nevertheless diversified and many companies at various scales offer such services. However, apart from the dominant companies, there are also alternative offers—with a specific market positioning—which provide different ways of accessing films. Thuillas and Wiart describe them as “alternative platforms for access to cultural content” or “alternative platforms.”\(^3\)

2 Identifying and questioning the dispositive and discursive modalities of the construction of cinematographic references on French-speaking video-on-demand platforms brings us back to the problems of cultural audiences’ participation. The cultural and political dimension of online participation can only be analysed within the framework of situated practices, the consumption of films being one of many that allow us to examine cultural industries’ behaviour.

3 The central question of the present proposal concerns the ways in which this relationship to film audiences mobilises or constructs forms of online participation. Indirectly, this implies questioning the platform model as an injunction to implicit
digital participation of audiences as a structuring axis of online cultural and social practices.

This approach does not consist of an evaluation based on an ideal scale that would measure participation assuming that the greater it is, the more enriching the cultural experience would be. Nor is it a study of the field of cinephilia, since the overall project’s framework considers cultural platforms in their diversity. The aim is to question the forms of participation in relation to the cultural referents of a cultural industry that is certainly governed by economic models, but also by practices and references that shape it as a cultural experience and not only as a consumeristic activity. The main hypothesis of this proposal is based on the paradoxical weakness of the participation mobilised by these websites, and the recourse to rather classical and institutional principles of authority for the selection and evaluation of films. The technical possibility of participation seems here to be blocked by cultural models of curation linked to film culture. The participatory promise of digital platforms is not kept, because it seems to clash with the consumption practices of film as a cultural product, which are structured by the platforms themselves on the basis of curation models specific to cinema.

By approaching these alternative platforms through the lens of audience participation, the research operates on two levels: first, on a strategic and economic level, by looking at how these companies organise the encounter between audiences and audiovisual works. Then, on a political level, by examining the way in which these platforms engage with the notion of participation, beyond the well-established models of dominant digital platforms. The aim is to determine whether these actors and their offer in France are developing an original cultural proposal from the point of view of the audience's participation, or whether they are perpetuating the commercialisation of audience participation via the platform model.

This paper will first specify the elements that allow us to define the approach of online participation and to understand how it will be studied on four VOD platforms. Secondly, an analysis of the promise of participation on these digital devices will reveal the implicit nature of the platform’s model, which contrasts with the participation functionalities implemented. The last point will try to discuss this observation in relation to the prevalence of cultural models specific to the audiovisual sector, based on expertise and selection, which may be in contradiction with public participation, especially when it comes to audiovisual audiences, resulting in what could be described as the unthought dimension of digital participation.

Digital participation in video-on-demand services: approaches and positioning

Another kind of participation in alternative cultural platforms?

In the field of cultural industries, the notions of “digital platform” and “platformisation” are at the heart of definitional debates and lead to multiple calls for projects and publications in information and communication sciences. In this work, we focus on the encounter between platforms and cultural industries without settling the terminological problem and by considering the platforms’ participatory dimension as a socio-technical system. Whether this encounter takes the form of competition,
conquest or collaboration, the overall picture is in any case very contrasted and prevents any generalisation.8

Socio-economic surveys of alternative cultural platforms have already highlighted a number of common features and have proposed analytical categories.9 These alternative cultural platforms notably provide original forms of editorialisation, catalogs built in accordance with artistic policies, as well as a relationship with the audience that allows them to present themselves as alternative or complementary offers to the giants of the sector.

Christel Taillibert10 has analysed the user’s pathways on numerous VOD platforms, as part of a reflection on cinephilic mediation beyond the technical intermediation allowed by the device. In order to extend this exploration of the “utopia of accessibility”11 specific to digital devices, the aim here is to question the participation of audiences in the very construction of the cultural offer; participation that would be specific to digital services, not constitutive of films’ traditional audiences.

Serge Proulx describes online participation as a paradoxical injunction because it calls for citizen participation while forcing them to use platforms that capture their data and traces in the framework of a partly invisible economy. Alternative cultural platforms, including publicly funded ones, are not exempt from this paradox, even if their data collection activities remain limited.12 If digital social networks tend to make us perceive participation as a functionality close to the notion of involvement—in the marketing sense (measuring involvement)—we must, on the contrary, link it to the political notion of the “citizen’s power to act.”13 If the “participatory act” does not result in any effective control over the situation, then it is only an illusion, involvement at the surface of pre-existing mechanisms, and consequently, a superficial form of participation. Effective participation in a digital world presupposes that the agent can ultimately intervene in a meaningful way in the real concrete situation.14

Our approach takes into account the phenomenon in a circumscribed way in order to show how the cultural referents associated with cinema eventually shape the relationship between film and audiences within the digital device and the way in which users’ participation is staged.

**Participation as a means of questioning the modalities of cultural referents and practices’ construction on four platforms**

We have chosen four video-on-demand platforms that present themselves more or less explicitly in their discourses as opposed to the SVoD giants (Netflix, Disney+...) by offering independent films, and are acknowledged as such by the professional community.15 Mubi is considered as a reference in the VOD and SVOD market for independent films. Films are selected according to quality, significance in the history of cinema, awards received, and their status as cult films or masterpieces. UniversCiné presents itself as a historical actor of independent cinema, existing since 2001 as an organisation, and offering VOD since 2007. As for LaCinétek, it presents itself as “The directors’ film library” and offers a double proposition: a cultural website on which one can browse in order to perfect one’s cinephilic culture (the main masterpieces of the 20th century), and a VOD platform on which one can rent or buy heritage films. Finally, the subscription platform Tënk was born in 2016 in response to a need expressed by the
actors of the French auteur documentary to create a tool giving access to documentaries that are gradually less distributed. Their stance is affirmed from the point of view of cultural policies, taking up the militant spirit of Les États généraux du film documentaire de Lussas, organized by Tënk. As we can see, each platform bears the traces of the cultural field from which it emerged, based on a strong editorial proposition, beyond the mere quest for completeness of a comprehensive catalog.

The selected platforms all claim a “cultivated” relationship to films, supported by professional actors of the cinema industry, quality programming and cinephiliс practices far from the mass consumption practices often associated with Netflix. They function through different curation systems, linked to symbolic sites of film culture (the film theatre, the cinemateque, the exhibition, the festival...).

Numerous studies have focused on cultural criticism and/or recommendation platforms that clearly involve user participation in the form of ratings or reviews. A semio-discursive approach to digital devices allows us to see if participation takes place in practice, and goes beyond mere cultural evaluation, to include users in the very functioning of the service in various ways: feedback on viewing experiences, proposals for catalog improvement, content editorialization, etc. The starting point here will be the user’s experience and the way it is expressed. However, a complementary study will be needed to assess the weight of technical infrastructure, which may lead to non-choices in the user’s experience.

The modalities of participation—i.e. the ways in which the users of these platforms are or are not integrated into the activities of curation, selection, and structuring of the catalog of films on commercially oriented online video-on-demand sites—are the object of the analysis. Here, it is the question of user’s participation, not in the framework of the cinephiliс tradition, but rather in the context of the supposed expectations of a digital service. The aim is to analyse this semio-communication process not only in relation to its cultural and socio-economic background—film industry—but also through the prism of the new framework in which it is now deployed: that of digital cultural practices. To this end, we conducted semiotic analyses of the four above-mentioned websites in December 2019, seeking to highlight:

1. public involvement modes;
2. participative features offered to the audience (from the simple possibility of “liking” content to the possibility of publishing original content);
3. proposed navigation paths;
4. ways in which the user-generated content is valued.

Through this analysis we will try to answer the following question: what does the participation of audiovisual audiences really consist of and what are the discourses that carry it through these websites? The semiological analysis aims to understand the appropriation strategies of the notion of participation by the actors of a cultural industry whose cultural model is based (offline) mainly on prescription, mediation and selection logic. To describe the “mediated experience” of participation is to unfold the representations and projections that underlie these proposals of an online filmic practice. Although the analysis is not meant to be representative, it attempts to grasp some of the symbolic frameworks of digital film systems.
Audience solicitation in online VOD services

As in any media, a website proposes a communication contract to its users, which is initially expressed as a promise. The injunction to digital participation is carried out in various ways: from the basic compulsory registration to the invitation to comment, its forms are diversified and nevertheless indicate the role given to cultural audiences.

Are cultural audiences invited to contribute?

The analysis shows that the four platforms draw on different representations of digital participation in their discourses.

Tënk’s subscribers are described as “contributors,” “ambassadors,” “networkers,” “messengers,” “donors,” and “jury,” depending on the communication actions undertaken.

On Mubi, it is notably the community dimension that is mobilized: “What our community of 8,753,254 cinephiles talks about and what they watch.” The user is even invited to comment and share his discoveries, which gives the impression of an ideal cinema-café: “a place where it is possible to gather and talk about alternate endings, Director’s cuts, and the meaning of frogs in Magnolia. Lively debates and heated exchanges are welcome.”

On UniversCiné, we find the typical participative features of recommendation sites: the possibility to give one’s opinion via a rating and a comment section.

Finally, LaCinétek exposes the platform’s “playing rules” (fig. 1). However, on reading, it turns out that these are rather guidelines for the film directors who select the 50 films that they consider to have marked the history of cinema. So it’s not the users of the platform who are invited to “play” but rather the directors-curators. The “contribute” button—imperative form—suggests, wrongly, that the user is situated on the same level as the international fame directors-contributors.

The terminology specific to the world of online participation is well present, and the websites’ owners wish to put forward a peculiar relationship with the users in their project. Although the general modalities are similar to those of cultural advisory
websites, we can notice some hesitations and imprecision in the way the requests are addressed and in the exactitude of their content.

**Externalisation of participatory functions from the platform’s editorial space**

On the four platforms surveyed, participation is limited to a reaction after viewing, such as appreciation and sharing, and does not concern programming or selection actions, such as the constitution of the catalog and the weekly film selections. Participation is therefore limited to cultural recommendations. For example, on UniversCiné, the participative features are those commonly found on social media: sharing, commenting, rating… Moreover, the cultural prescription methods are not very explicit. Although there is a “Top 100” section in the main menu, the selection criteria are not specified, nor is the identity of those who carried out the selection. It is only once the user has clicked on one of the film posters that he/she has access to external reviews (AlloCiné, *Les Inrocks...*) and to the advice of other users. The sharing and commenting functionalities exist, but they are limited to the conventional ones found on social media (fig. 2).

*Figure 2*

![Screenshot of “Avis” comment section. Collaborative features. UniversCiné, December 2019.](image)

In this case, participation is subsidiary and the available features seem to meet a need identified as necessary: offering users the possibility to comment on a film or a product (as one would do on an e-commerce platform) without this practice being valued. Moreover, there is no section dedicated to “the viewers’ favorites” as is the case on most commercial websites. These spaces are not exploited by users: a film such as *Volver*, although it appears in the first positions of the “Top 100” ranking, only has two votes.

On the other hand, the social media sharing features are present on the platforms we studied, as they are on most of the content websites. Although these features are also
widespread on websites, they take on a very particular meaning here: they externalise participation to other editorial spaces. On these platforms, the cultural prescription is ensured by cinema experts, the public can share their favorites and recommend their playlist to their contacts on their own social media networks, i.e. outside the platforms’ editorial space. The cultural recommendation provided by audiences is therefore of a secondary nature, and cannot be compared to the cultural prescription provided by experts.

Public financial participation

For Tënk, participating means supporting financially the distribution of documentary creations. Tënk has taken advantage of the rise of the crowdfunding phenomenon by launching a call for funding before the creation of the platform. The contributors’ names are all presented on the website in alphabetical order, without distinction of the donor’s status or the nature of the donation. In this case, we can notice an almost militant form of participation for the development of creative documentaries. However, one could have expected that this activist approach would have led to create a particular place for the public to participate actively on the platform (i.e. to participate in the creation of the films, to participate in the criticism, etc.), which is not the case here.

The implicit idea of participation, carried by the presentation statements and by the very notion of digital platform, is not fulfilled by the website’s features. Whether the modalities are not very explicit, confused or very limited, on the whole, there is no strong connection between users’ participation in these platforms and the modalities for developing the catalog and selecting the films. The curation model of each platform, whether based on the professional legitimacy of filmmakers, the expertise of cinephiles or the militancy of independent cinema, struggles to formalise any form of user participation.

Unclear collectives for an ineffective participation

Finally, the most successful participatory dimension is offered by Mubi. Indeed, Mubi is both a VoD platform and a film review website. However, the editorial position is difficult to define, halfway between the cinephiles’ expertise and the enthusiasts’ community. Who is actually producing the expertise? Indeed, the repeated use of “we” and “you” seems to indicate a strong enunciative implication, all the more so as the use of the expression “our community” is recurrent: “What our community of 8,753,254 film lovers are watching and talking about” (feed section’s subheading).

From the home page to the film selection sections, the communication approach is clearly oriented towards cinephile expertise. Films are qualified according to their quality, their place in the history of cinema, the awards they have received, their status as cult films or masterpieces. If this is the enunciative stance, there is then a contradiction in the embodiment of expertise in a collective that occasionally includes the user (“what do you think,” mention on the comment section) and sometimes excludes him (“our team of cinephiles is proud to present a film...”).

This ambiguity persists in particular on the Team page, where one expects to find the presentation of the experts so often mentioned. Instead, we find a mosaic of numerous
individuals presented through social-network-style profiles, on which we see their critical activity but neither their cinephilia nor their expertise (fig. 3). Each portrait is clickable and gives access to a page similar to the one of the members of Sens Critique. The member is defined by some numerical data: ratings and comments, watch list, favorites, lists, follows, followers ... as well as a mosaic of films rated on the basis of 5 stars.

![Figure 3](image.png)

The overall impression is that of a very heterogeneous, unstructured collective that adopts all the codes of cultural criticism platforms and contradicts the argument of expertise and cinephilia displayed on the other pages. The quantitative data of some members are often disappointing: some users are only followed very few people, some others display zero lists. Moreover, the numerical data is difficult to analyse in a cinephile logic (a user produced 935 notes and comments...). We can only guess that they are contributors, under different statuses. Paradoxically, the user is not well involved in this interface, which invites to subscribe to the site in its entirety. This dual positioning makes it difficult to identify the economic model and the editorial positioning of the platform.

If Mubi is emblematic of this confusion between communities and their roles, the other platforms swing between the absence of real interaction with the public and the confusion between professional communities (the directors) and potential audiences (La Cinétek).

This ambiguity in the definition and presentation of the different communities that are supposed to be present and to act on the digital platform seems to be emblematic of a forced marriage between traditional cultural curation models for film industry (the experts, the jury, the professionals...) and poorly assimilated representations and functionalities specific to the technical and editorial infrastructure of the digital platform.
The unthought dimension of digital participation

36 Two of the selected platforms (LaCinétek and Tënk) are based on a model of cultural prescription by audiovisual enthusiasts and professionals (and not by the public). Their catalog offers films whose selection is carefully justified in accompanying texts written by the editorial team. These films are classified according to several criteria and strongly supported by editorial content, allowing the public to make informed choices.

37 LaCinétek is intended for amateur cinephiles knowing the codes of the film world, having a “classic” cinephilic practice (which is more a VOD than SVOD approach) and used to be guided by professionals in their explorations. On this platform, the pedagogical discourse is omnipresent, whether to justify the selected films or to explain “the instructions” or “the rules of the game.” However, these rules are those given to the platform’s directors and not to the users. While the “contribute” button (fig. 2) seems to give voice to the user, his or her contribution is limited to reporting errors and providing the names of rights holders to help the platform’s owners obtain broadcasting rights.

38 For its part, Tënk, in its opening editorial entitled “Projet politique” (“Political Project”), presents a political and militant positioning (fig. 4), the editorial decisions made (although more precisely, it is the manner in which the editorial decisions are made that is displayed), as well as the platform’s target audience: those who want to get off the beaten track, to be confronted with alternative audiovisual experiences. According to the festival model, audiences are an important aspect of cultural experience, but their participation is limited to viewing and appreciating the films chosen by a team of professional auteur documentary programmers “assuming their subjectivity.”

Figure 4

As we have seen, the participatory dimension is limited to general forms of cultural recommendation. This is due to the fact that the selected platforms are positioned on a
strong cultural prescription model, carried out by audiovisual professionals (and not by the public): directors (LaCinétek), a professional collective (Tênk), and award juries (Mubi, UniversCiné). Their catalogs offer films whose selection is carefully justified in accompanying texts. On these platforms, the pedagogical discourse is omnipresent, whether to justify the composition of the catalog, the project (political in the case of Tênk), the raison d’être of the platform, or to explain the “using instructions” (for LaCinétek).

This is where the difference in positioning with mainstream platforms lies: a strong and original editorial proposal, whether in the composition of the catalogs or in the cultural prescription discourse that goes with it. Nevertheless, they remain broadcasting platforms that follow the models of the 21st century’s audiovisual media, which hardly integrate the participatory dimension, and limit it to cultural referencing. Participation plays a virtually anecdotal part, even though the vocabulary used in the supporting texts insists to this contributive dimension.

Thus, the technical possibility of participation does not seem to be thought out in relation to the specificities of cultural practice. It relies on traditional curation models based on film culture while borrowing marginally—and awkwardly—community terminology and some general social functionalities. We could take up Pascal Robert’s analysis of the “unthought” of computer science and then of the “unthought” of digital technology, as it allows us to translate the position of these cultural industry actors with regard to digital participation. Participation is indeed integrated by the technology in the platforms, as an automatic feature of the web or a minimal technical configuration, without thinking about the political dimensions at stake. The acknowledgement of these dimensions would require a reconsideration of cultural hierarchies and the role of experts, for example. Questioning the range of actions left to the public requires to rethink the distribution of roles in a cultural industry model that, for the moment, tries to maintain its offer online without yet being able to invent alternative forms of cultural participation. We could even go further and make the hypothesis that the platform’s structural model actually tends to attenuate the political dimension of a social practice. On the one hand, it crushes it by the satisfying dimension of facilitated logistics (the film when you want it where you want it). On the other hand, it grants minimal and risk-free expressive modalities (to give one’s opinion, to rate), thereby silencing the desire for a wider and more radical challenge that could, in the case of our field of study, concern the selection criteria, the composition of the catalog or the patrimonial character of a work of art.

If we consider the democratic role of cultural practices and spaces, these alternative platforms must tackle this issue of participation and the way they mobilize it in their services, if they want the alternative they propose to be part of a cultural policy, and not just a superficial positioning against dominant companies.

Conclusion

The results of this exploratory analysis raise questions about the ability of alternative VoD platforms to develop their models beyond the traditional approach of the online sale and distribution of audiovisual works, based on informed curation. Participatory functionalities are provided because they are part of an idea of public involvement inherent to digital platforms, but they are poorly exploited or simply restricted to
financial participation. On the premise of the claims of a more or less original cinephile stance, in defence of a high-quality and creative cinema, one might have expected a stronger integration of potential audiences, which is what the communication narratives of these platforms are all about. Thus, these digital services build a relationship between film works and online spectators essentially in line with the historical models represented by festival juries, cinema programmers or film critics’ recommendations, superficially polished by shallow participatory techniques and rhetoric. We can make the hypothesis that the alternative nature of these platforms is partly based on these cultural programming models, and that perhaps the total integration of the public as an actor operating programming choices would result in erasing the value of expertise in the name of the suppression of cultural hierarchies and the relativism of aesthetic tastes. If participation can be qualified as “weak” in these platforms, it is precisely because their cultural and editorial proposal is strong, which allows them to produce an alternative or complementary offer. This choice allows them to position themselves outside of a consumerist and individualised relationship with the cultural product, which would suppose that the public is a key player in the construction of the cultural offer, according to Netflix’s algorithmic model.

44 Our study shows that cultural authority and true participation are hardly compatible and that participation is anecdotal on those platforms defending a strong cultural proposal. However, the field of study is limited and changing, as each platform is constantly evolving and some reflections are underway among certain actors such as Tênk. The observation is neither definitive nor exhaustive and it could be enriched by other examples that develop an original editorial offer while presenting themselves as an open recommendation site, like Outbuster.

45 Through cultural participation the issue of cultural policies is also raised. To deconstruct the notion of participation is also to understand in what way each actor (institution, political subject or industry) relates to it.

46 Cultural participation, especially digital participation, is sometimes a political ideal, sometimes an industrial and capitalist lever, sometimes an empty promise. We must stop believing that the implementation of technical possibilities of participation “automatically” generates a citizen and political participation. Historically, creating a public sphere is a political matter, whereas some conceptions of participation tend towards individualisation, through the marketing fragmentation of the public, as a consequence of the personalisation of online services.

47 We must therefore question the injunction to participate and not just pose it as a panacea. This critical perspective must keep us from a certain myopia, or from the strong beliefs carried by the digital media. Digital cultural participation is one of the means, among others, of thinking about the modalities of democratic collectives, including the cultural public, but we must also question its discourse and its effectiveness in the cultural industries, whose digital modes of existence have been accelerated and reinforced by the pandemic.
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NOTES


2. CNC, Video on Demand (VOD) Barometer, March 2020. [Online] https://www.cnc.fr/professionnels/etudes-et-rapports/barometre-de-la-video-a-la-demande-vadvada--mars-2020_1187238 [accessed 5 March 2021]. It should be noted that this survey was conducted before the launch of Disney+ in April 2020.


4. This study is part of the Paradicc research project, Platforms in Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes for cultural content diffusion: economic issues, cultural issues, territorial issues, funded by the “Pack ambition recherche” of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Region.


6. It is impossible to quote all the authors contributing to this debate.


22. This page has disappeared since the time of our survey, but the site still does not clarify the perimeter of the “community.”
23. Tènk platform is closely linked to the Lussas documentary film festival. The premises of the company (cooperative society of collective interest) are located in Lussas in an incubator dedicated to the documentary audiovisual.
ABSTRACTS

This paper focuses on the modalities of displayed participation, namely the ways in which platform users are or are not integrated into curation, selection and catalog structuring activities on commercial video-on-demand platforms. This study shows how the cultural recommendation models of four VOD services are essentially based on the classic curatorial logic of cinema “venues” (movie theatres, festivals, specialised press...) and that, as such, they do not allow for public participation in the functioning of the platforms, the audience being relegated to the minimal functionalities of rating or sharing on digital social networks. The issue here is not only related to the capacity of this industry to build a relationship with its audiences, it also has a political stake in considering ways to mobilize digital participation in a thoughtful and alternative way.

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