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The Peripheralization of East-Central European Film Cultures on VOD Platforms

Abstract

This article draws on previous research on European digital peripheries and explores the way they are created on the interfaces of VOD (video-on-demand) catalogues. Our analysis distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative peripheralizations and considers both European providers who received subsidies from the EU and global services such as Netflix. It focuses on European film cultures and critically engages the umbrella concept of "European film." The article argues that EU funded VOD platforms tend to favor bigger European film cultures such as France, and disfavor smaller ones such as those from East-Central Europe (Czechia, Romania, Hungary, etc.). It shows that streaming giants like Netflix tend to generate less disparities between European film cultures than European providers. The article also questions the increasingly commercial mindset that drives such efforts to globalize European film through digital viewing services and regards it as a cause of peripheralization. It advocates consideration of the diversity of European film output in such globalized and increasingly profit-driven contexts.

Keywords

Digital Periphery, Peripheralization, VOD platforms, East-Central European Film, Netflix, Filmin

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Introduction

A recently published aid-for-policy document signed by 27 EU experts concerned with improving the circulation of European films claims to have tailored its recommendations according to the following market predicament: "there are many people eager to discover European films," and these people "relate to and enjoy [these films] precisely because they

are European."[1] Suggestively titled *European Movies on the Move: Ten Actions for Better Circulation across Europe*, the document identifies deficient promotion and distribution, both within and without the continent, as the main hindrance for lovers of European film to have access to their beloved product. Among the document's proposed actions, of interest for this article is Action #4, titled "Make European films a hit online!" In accordance with the goals of the European Commission to increase the digital availability of European films, it advocates increased support for VODs that commit to promoting online presence and visibility of European content in another European country and recommends that

> greater efforts be made — both at national and European level — to support the setting up and scalability of European VoD (sic) [video-on-demand] platforms and to enhance the presence and prominence of European works on European and global VoD platforms.[2]

These recommendations are of interest here not for their originality, as they reflect a trend in EU policy to offer more support to distribution and exhibition through its Creative Europe program.[3] Of interest is an issue that policy-aid documents like this one fail to address: the heterogeneity of the concept of European film,[4] whose big other is a homogeneous approach to European cinema.[5] These documents fail to attentively consider the various cultural and economic side-effects of creating policy under umbrella concepts like European cinema.[6] In other words, what *European Movies on the Move* falls short to address is that the EU's effort to challenge the hegemony of American content on European and global markets can preserve or even accentuate existing disparities and forms of hegemony *within* the European film culture. Several studies have highlighted these disparities.[7] In our article we will trace the making of peripheries using the concept of *peripheralization*.

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1)   Open Method of Coordination (OMC) Group of European Union Member States, *European Movies on the Move — Ten Actions for Better Circulation across Europe* (Luxembourg: The Publications Office of the European Union, 2019), 3.

2)   Ibid., 11.

3)   See Creative Europe's distribution funding opportunities on its website, accessed March 20, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/node/184_en.

4)   Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 13; Randall Halle, *The Europeanization of Cinema: Interzones and Imaginative Communities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 23.

5)   Vinzenz Hediger, "Double Occupancy and Karaoke Americanism: Thomas Elsaesser's European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood," New Review of Film and Television Studies 4, no. 1 (2006), 37–52, 50.

6)   Elsaesser, *European Cinema,* 37–39.

7)   Christian Grece, *How do Films Circulate on VOD Services and in Cinemas in the European Union: A Comparative Analysis* (Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2016); Christian Grece, *Films in VOD Catalogues: Origin, Circulation and Age: Edition 2018* (Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2019); Andrew Higson, "The Circulation of European Films within Europe," *Comunicazioni Sociali,* no. 3, (2018), 306–323; Dom Holdaway and Massimo Scaglioni, "From Distribution to Circulation Studies: Mapping Italian Films Abroad," *Comunicazioni Sociali*, no. 3, (2018), 341–355; Jihlava IDFF, "East West Index, 2019," accessed January 22, 2020, https://www.ji-hlava.com/eastwestindex.

Though *European Movies on the Move* has been signed by experts from all EU countries and uses *European* with the assumption that the strategies it indicates will similarly serve all 27 European film industries, this article shows that the situation on the homepages of European VOD platforms, where European movies are a or should be a hit, is different. Some national European film cultures, the French in particular, are treated as more European than others. They benefit more from the culture war to brand and promote European content in European and digital global markets, while others are peripheralized. The premise of *European Movies on the Move* that Europe and the world want to watch *all* European films, responding to the EU's principles of supporting cultural diversity, artistic creativity, integration, and equal participation of all 27 national film cultures,[8] is not mirrored on either the catalogues or the programming of these platforms, even if the platforms were supported with EU funds.

We argue that this phenomenon occurs not only because bigger players take the front seats and influence agendas and promote their content, but also because, at European industry and EU-policy levels, the so-called discourse on the war against American cultural imperialism on digital platforms is increasingly envisioned in economic coordinates, as numerous authors noted.[9] Revenue targets overdetermine cultural and political criteria that perhaps should be at work when generating European film portfolios — for example, the plurality of European identities and heritages[10] or of national cultural policies and patterns of cultural consumption.[11]

The aim of this article is not to analyze in detail the discourse of European film policies, but rather the reality of inclusion and presentation of films from East-Central European (ECE) national industries on the catalogues of VODs on the European market: Filmin, FilmDoo, MUBI, Netflix, and some smaller players. Given the EU policies as a cultural-political context for the presented analysis, VODs were included in the sample that had been supported by EU funds and hence should reflect at least to some degree those policies.[12] The choice of particular catalogues was further shaped by convenience as they are suitably organized for analysis and more familiar to the authors over a longer period of time than some other potential candidates. This allowed us to further emphasize how peripheral cinemas (particularly of Romania and Czechia) are peripheralized in large (and therefore more lucrative) central markets. Finally, Netflix was selected as, in various regards, a significant and pioneering player and in order to allow for comparisons between American (global) and European VODs. Catalogues of other VODs are analyzed in some

8)   Luisa Rivi, *European Cinema after 1989: Cultural Identity and Transnational Production* (Cham: Springer, 2007), 5.

9)   Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 9–10; Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 135–161; Constantin Parvulescu and Francesco Pitassio, "Recent Quality Film and the Future of the Republic of Europe," *Studies in European Cinema* 15, no. 2–3 (2018), 101–109, 102–104.

10) Alberto Martinelli and Alessandro Cavalli, *European Society* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2020), 16.

11) Joaquim Rius-Ulldemolins, Alejandro Pizzi, and Juan Arostegui, "European Models of Cultural Policy: Towards European Convergence in Public Spending and Cultural Participation?," *Journal of European Integration* 41, no. 8 (2019), 1045–1067.

12) The aim, however, was not to demonstrate the direct impact of such policies on VOD catalogues, which would be very difficult, if not impossible to undertake.

places to clarify the argument. We compare the inclusion and presentation of ECE titles with that of titles from other national cultures with a less peripherical status. While the dominance of some countries in VOD catalogues is to some degree foreseeable, differences among platforms (or their country-specific catalogues) and kinds of films included in them are much less so and worth examining in detail. Catalina Iordache, for example, discovered that, counterintuitively, the Romanian Netflix catalogue features more numerous and diverse set of films and series than the Spanish one.[13]

Our exploration builds on the effort of some of the contributions to the collection *Digital Peripheries: The Online Circulation of Audiovisual Content from the Small Market Perspective* and on their effort to outline the condition of ECE film cultures as digital audiovisual peripheries.[14] We enlarge and nuance their findings by including Romanian film culture and its VOD market into the debate.[15] We also enlarge their findings by conducting close readings of the catalogues of VODs. Most importantly, we employ a more processual concept. In lieu of the rather static and descriptive concept of *periphery*, we propose *peripheralization*.

This choice of concept reveals that VOD administrators have a palpable input in making and un-making peripheries. Use of *peripheralization* also plays an important role in breaking the expectation that, on a VOD interface, a periphery by necessity must come through as peripheral, as it is assumed by most of the studies on peripheries cited above. When providing arguments that explain why ECE film cultures and their VOD presence are peripheral, the studies mentioned above invoke behind-the-catalogue causes.[16] The definition of a national film culture as periphery relies on measuring its film output, consumption, budgets, box office, modes of production, diversity of its offer, and interest in non-national and non-American content. Tracing catalogue peripheralization works with variables such as number of films displayed, choice of tags, promotion and accessibility, catalogue lifespan, thematic and genre diversity, year of production, and user ratings, and relies on knowledge about the design of interfaces, their presentation protocols, data collection strategies, referencing algorithms, and certainly their strategic business priorities.

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13) Catalina Iordache, "Netflix in Europe: Four Markets, Four Platforms? A Comparative Analysis of Audio-Visual Offerings and Investment Strategies in Four EU States," *Television & New Media* (2021), 7–8. doi:10.1177/15274764211014580.

14) Marcin Adamczak, "Industry Divide: The Interdependence of Traditional Cinematic Distribution and VOD in Poland," in *Digital Peripheries*, ed. Petr Szczepanik et al. (Cham: Springer, 2020), 145–157; Petr Bilík, "Small Country, Complex Film Policy: The Case of the Czech Film Funding System," in *Digital Peripheries*, ed. Szczepanik et al., 291–302; Christian Handke, "Compensation Systems for Online Use," in *Digital Peripheries*, ed. Szczepanik et al., 261–272; Pavel Zahrádka, "The Czech and Slovak Audiovisual Market as a Laboratory Experiment for the Digital Single Market in Europe," in *Digital Peripheries,* ed. Szczepanik et al., 101–121.

15) Petr Szczepanik, "Channels and Barriers of Cross-border Online Circulation: Central and Eastern Europe as a Digital Periphery," in *Digital Peripheries*, ed. Szczepanik et al., 159–180 focuses on the Czech film culture. Petr Szczepanik et al., "Introduction: Theorizing Digital Peripheries," in *Digital Peripheries*, ed. Szczepanik et al., 1–31 deals only with some film cultures of ECE such as Czechia, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary.

16) On page 9, Szczepanik et al., "Introduction" argues that this foregrounding of some European film industries happens due to film commissioning and targeted marketing, consolidated relations of cooperation between distributors and VOD exhibitors, and the functioning of recommendation algorithms.

These variables, only some of which will be explored in the presented analysis in detail, are interconnected with the ones that determine the periphery, but they have also sufficient independence to provide an original angle.

According Szczepanik et al.,[17] within the EU, one can distinguish between three types of film cultures. The center, the EU Big Five: UK, France, Germany, Italy and Spain; the in-between players, which include the Nordic countries or Belgium and Poland; and, third, other EU players, such as Romania, Czechia and Hungary, which the study labels as both small and peripheral. Our post-Brexit study updates this categorization, arguing that it is more useful to operate with four categories. The first would be France, in a league of its own (as was the case of the UK before Brexit). A second would be the remaining Big EU — Germany, Spain, and Italy. The third and fourth would stay the same. They would include the in-betweeners, and the small and peripherals.

Our catalogue readings distinguish between *quantitative* and *qualitative* peripheralization. The former is employed by all the studies that focus on the digital circulation of films and other media products. For example, using data provided by aggregators justwatch.com, Szczepanik highlights disparities in terms of quantity of titles on VOD catalogues between big and small, as well as central and peripheral film cultures.[18] Qualitative peripheralization has been less discussed, as it requires careful interpretation. However, both quantitative and qualitative analyses are affected by the instability of catalogues. Selections and numbers of titles change rapidly in VOD archives.[19] Presentation and tagging also change, and peer-reviewed academic publishing cannot keep up with the pace of these changes. For example, the figures on peripheralization offered by Grece and Szczepanik have already changed since their publication.[20] While before 2019 there were practically no Romanian movies on Netflix, an April 2020 blog counted, on the Romanian market, an impressive number of 92 Romanian films.[21] In the meantime, as we write, the number has passed the 100-title landmark. The same argument can be made about Czech films in the Czech catalogue of Netflix. Before 2019 Netflix featured virtually no Czech films. As we write, the website Filmtoro.cz[22] registered more than 300 Czech films available in the Czech Netflix catalogue.[23]

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17) Ibid., 3.

18) Szczepanik, "Channels and Barriers," 171.

19) This characteristic was aptly expressed in Albornoz's and Leiva's definition of the term catalogue as "interactive databases of selected contents in permanent reformulation." Luis A. Albornoz and Ma Trinidad García Leiva, "Netflix Originals in Spain: Challenging diversity," *European Journal of Communication* (2021), 5. See also Chuck Tryon, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 21.

20) Szczepanik, "Channels and Barriers"; Grece, "How do Films Circulate."

21) Raftul cu Filme, "The Complete list of Romanian films on Netflix" (Lista completă a filmelor românești care se găsesc și pot fi vizionate pe Netflix). *Raftul cu Filme*, acessed December 20, 2020, https://www.raftulcu-filme.ro/cele-mai-bune-filme-romanesti-pe-netflix-top/.

22) Filmtoro.cz, accessed September 16, 2021, https://filmtoro.cz/hledam-film/start/vyber/zaber/vse/91/0/1279/1000/0/dabing-titulky/tit/0/doporucene.

23) In the case of Netflix, to which we will return, there is a significant number of Romanian films available (and localized) on the Czech Netflix, as well as of Czech films for Romanian users — a presence that Szczepanik, "Channels and Barriers" or Greece, "How do Films Circulate," could not have signaled out.

To demonstrate what we term quantitative and qualitative peripheralization of certain national cinemas by VODs, the following sections provide comparisons of numbers of films produced by central countries (particularly France), and some more peripheral (particularly Romanian and Czech) in the selected VOD catalogues. Such quantifications are obviously complicated by the interfaces of individual VODs with their thumbnails and simultaneous processes designed to expand the appearance of a large choice and at the same time to suppress the choice through algorithmic recommendations and advertising.[24] The searches were done using categories such as "French Movies" that some VODs feature, and with the help of Filmtoro.cz in the case of Czech Netflix catalogue. The data obtained is necessarily approximate and ephemeral, but we believe that they still allow useful comparisons, especially those made within individual platforms.

Quantitative Peripheralization on European VODs

Peripheralization takes place on both international TVODs (for example, iTunes) and SVODs (for example, on the only Romanian SVOD, TIFF Unlimited). It takes place on the interfaces of providers that only facilitate access to content (such as Filmin) and on ones that produce original content (such as HBOGo). FilmDoo, a TVOD, a provider that brands itself as multicultural, reflects the quantitative peripheral condition of ECE film in the same way as apparently more commercial TVODs such as iTunes. On March 11, 2021, FilmDoo's catalogue listed, through its search engine, 3680 French titles, 1601 Italian and

Ratio of films from the 5 selected countries available on FilmDoo

Ratio of films produced by the 5 selected countries

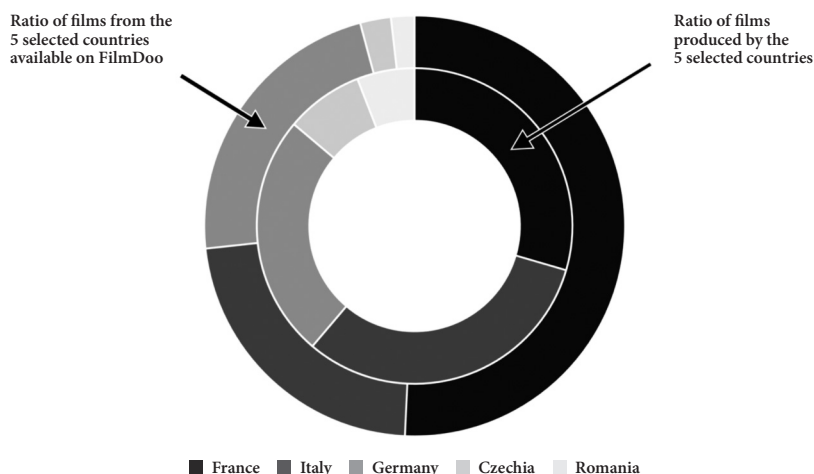■ France ■ Italy ■ Germany ■ Czechia ■ Romania

Figure 1: The ratio of the numbers of films produced in the 5 selected countries that were available in the catalogue of FilmDoo in December 2020 contrasted to the ratio of the numbers of films produced in the 5 selected countries in 2018 (minority coproductions excluded). Source: FilmDoo website and European Audiovisual Observatory (2019)

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24) See Roderik Smits and E. W. Nikdel, "Beyond Netflix and Amazon: MUBI and the Curation of On-demand Film," *Studies in European Cinema* 16, no. 1 (2019), 27.

1559 German, including short films and content that can be seen for free. In contrast, the catalogue carried only 128 Romanian and 168 Czech titles, including the content mentioned above. These numbers construct Romanian and Czech film content as peripheral. Peripheralization is revealed by the fact that this selection of films does not correspond to the ratio of numbers of films produced in the five countries under question. Taking the numbers of films produced in 2018 as an example (minority coproductions excluded)[25] the chart in Figure 1 reveals a clear overrepresentation of French films in the catalogue and a clear underrepresentation of both Czech and Romanian.

Perhaps these numbers are understandable with respect to the relatively low exportability of Czech films, but harder to explain when considering Romanian cinema, with its many international festival accolades and its greater international appeal.[26] The catalogues of most SVODs provide a similar picture. Peripheralization can be noticed even in the inventories of two poster children of Europe's effort to stimulate digital intra-European cross-border film consumption: MUBI and Filmin. These providers received EU funding through the Creative Media Program. They were praised for their contribution to European integration through cultural consumption, and for their attention to diversity, and their commitment to quality and art content.[27] However, their portfolios deliver the same discrepancies at a European level as those revealed by the analysis of FilmDoo.

MUBI conspicuously foregrounds French cinema. On December 11, 2020, when we started this research, this bias was evident on the provider's signature monthly selection of "wonderful, hand-picked cinema" (allegedly, by the service's expert consultants) in spite of the platform's impressive diversity.[28] The same can be said about MUBI's list of Top 1000 selection. On this same date, these selections included no film from East-Central Europe, and, surprisingly, also few non-French EU films, making French cinema even more prominent in the EU landscape. The monthly selection of thirty films included eight French titles (plus one French-language Belgian film), while the other national cinemas in the selection (mostly non-EU) were represented with only one or two films — the exception was Brazil because the provider had organized a "focus on Brazil" showcase in that time frame.

This deliberate and disproportionate foregrounding of French film was even more blatant on the provider's Top 1000 selection. Presented as "our weekly updated list of the highest rated films of all time, as voted by our global community of film lovers," it included among its top fifty films of the world's best 1000 twenty-three French films, five American, five Italian, three Turkish, two Japanese, two Spanish, and one from mostly non-EU countries (Chile, the Soviet Union, Canada, and Taiwan). Again, no film from ECE was listed. This level of exclusion is even at odds with the many similar lists hosted by cinephile

25) European Audiovisual Observatory, *Focus: World Film Market Trends 2019* (Cannes: Marché du film — Festival de Cannes, 2019).

26) See the discussion in Constantin Parvulescu and Jan Hanzlík, "Beyond Postsocialist and Small: Recent Film Production Practices and State Support for Cinema in Czechia and Romania," *Studies in European Cinema* (2020), 1–18.

27) Smits and Nikdel, "Beyond Netflix and Amazon," 22–37.

28) The landscape of the homepages of MUBI and Filmin is far cry from the ethnically and stylistically homogeneous start pages of providers such as Netflix and Amazon Prime.

websites. Such lists would by default include at least one classic of the New Romanian Cinema, one Emir Kusturica or Bela Tarr film and one from the Czech New Wave.[29]

While MUBI is subtitled in English, Filmin, which claims to have 70% of its catalogue comprised of European film, is subtitled in Spanish and Catalan (and often also dubbed in Spanish). However, its more stable and searchable catalogue generates the same peripheralization.[30] On the same day, December 11, 2020, the search and browsing tab by country of origin included 530 Italian titles, 547 German titles, and a towering amount of 1522 French. In contrast, the service offered only 36 Hungarian, 35 Czech, 32 Romanian, and 17 Bulgarian titles, including co-productions, making the overrepresentation of French films and the underrepresentation of ECE ones even more blatant (see Figure 2).[31] The same process can be noticed on content curated in the peripheral cultures themselves. The only Romanian SVOD to date, TIFF Unlimited, with a modest catalogue compared to Filmin, offered on the same date more than 80 French films and only 3 Hungarian and 3 Czech, and the numbers have not changed by March 2021. On the same date, the Czech SVOD/TVOD arthouse platform AeroVOD listed 51 French films, but only 4 Romanian and 3 Hungarian, and again, the numbers have not changed until March 2021.

The making of quantitative hegemony can also be noticed on European-friendly aggregators of film content. Telling are the recommendations of such an aggregator supported through the Media/Creative Europe program, agoodmovietowatch.com, designed to promote European films on global markets by mixing them with quality global ones

Ratio of films from the 5 selected countries available on Filmin

Ratio of films produced by the 5 selected countries

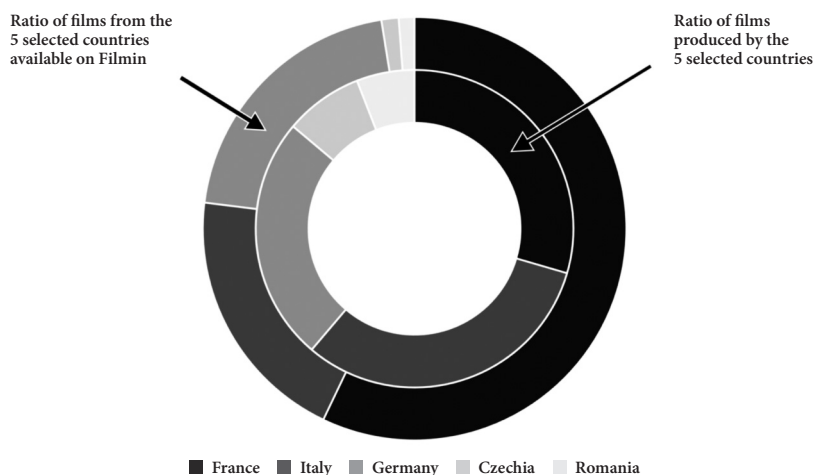■ France ■ Italy ■ Germany ■ Czechia ■ Romania

Figure 2: The ratio of the numbers of films produced in the 5 selected countries that were available in the catalogue of Filmin in December 2020 and the ratio of the numbers of films produced in the 5 selected countries in 2018 (minority coproductions excluded). Source: Filmin website and European Audiovisual Observatory (2019)

29) See for example, dimkovachev, "The Best 500 European Movies You Must Watch!," IMDb, accessed March 20, 2021, https://www.imdb.com/list/ls066522530/.
30) MUBI's catalogue changes daily, dropping and adding a film to its monthly selection of thirty titles.
31) The numbers have not changed by March 20, 2021.

(mostly North American). For our discussion, the most relevant curation tab on this domain is "The Top Movies to Watch." Accessing it on December 20, 2020, generated the following recommendations for the global market. We list here the first page, including 9 titles, which again, shows that European content is limited mostly to the big players, with France leading the pack.

1. *Incendies* (2010) Canada-France
2. *Wild Tales* (2014) Argentina-Spain
3. *Viktoria* (2015) Germany
4. *The Hunt* (2012) Denmark-Sweden
5. *Fruitvale Station* (2013) USA
6. *A Separation* (2011) Iran-France
7. *Mommy* (2014), Canada-France
8. *The Untouchables* (2011) France
9. *The End of the Tour* (2015) USA.

Quantitative Peripheralization and Recentering on Netflix

Given its specific design, searches for titles from a national cinema on Netflix generate less quantitative contrast between European film cultures and do not foreground French films. There is, of course, a strong marginalization of European film in general on the homepage of the provider. However, searches for European titles offer similar quantities of films. This apparent equality is imposed by the structure of the interface. The Czech interface limits the search results by national categories to 42 thumbnails (the Romanian interface to 49). Hence, regardless of whether the search is for "French Movies," "Italian Movies," "Czech Movies," or "Romanian Movies," only 42 thumbnails are generated for a Czech user and 49 for a Romanian one (the titles including co-productions). The only limitation is if there are less than 42 films in the catalogue, which is the case of some more peripheralized film cultures.

This apparent equality of individual film cultures on the Netflix interface does not accurately reflect the number of films in storage. For example, in March 2021, the Czech catalogue of Netflix included 85 French films (identified with the help of Filmtoro.cz in March 2021) as opposed to the mere 42 French films that appeared during the search. In the same period, there were only 16 Polish films. A comparable number of 13 Czech films appeared on the Romanian interface at the same date. However, the catalogue also delivers an equal representation. When we conducted the same comparison from the previous section and contrasted catalogue inclusion with the numbers of films produced per year, we noticed that Polish titles were overrepresented in relation to French ones. The ratio of Polish to French titles was 1:5.3, whereas the ratio of the numbers of Polish and French films produced in 2018 was higher, more specifically 1:6.6.[32] Similar ratios were generated by applying the comparison to Czech films on the Romanian interface or Romanian films on the Czech one, suggesting a species of purported Netflix catalogue democracy. As

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32) Based on numbers provided in European Audiovisual Observatory, *Focus*.

suggested before, this is a democracy within the European ghetto. A comparison between European and English-language titles would generate strident contrasts in spite of the 30% rule of inclusion of European content demanded by the EU.[33]

Regarding Romanian titles, one could also add that those made visible by the "Romanian Movies" search tab include both award-winning films such as *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (directed by Cristi Puiu, 2005) and *4 Months, 3 Weeks & 2 Days* (directed by Cristian Mungiu, 2007), and broader-audience films such as *Selfie* (directed by Cristina Jacob, 2014) and *Miami Bici* (directed by Jesus del Cerro, 2020). However, this process of recentering of the marginal does not apply to all ECE film cultures. For reasons we cannot explain here, searches in the Czech and Romanian Netflix catalogues generated only one Hungarian hit, the film *Nyitva* (directed by Orsi Nagypal, 2018), while the search engine did not even recognize the category "Hungarian Movies" or "Slovak Movies." This is of course not the case with Hungarian movies on the Hungarian interface. Not only do they appear in a high number, but the "Hungarian Movies" search label also exists (See figure 3).[34]
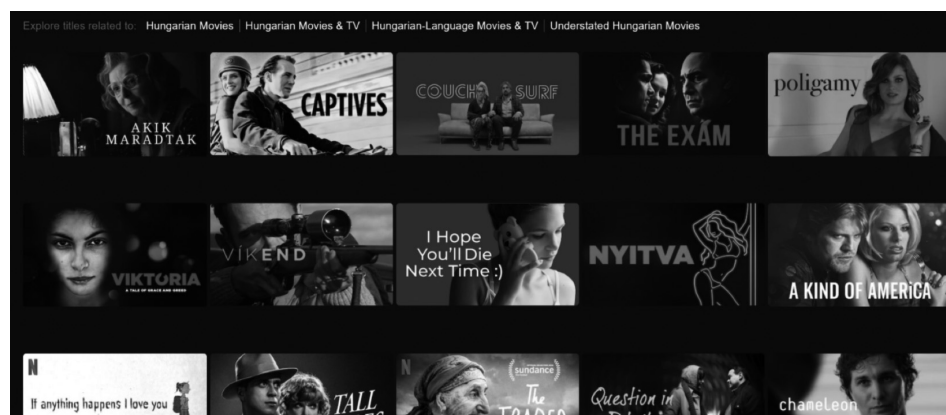

Figure 3: Hungarian titles and search categories on the Hungarian interface (March 2021)[35]

A short parenthesis is needed here. One difficulty with exploring the catalogue of Netflix is the customization of its search results. It obliges the researcher to add many specifications and footnotes to their findings — for example, the dates the searches were made and on what national interface. Another challenge, more related to our research, is that many additions from ECE film cultures to the platform's catalogue are recent. In mid-November 2020, there were only 18 Romanian films in the Czech catalogue, while in mid-

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33) Gilles Fontaine and Christian Grece, *Origin of Films and TV Content in VOD Catalogues & Visibility of Films on VOD Services* (Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2016), 126.

34) On non-Hungarian interfaces, Netflix surprisingly offers neither Hungarian awarded arthouse films such as the Berlin IFF Golden Bear winner *On Body and Soul* (directed by Ildikó Enyedi, 2017), nor popular productions such as *Liza, the Fox-Fairy* (directed by Károly Ujj Mészáros, 2015), the director of which was described in *Variety* in a review of this film as one of the Hungarian film industry's major hopes for international visibility. See Dennis Harvey, "Film Review: 'Liza, the Fox-Fairy,'" *Variety*, January 13, 2016, accessed March 20, 2021, https://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/liza-the-fox-fairy-review-1201679632/.

35) This image was kindly provided by Gyorgy Kalmar, University of Debrecen.

March 2021 the number increased to at least 42. This can be explained by recent European policy pressuring Netflix to include more European titles and by the increase in VOD viewership triggered by the pandemic and its lockdowns.[36)] However, these particularities of the organization of the Netflix catalogue, including the disobedience of its search function, serve also as a valuable evidence to our research. Platform particularities emphasize that, regardless of whether algorithmic or hand-made, the organization of information on an interface plays a major role in creating centers and peripheries. In addition, it proves the effectiveness of using processual concepts such as peripheralization and recentering when approaching VOD markets.

Contrasts between in-between and peripheral film cultures are also relativized by the Netflix interface. Film peripheries established in terms of cross-border circulation number — used by Szczepanik et al. to discriminate between in-between film cultures and the fully marginal, such as ECE — are also questioned by searches on Netflix.[37)] For example, the publication regards Belgium as a less marginal film culture than Czechia. However, when operating a category search for Belgian movies, the number of titles available in Romania in December 2020 was 3, in contrast to 13 Czech. This is in stark contrast with search results on Filmin, where the Belgian film tab lists 154 titles — that is, almost three times more titles than those delivered by the Czech film search tab.[38)] The same publication also argues that another aspect of the periphery is its tendency to consume more "central" material and show less interest in the product of other peripheries.[39)] The contrast between the number of titles of Belgian and Czech films on the Romanian Netflix interface or between Belgian and Romanian films on the Czech interface contradicts this assumption. It shows that the two peripheries, Romanian and Czech, are offered to consume more products from other peripheries than from a more central culture, indicating thus that the Netflix interface challenges another center-periphery distinction. Put differently, it recenters the film cultures peripheralized on other platforms.

To conclude, despite the many reservations articulated against the effect of Netflix on the diversity of film consumption in Europe,[40)] the figures above indicate that Netflix's presentation algorithm is guided, within the European ghetto, by seemingly more egalitarian protocols. It is highly probable that, for various reasons, which might have to do with film deals that Netflix will close with distributors of ECE content in the near future, that the underrepresented Hungarian film culture will increase its international visibility soon after the writing of this article. What is important here to remember is that our insights show that, in the context of the broadening of the access to digital content across Europe, big VOD players such as Netflix can play an important role. Whether as a result of their

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36) Steven Taylor, Caeleigh A. Landry, Michelle M. Paluszek, Thomas A. Fergus, Dean McKay, and Gordon JG Asmundson, "COVID Stress Syndrome: Concept, Structure, and Correlates," *Depression and Anxiety* 37, no. 8 (2020), 706–714; Helena Bezděk Fraňková, "Audiovisual Debate 2.0" (Audiovizuální debata 2.0), *Telegraph Olomouc*, February 20, 2021, accessed March 20, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQfekTbmLFk.

37) Szczepanik et al., "Introduction," 3.

38) The differences are obvious even if the results include coproductions because Belgium has the reputation of a film culture participating in many coproductions.

39) Ibid., 9.

40) Ramon Lobato, "On the Boundaries of Digital Markets," in *Digital Peripheries*, ed. Szczepanik et al., 51–62, 55–56.

business plans or because they have been forced by EU legislation, they can play the role of "key gatekeepers and vehicles for the circulation of European content" on both European and global markets.[41]

Qualitative Peripheralization

The term "qualitative" here suggests that we do not focus merely on numbers in the following part, but rather on the characteristics of films in individual catalogues, again with regard to the concepts of central and peripheral countries. Many VOD interfaces create subcategories of films and series that are coded (or tagged) by certain phrases and presented to viewers as variously defined sets of content items. Such categories are then also searchable with search engines. The following part uses this common organization of interfaces and traces qualitative peripheralization as the outcome of the way films are tagged on VOD catalogues. Tagging includes year of release, country of origin, maturity rating. It also includes genre, stylistic and thematic labels. In this context, we use the concept of peripheralization to emphasize the way films from the ECE periphery tend to be labelled differently than those produced by the bigger players, France in particular. Platform design plays an important role here. Tagging tools and categories can render more manifest or make less visible the peripheral status of a national film culture.[42] First, we study the way films coming from ECE film industries are tagged on Netflix and Filmin according to the specific cataloguing protocols of each platform. Then we compare this tagging with tagging of French and Big EU titles. The comparison emphasizes some peripheralization effects of tagging. We should mention again that the customization of the Netflix interface limits our capacity to draw comparisons. Netflix's recommendation system influences searches and foregrounds results based not only on location but also on previous user activity. We explored Czech and Romanian titles.

One first conclusion can be drawn from comparing tagging according to the production year of the searched films. On Netflix, differences between center and periphery are not so evident. Netflix's business plan tends favor recent productions. Thus, on both the Romanian and the Czech interfaces, Romanian film culture is mostly represented by productions from the last ten years (more than half). The Polish titles are made between 2016 and 2021 and Czech ones in the Czech catalogue of Netflix are also recent. However, as opposed to Romanian films in the Romanian catalogue, there are a few Czech films made in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s too, gathered e. g. under the label "Critically-acclaimed Czech Movies."[43] There is thus not a conspicuous ECE peripheral homogeneity. Moreover, in

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41) Szczepanik, "Channels and Barriers," 159.

42) Peripheralization is referred to but not analyzed in Szczepanik, "Channels and Barriers," and Szczepanik et al. "Introduction." For example, in their descriptions of the periphery, these studies include a reference to the limited diversity of the output and consumption of a national film culture (Szczepanik et al., "Introduction," 13). According to the latter study, peripheries also lack globally recognizable brands (stars, franchises, and industry profiles) (Szczepanik et al., "Introduction," 9).

43) They include *The Loves of a Blonde* (directed by Milos Forman, 1965) and *The Cremator* (directed by Juraj Herz, 1969).

terms of production year, there is not much difference between the portfolio of French films and that of Czech, ECE and other Big EU national film cultures. For example, in March 2021 on the Czech interface, only 3 French films out of 85 identified by Filmtoro.cz were older than 2006, and only 11 older than 2014, Netflix's interest in showing recent productions blurring contrasts between center and periphery.

If peripheralization in terms of production year means a limitation of the age of films, then indeed the practice is more visible on Filmin. Filmin has a more cinephile catalogue, though recent developments show it is increasingly following the Netflix model. Like the older Netflix, Filmin's business model relies more on long-tail retail. Thus, exclusive focus on present-day productions on its catalogue would be more surprising. Its portfolio includes a variety of French and Italian titles from the twentieth century. However, cinemas like the Romanian, Hungarian and Bulgarian ones are peripheralized by being presented as having no past.[44] The only twentieth-century Romanian film on Filmin is from 1992, *The Oak* directed by Lucian Pintilie, which also happens to be a French and Romanian co-production, with a French distributor (MK2). The next oldest film is from 2005 and already belongs to the New Romanian Cinema (to which most of the Romanian films on Filmin belong).[45] The same can be said about the Hungarian selection, which has also only one twentieth-century film in spite of the visibility of its industry in the twentieth century. The included film is a German-language production *Colonel Redl* (Directed by Istvan Szabo, 1985), which on imdb.com is credited as having Yugoslavia as first producing country.[46] However, when it comes to Polish films, an ECE less peripheral industry according to the classification of Szczepanik et al.,[47] the portfolio becomes more balanced than in the case of Hungarian and Romanian films. Of the 85 films delivered by the Polish country search tab, 14 are twentieth-century films.[48]

Looking at genre categories also sheds light on qualitative peripheralization. The following exploration of genre categories was not based on our attribution of genres to films but on how individual VODs tag the films. Since individual VOD platforms use different genre categories, cross-platform comparisons were virtually impossible in this respect but comparisons within those platforms were still feasible.

The contrasts are not as strong here as they were with previous characteristics of catalogues because it is expected that, on international markets, drama would be the predominant genre on demand. Drama is more exportable than comedy in the case of globally traveling European films.[49] There is thus a structural peripheralization at work in catalogues of international providers like Netflix, affecting all European film — though recent-

44) The selection of Czech films, however, is an exception. The Czech country search tab shows only quantitative peripheralization but is quite diverse in terms of both years of making and genres (we will return to this).
45) *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (directed by Cristi Puiu, 2005).
46) Bulgaria has no twentieth-century film in the catalogue.
47) Szczepanik et al., "Introduction," 3.
48) These include films by acclaimed directors who worked in the West: Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Kieslowski, and Krzysztof Zanussi, which had received international theatrical and video-store distribution in their times.
49) Ib Bondebjerg, Eva Novrup Redvall, and Andrew Higson, eds., *European Cinema and Television: Cultural policy and everyday life* (Cham: Springer, 2016), 2.

ly Netflix has increasingly promoted French comedy series such as *Call My Agent* (4 seasons, 2015–2020), as well as *Family Business,* and *The Hook-up Plan* all from 2020. These examples contribute to supporting our argument that this general European peripheralization on the interfaces of global providers such as Netflix's affects the presentation of the output of smaller industries more. This situation is in a way similar on Filmin, also an international distributor but of a smaller scale than Netflix. This phenomenon indicates that, in terms of tagging, Netflix is no longer a market that peripheralizes less than others, as it was the case of quantitative peripheralization.[50]

This increased peripheralization of ECE film cultures is thus to be traced by comparing the drama-comedy ratio or the ratio between drama and other genres. That most of the Romanian films we found on the December 2020 Romanian catalogue of Netflix are dramas, 89 of 108, is perhaps not surprising. Also, there is nothing special in the finding that the tagging combines drama with comedy. European comedies tend to be more bitter-sweet. The same can be argued about cross-tagging drama and "Crime Movies" or "Thrillers." However, what draws attention is that — except for comedies, 32 including cross-tagging — the other genres are poorly represented. The Netflix catalogue includes only 6 Romanian "Crime Movies," 4 "Thrillers," 3 "Music and Musicals," and only one tag for "Action and Adventure," "Period Piece," "Horror," "Children and Family," "Movies Based on Real Life," and "Mystery." Almost all of these titles are cross-tagged with either comedy or drama, and one can easily notice the absence of a variety of genres, among them "Sci-fi," "Fantasy" and "Anime" (standing in some Netflix catalogues, rather confusingly, for animation).

A quick look at the French film offer on the Romanian interface of Netflix on an account with a predominant history of Sci-Fi views,[51] confirms the thesis of Szczepanik that another differentiating aspect of the periphery is the limited diversity of its output.[52] The same conclusions can be drawn from accessing the Czech interface and comparing Romanian and French titles. Besides a massive promotion of French comedies, the selection includes all the genres mentioned in the Romanian selection, but also several that are missing from the Romanian selection, but not necessarily because they could not also be applied to the Romanian films.[53] They include "Movies Based on Books," "Sports Comedies," "Action Comedies," "Psychological Thrillers," "Teen Movies," "Steamy Dramas," "Anime," and "LGBTQ Movies." Among the French films on the Czech interface, comedies are also significantly more frequent than among the Romanian or Polish films. The comedy/drama ratio in the case of French films is 1:1.27 whereas in the case of Polish films it is 1:2.5 and the Romanian one is slightly smaller.

The fact that French cinema has more genre diversity is primarily indicative of the muscle of the French film industry. However, peripheralization is revealed by the fact that

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50) Drama predominance on Filmin is also the effect of the fact that the platform uses festival selection and awards as a major criterion of inclusion in its catalogue. Thus, Filmin would include more dramas because drama is predominant entry on festival programs.

51) As mentioned above these specifications are necessary given the customization of Netflix's recommendations.

52) Szczepanik, "Channels and Barriers," 9.

53) Unfortunately, there is no space here to support this affirmation with a detailed analysis. It would be the object of a separate study.

platforms include significantly more non-drama films from the major players. French comedies seem to be trusted to sell better than Romanian ones, and Netflix promotes them heavily at the moment of finishing this article (April 2021). However, given the customization of the Netflix catalogue, peripheralization can be traced more accurately on the Filmin interface. Comparing genre tagging between Romanian, French and Big EU titles on Filmin emphasizes again that, on Filmin, Romanian cinema comes through as more peripheral than on Netflix. The drama-comedy ratio of Romanian film is smaller on Netflix — 2.8:1 in contrast to 3.8:1 on Filmin — revealing again that Netflix presents Romanian film culture as more diverse. Of the 24 Romanian features included on Filmin, 19 are dramas, and only 5 are comedies (including cross-tagging). The range of non-drama film is even narrower. There are only 6 thrillers (3 pure thrillers, 3 cross-tagged with drama), 1 fiction and documentary mix, 1 animation, both also labeled as drama.[54]

Maturity rating is another variable that indicates both peripheral status and peripheralization, but there is no space to present details on it in this article.[55] Maturity ratings are accompanied by thematic or stylistic tagging. These tags make peripheralization more visible. The cataloguing process narrows the thematic and stylistic range of a national offer, and profiles a national film industry, especially the smaller ones. Thematic labels attributed by Filmin to French cinema are diverse and do not repeat themselves — or repeat themselves less often. In the case of the Romanian titles, the range is narrower, sometimes slightly prejudiced, and the labels are quite repetitive. While on Filmin, French film ranges from "music," "new technologies and astronomy," to "feminism," "midlife crisis," and "generation tinder," the range is far more limited when it comes to Romanian cinema, and not because there could not have been found any, but because there is a more concentrated profiling when it comes to a more marginal player.[56]

For example, the themes that repeat more than three times on French selection of films on Filmin analyzed above are: "women directors" — 5; "French auteur cinema" — 4; "based on a novel" — 4; "feel good movies" — 3; "few characters and locations" — 3; "family relations" — 3; "melodrama" — 3; "French period piece" — 3; "French comedy" — 3; women screenwriters — 3.[57] In other words, most of them are genre and subgenre indicators and not content-driven themes. The exception could be "family relations." Thus, one cannot profile thematically French cinema according to this data. However, the selection

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54) It could be argued that individual film cultures at least to some degree specialize in certain genres and tend to ignore others. While this may well be the case, the presented analysis emphasizes the diversity of cinemas (and lack thereof) represented in VOD catalogues and does not intend to focus in detail on individual genres.

55) For example, the Romanian film offering is narrower in terms of rating.

56) For lack of space and for its relative relevance, we will not comment on the thematic and stylistic tagging on Netflix. As we have seen above, customization plays a role in limiting the range of tags, and thus diminishes the contrasts between center and periphery. On Netflix, Romania is associated with dramas, dark comedies and adult ratings. Romanian drama is mostly "Dark" — 39, "Understated" — 38, "Intimate" — 15 and independent in style — 18. It tackles "Social Issues" – 13, often in a way that is "Cerebral" — 13, "Emotional — 13, and "Gritty" — 10. Romanian comedies are "Romantic" — 14, but also "Deadpan" — 6 and Cynical — 4. Rarely are they "Inspiring" — 2 or "Feel-good" — 2.

57) In March 2021, after this research has been conducted, Filmin has introduced a few more labels. One of them, "Nueva Ola del Cine Rumano" (The Romanian New Wave) homogenizes even more the Romanian portfolio. It is applied to 14 titles, almost half of the portfolio.

of Romanian films is significantly more profiling, confirming a thematic identity that Filmin and other similar platforms draw for smaller film cultures.[58] According to its tagging on Filmin, Romanian film delivers a sobering social and political commentary. Besides the more neuter "family relations" (11 labels),[59] the thematic labels with three hits or more are "social commentary" — 6;[60] "dark and absurd humor" — 6; "communism" — 5; "immigration" — 5; "class struggle" — 4; "crime and delinquency" — 4; "human rights" — 3; and "existentialism" — 3.

Conclusion

Our analysis of VOD services has emphasized instances of quantitative over- and under-representations on VOD interfaces corresponding to bigger and smaller, central and more peripheral film cultures. Some contrasts are more striking — those on FilmDoo or MUBI — or more obscured by the particularities of the architecture of the platform's interface — the case of Netflix. But even Netflix, to this date, exports only one Hungarian title, and has no country search labels for some ECE cinemas. We have also emphasized instances of qualitative peripheralization which inform the construction of the diversity of the output of a national film culture on an interface. We analyzed the profiling of smaller film industries as generators of a cinematic output that is more socially engaged, more maturity restricted, and less diverse in terms of topics and style. These instances of peripheralization should be considered and addressed, we argue, when European film is promoted on overseas markets and in the policy dedicated to developing the European digital single market for film (still in a project phase).[61] The tracing of acts of peripheralization, as well as of the opposite process, (re)centering, opens the field to a more prescriptive debate on how policy could intervene to undo the making of peripheries on the European digital market for film. This article only slightly intervenes in this debate, but it is worth mentioning that an intervention against peripheralization would not only be in the spirit of the EU's priorities, which include integration and the stimulation of cultural diversity, but also articulate a reaction to economic globalization. These concerns should also apply to further negotiations regarding the development of the European Digital Single Market for audiovisual content, and the more recent Audiovisual Media Service Directive concerning levies applied to VOD providers or their obligation to invest in national European content and promote it in non-national markets.[62]

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58) Constantin Parvulescu, "World Cinema, VOD Platforms and the Western Demand," *Studies in World Cinema* 1, no. 1 (2020), 1–7, 6.

59) I include here mother-son and father-son relations.

60) Comprised of *cine social* and *cine de denuncia*.

61) On the debates regarding the European Digital Single Market from a perspective of smaller film industries see e. g. Pavel Zahrádka and Petr Szczepanik, "Jednotný digitální trh jako hrozba, nebo příležitost? Rekonstrukce postojů českých distributorů ke strategii pro vytvoření jednotného digitálního trhu v Evropě," *Iluminace* 30, no. 3 (2018), 23–48.

62) European Parliament, Directive (EU) 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 amending Directive 2010/13/EU on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services

When looking back at *European movies on the move*, the policy document we referred to in the beginning of this article, we notice that a major peril facing further policy is demagogy and lack of capacity or will to think outside the neoliberal capitalist box. References to integration or diversity promoted either by the EU or its consulting subcontractors are often just a coating for a set of initiatives designed to boost the bottom-line interests of the makers and distributors of content and shape the European digital market as an imitation of the American — a "karaoke Americanism" as Elsaesser termed it.[63] On the one hand, there is a demagogical stance regarding the concept of European film. It can be encountered in the false claim that the subsidies and incentives to support the inclusion and the foregrounding of European titles on VOD platforms and, more generally, the more aggressive branding of the European film on domestic and global markets will similarly benefit all European 27 film cultures, regardless of size, prestige, and lobbying power. We disagree. On the other hand, it is truly "karaoke" to assume that a robust presence on the market — on catalogues or the "scalability of European VODs" will solve the problem of protecting the diversity of European output.

We have shown the opposite. Digital markets, and large and deregulated global ones, are neither democratic nor quality and diversity driven. They are even less meritocratic as they tend to generate monopolies, disparities, bubbles, conformism, formulaic content, and have no protection plans for smaller players.[64] We believe that further studies, made after the introduction of the European Audiovisual Directive that compels big players like Netflix to produce in Europe will further generate discrepancies between European national film cultures and will create national ghettoization. The rise of the French comedy films and series we mentioned here is one indicator of biased Europeanness. Moreover, filter bubbles or search tabs will offer more Czech films to Czechs and Romanian films to Romanians on these platforms, but not to Europeans and the world as *European Movies on the Move* desires.

The number of titles on various catalogues has increased and the tagging has become more complex since this count was conducted.[65] All the variables we considered here will change again by the time this article will be published. However, these changes do not obscure that peripheralization is a real-existing phenomenon, and that it was done in certain parameters at a certain moment in time. Our results serve as a point of reference for further studies on issues of digital center and periphery, and for inquiries into the practices of the platforms discussed here and into the way their catalogues, tagging and interfaces have changed in time and in response to EU policy. We aimed to develop a methodology designed to investigate VOD platforms and we are aware that it is imperfect. In the meantime, the Netflix interface model is more and more adopted by other platforms, and the

(Audiovisual Media Services Directive) in view of changing market realities, PE/33/2018/REV/1, accessed March 20, 2021, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2018/1808/oj.

63) Elsaesser, *European Cinema,* 109.

64) Anna Cooper, "Neoliberal Theory and Film Studies," *New Review of Film and Television* Studies 17, no. 3 (2019), 265–277, 278–279; Ann Pettifor, *The Production of Money: How to Break the Power of Bankers* (New York: Verso Books, 2017), 69; Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox: Why Global Markets, States, and Democracy Can't Coexist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xii–xv.

65) For example, the number of Romanian titles on Filmin has increased to 32 and so have others.

observation of the catalogue of Filmin or MUBI will also become increasingly subjectivized by the customization of the interface.

An important addition to this study would be a longitudinal inquiry. For example, it would be highly informative to trace the presentation of European film on platforms for a longer period of time in order to draw conclusions on the recommendation system or on the titles entering and exiting the catalogue, and on their tagging and choices of acquisition. Peripheralization on homepages of various other providers would probably be an important study to follow this one, tracing the way algorithmic or human made recommendations favor certain film cultures in the detriment of the other. A study of user rating by national film cultures would also highlight peripheralization. User rating has been abandoned by Netflix, but still represents a navigation tool on other platforms with more cinephile profiles and so are press ratings or ratings delivered by aggregators. Finally, studies of the advertising and social media content of these platforms can also generate valuable insights into the battles to promote and define European film culture, and preserve its diversity.

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Incendies (Denis Villeneuve, 2010)
Liza, the Fox-Fairy (Liza, a rókatündér; Károly Ujj Mészáros, 2015)
Miami Bici (Jesus del Cerro, 2020)
Mommy (Xavier Dolan, 2014)
Nyitva (Orsi Nagypal, 2018)
On Body and Soul (Teströl és lélekröl; Ildikó Enyedi, 2017)

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Viktoria (Mónica Lima, 2015)
Wild Tales (Relatos salvajes; Damián Szifron, 2014)

TV series
Call My Agent (Dix pour cent; Antoine Garceau et al., 2015–2020)
Emily in Paris (Andrew Fleming et al., 2020–2021)
Family Business (Igor Gotesman, 2019–2020)
The Hookup Plan (Plan Coeur; Renaud Bertrand and Noémie Saglio, 2018–2020)

Biographies

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