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**DISTRIBUTOR AS TASTEMAKER:
NEON AND THE AMERICAN INDEPENDENT FILM SECTOR**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR AFFUSO
PROFESSOR WING**

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Introduction

At the 2020 Academy Awards, South Korean director Bong Joon-ho made history when he won Best Picture for *Parasite*, the first film not in the English language to win the coveted award. NEON, a company only three years old at the time, was the U.S. distributor behind *Parasite*'s unprecedented critical and commercial success. In the last decade, the American independent film sector has undergone significant changes in response to media convergence, the rise of streaming platforms, and the ongoing conglomeration of Hollywood corporations—not to mention a global pandemic. Despite facing fierce competition from the studios and their subsidiaries, as well as from the streaming giants, a number of independent distributors with no ties to conglomerated companies have emerged during this time. NEON represents one of the most successful companies out of these “genuine” independents and has proven its viability in the independent film landscape through consistently releasing films well received by critics and audiences alike. Through a study of NEON's practices, I analyze the distributor as a cultural intermediary responsible for shaping the discourse surrounding independent film through (1) its marketing and promotional strategies (2) its chosen avenues of distribution/exhibition and (3) its specific film products.

The term ‘cultural intermediary,’ first derived by Pierre Bourdieu in 1984, has recently been revisited by media industry scholars as a means of studying producers of cultural value.¹ Cultural intermediaries operate in between production and consumption and take on the role of

1. See, for example, Roya Rastegar, “Seeing differently: The curatorial potential of film festival programming,” In *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, ed. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 181-196; Matteo Corciolani, Kent Grayson, and Ashlee Humphreys, “Do More Experienced Critics Review Differently?” *European Journal of Marketing* 54, no. 3 (2020): 478–510, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-01-2019-0095>; Hye-Kyung Lee, “Cultural Consumers As ‘New Cultural Intermediaries’: Manga Scanlators,” *Arts Marketing: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2012): 131–43, <https://doi.org/10.1108/20442081211274011>.

“popularizers” of legitimate culture, shaping the preferences of consumers by determining for them which works are valuable.² Michael Kho Lim describes the function of the film distributor as both a “cultural intermediary” and “business driver,” emphasizing that distributors are not only tastemakers but credible, “*professional* tastemakers.”³ Importantly, distributors are involved in constructing the value of a film, although they tend to be less visible than other cultural intermediaries such as critics or film festivals. Due to their relative invisibility, they are often overlooked as key producers of meaning and incorrectly reduced to serving merely as a bridge between film and audience. NEON, however, has deliberately built a visible identity meant to connote expertise, embracing the role of cultural intermediary as respected tastemaker. The distributor has established a reputation as a *connoisseur* of ‘high-quality’ independent films while downplaying its powerful position in determining which films fall under this category. Exemplifying Bourdieu’s claim that cultural intermediaries “sell so well because they believe in what they sell,” NEON’s CEO Tom Quinn has described the company as “just a group of cinema lovers who never compromise in what [they] believe in.”⁴

Bourdieu’s theory of fields is useful in illustrating the space that the independent (or indie) sector occupies in relation to Hollywood. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, he identifies two poles in the field of cultural production, the “heteronomous” and the “autonomous.” Following the heteronomous principle, work is created

2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 326.

3. Michael Kho Lim, “Distribution and Exhibition as Intermediary Spaces,” In *Philippine Cinema and the Cultural Economy of Distribution* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-03608-9_5.

4. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 365; Diana Lodderhose, “How Tom Quinn’s Indie Label Neon Is Shining Bright With Its Pandemic-Proof Business Model,” *Deadline*, Aug 24, 2021, <https://deadline.com/2021/08/how-tom-quinn-indie-label-neon-shining-bright-with-pandemic-proof-business-model-1234820754/>.

according to the demands of the market. At the opposite pole, work produced under the autonomous principle is motivated by artistic rather than economic incentives.⁵ Located between the two poles, indie film exists somewhere in between mainstream Hollywood, which aims for universal appeal, and experimental cinema operating on the margins and free of commercial motivations. As Geoff King notes, indie films are often accused of being too commercial and of selling out if they attain some arbitrary marker of mainstream success. Similar to King, however, instead of attempting to “draw lines” in order to strictly define the boundaries of indie film, I understand it to mean “a particular cultural terrain” or in Bourdieu’s terms, a distinct field of cultural production.⁶ This allows the term ‘indie’ to be viewed as a spectrum, where some works lean more towards the mainstream instead of the artistic, and vice versa. Accordingly, attempting to locate the ‘meaning’ of an individual film must not only take into account the intentions of its direct producers, such as writers and directors, but must also consider other producers of “the meaning and value of the work.”⁷ These include, but are not limited to, critics, film festivals, award shows and—important but arguably less recognized—distributors.

The methodology for this thesis was influenced by Alisa Perren’s book *Indie, Inc.*, which tracks the rise of Miramax, as well as her case study “Last indie standing: the special case of Lions Gate in the new millennium.” In both works, Perren focuses on one influential media company in order to explore how it effected changes in Hollywood while also shaping the discourse surrounding independent film. Using a single case study in order to explore the larger independent sector allows Perren to “balance the ‘top-down’ concerns of political economy with

5. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, translated by Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 38.

6. Geoff King, “Introduction,” In *A Companion to American Indie Film*, ed. Geoff King (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 23-41, <https://doi-org.ccl.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/9781118758359.ch0>.

7. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 37.

the ‘bottom-up’ perspective of cultural studies,” a balance key to the objectives of media industry studies.⁸ Similar to Miramax and Lions Gate (now Lionsgate), I believe NEON merits scholarly attention because of its role as an influential tastemaker in today’s independent film sector. Following Perren’s method, I supplement analyses of specific films with trade publications that report on industry news and box office numbers, such as *Variety*, *IndieWire*, and *Deadline Hollywood* in order to understand how films were received by critics and audiences.

Co-founded by Tom Quinn and Tim League, the latter also the founder of the Alamo Drafthouse theater chain, NEON centers its brand identity on the power of the big-screen experience to foster a community of cinephiles. In 2018, financier 30WEST bought a majority ownership stake in the company, providing the distributor with the necessary capital to compete with the big players in the distribution scene.⁹ Similar to the practices of Magnolia and IFC in the early 2000s, NEON has positioned categories of film Hollywood has historically been hesitant to embrace, namely foreign-language films and documentary, at the forefront of its brand. Although the company resists describing its taste in terms of specific genres or qualities of films, it gravitates towards films by auteur filmmakers that balance edgy narratives with art-house tendencies. As of 2021, the company has amassed an impressive total of 12 Academy Awards nominations.¹⁰ While NEON is a relatively new company that has yet to stand the test of time, it

8. Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 6.

9. 30WEST, an investment and advisory firm, has developed a positive reputation as a “disruptive force in the indie film space,” see Mike Fleming Jr., “How 30West Is Fueling Indie Films & Progressive Media Businesses — Deadline Disruptors,” *Deadline*, May 13, 2018, <https://deadline.com/2018/05/30west-micah-green-dan-friedkin-disruptors-news-1202380807/>.

10. Jordan Qin, “NEON - The Oscar-Maker Studio.”

is already being described in the trade press as “pioneering” and as “Hollywood’s biggest overnight success.”¹¹

This thesis begins with a brief overview of the independent sector from the 1980s to present day in order to contextualize the space NEON occupies in the industry. The following three sections each focus on a specific film released by NEON that I deem as particularly significant in analyzing how the distributor contributed to the American independent film discourse in the late 2010s and beginning of the 2020s. The first section focuses on *Three Identical Strangers* (2018), a low-budget documentary film that performed exceptionally well at the domestic box office, in order to explore the new wave of commercially successful documentaries in recent years. The second section looks at *Parasite* (2019), the film that cemented NEON’s status as a groundbreaking distributor, in order to analyze the evolving relationship between American audiences and foreign-language films. Lastly, the third section uses *Palm Springs* (2020) as a mean of exploring the rise of streamers and how they have disrupted the independent film landscape overall. Within each section, I combine a historiographic approach with analyses of industry practices in order to contextualize and interpret NEON’s role in shaping the contemporary independent film sector.

American Independent Film from the 1980s to Present Day

Looking into the correlation between the conglomeration of Hollywood and the rise of independent cinema in the United States from the 1980s through the 2000s challenges the interpretation of independent as “against” Hollywood. In the late 1980s, Miramax and New Line

11. Jordan Qin, “NEON - The Oscar-Maker Studio: A Look into Hollywood’s Biggest Overnight Success,” *Hollywood Insider*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.hollywoodinsider.com/neon-studios-oscars-success/>.

Cinema rose to prominence as independent distributors of films by proposing to be alternatives to the traditional Hollywood fare. Miramax specialized in art-house films while New Line focused primarily on exploitation films, both genres previously deemed commercially unfeasible by the Hollywood majors. Noticing that these distributors were flourishing, the majors became interested in entering the independent scene themselves through negative pickup deals. Studios began to acquire films that fit the indie criteria, such as Columbia Pictures distributing *When Harry Met Sally...* and Universal Pictures financing and distributing Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* in 1989.¹² This marked a turning point in the independent film movement as Hollywood became inextricably involved, negating the idea of independent cinema as separate from Hollywood. Going into the 1990s, the independent movement gained momentum and broke into the mainstream, in part because it was being co-opted by the major studios.

The lines continued to blur even more in the 1990s as the Hollywood studios became decidedly invested in independent cinema and either acquired smaller companies or established their own specialty divisions dedicated to indie filmmaking. In 1993, Disney acquired Miramax Films and Turner acquired New Line, thus ending their reign as stand-alone distributors of independent film and bringing them under the umbrella of powerful conglomerates.¹³ Other studios opted to create subdivisions within the company dedicated to specialized film, such as the formation of Sony Pictures Classics in 1992 and Fox Searchlight Pictures in 1994. This led to the dubbing of "Indiewood," marking a new era of independent cinema where the term

12. Thomas Schatz, "Conglomerate Hollywood and American Independent Film," In *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, ed. Geoff King, Claire Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 127-139.

13. Schatz, "Conglomerate Hollywood and American Independent Film," 133.

“independent” could no longer mean economic autonomy from the major studios.¹⁴ In the 2000s, however, many of these specialty divisions shut down as their parent companies realized it would be more profitable to consolidate. Today, the boundaries between independent film and the Hollywood studios remain unclear as the major studios continue to be involved in the indie sector. The addition of streamers has further complicated the matter, often functioning as studios while threatening the Hollywood Big Five hegemony. I believe it’s necessary to demarcate independent distributors from conglomerate-owned indie divisions, as well as from streaming companies that don’t fall under either category, in order to analyze NEON’s position as a cultural intermediary.

Three Identical Strangers and the Documentary Boom

Since its foundation in 2017, NEON has demonstrated a commitment to distributing documentary films, which typically account for around one third of their annual slate. Through positioning itself as a distributor that “[has] always seen feature nonfiction as cinema,” NEON has taken on the mission of introducing documentaries to larger audiences. Other independent distributors with a similar status as NEON, such as A24 and Bleecker Street, have notably resisted including many documentary films in their slates. This makes NEON one of few indie distributors invested in documentaries, consequently increasing its influence as a tastemaker in the sector. At the same time as Netflix and other streaming services became hubs for documentary media, countering the stigma of nonfiction as slow-paced and tiresome, the latter

14. The Independent Spirit Awards use the following guidelines to determine whether a film qualifies as independent: “uniqueness of vision,” “original, provocative subject matter,” “economy of means,” and “percentage of financing from independent sources.” They note that as of 1994, “films that are made with an ‘economy of means’ and are fully financed by a studio or an ‘indie’ studio division may still be considered independent if the subject matter is original and provocative,” see “FAQ,” *Film Independent*, <https://www.filmindependent.org/spirit-awards/faq/>.

years of the 2010s also saw documentaries reach new heights at the U.S. box office. NEON's *Three Identical Strangers* grossed over \$12 million in 2018 to become the distributor's highest grossing documentary and third highest grossing film overall in terms of theatrical revenue. The company's dedication to distributing documentary films both leans into the current popularization of nonfiction media propelled by streamers while also pushing back in favor of the more meditative, theatrical experience.

2018 stood out as an exceptional year for indie documentaries at the box office with *Free Solo*, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, and *RBG* all grossing upwards of \$14 million. Only slightly behind these films was *Three Identical Strangers*, an impossible-yet-true documentary about triplets separated at birth. The film initially premiered at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival where it won the documentary Jury Award and was acquired by NEON. Commenting on the film's platform release, NEON emphasized the importance of a slow theatrical expansion over the summer in order to maximize word of mouth.¹⁵ The marketing strategy encouraged bringing the conversation to social media through sharing the hashtag #ThreeIdenticalStrangers (used over 4,000 times on Instagram) and making Twitter and Instagram pages specifically dedicated to the film. Similar to the distribution strategies used for the company's previous documentary releases, *Three Identical Strangers* opened in a select few art house theaters in New York City and Los Angeles, then slowly expanded over the following weeks. The film opened strong during the first weekend of July and was playing in more than 400 theaters at the peak of the summer, evidence that the strategy was effective.

15. Brian Brooks, "Off The Grid Drama 'Leave No Trace' & 'Three Identical Strangers' Head To Theaters – Specialty B.O. Preview," *IndieWire*, Jun 29, 2018, <https://deadline.com/2018/06/leave-no-trace-three-identical-strangers-specialty-box-office-preview-1202419404/>.

Three Identical Strangers contributed to the summer documentary boom of 2018, comprising a trio of highly successful films that also included *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* and *RBG*. In the press, critics often wrote about the three films together, with *The Atlantic* declaring documentaries to be “the hottest genre of the summer.”¹⁶ While these articles generally reflected surprise at the high box office returns, the theatrical success of these documentaries was understood as an actual shift in audience preferences rather than as an anomaly or trend.¹⁷ Without a doubt, documentaries were driving audiences to movie theaters, signaling the value of the communal, big-screen experience. Speaking on the success of *Three Identical Strangers*, NEON’s Tom Quinn gave credit to *RBG* and *Will You Be My Neighbor* credit for “paving the way” as the film gained momentum through riding on the success of the other two.¹⁸ Though the three documentaries told very different stories, many moviegoers were willing to give *Three Identical Strangers* a chance after having positive experiences seeing one or both of the other films in theaters.¹⁹

16. David Sims, “Documentaries Are Thriving at the Summer Box Office. Why?,” *The Atlantic*, Jul 11, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/07/whats-driving-documentaries-to-box-office-success/564875/>.

17. See, for example: Sean Fennessey, “‘We’re in This Amazing Golden Era of Documentary,’” *The Ringer*, Jul 24, 2018, <https://www.theringer.com/movies/2018/7/24/17607044/documentaries-box-office-three-identical-strangers-rbg-wont-you-be-my-neighbor-mister-rogers-cnn>; Sims, “Documentaries Are Thriving at the Summer Box Office. Why?”

18. Pamela McClintock, “Box Office: ‘Three Identical Strangers’ Crosses \$10M, Continues Doc Boom,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Aug 19, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/box-office-three-identical-strangers-crosses-10m-continues-doc-boom-1135822/>.

19. It is also worth noting that MoviePass was still active during this period of time. Though the movie ticket subscription service was already facing problems with its unsustainable business model (users paid \$9.95 a month for one movie ticket per day), it reported over 3 million subscribers by summer 2018. CEO Mitch Lowe claimed (without evidence) that MoviePass ticket purchases accounted for 12 percent of *RBG*’s theatrical gross in the U.S. Even if those numbers are exaggerated, they suggest that lowering the theatrical barrier for entry allows audiences to take more risks with less familiar genres. A new movie ticket subscription service created by MUBI, “MUBI GO,” similarly attempts to lower the entry barrier for the theatrical in order to promote more risk-taking on indie films. The service showcases one handpicked film each week and targets moviegoers who are willing to trust the company’s taste and see films that they may not have paid full price to see in theaters. Although MUBI GO is still very new, it

From the trailer alone, *Three Identical Strangers* introduces a very commercial premise. The trailer promises an unbelievable mystery about triplets separated at birth and miraculously reunited, while also hinting at a darker underside to the story. A review from RogerEbert.com quoted in the trailer says it best: “[*Three Identical Strangers*] proves that life is stranger than fiction.”²⁰ Nevertheless, compared to *RBG* and *Won’t You Be My Neighbor*, the film faced the challenge of featuring subjects who were not already well known. Both *RBG* and *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?* approach their subjects, Ruth Bader-Ginsburg and Fred Rogers, with affection and are not especially challenging films to watch. Unlike so many documentaries that seek to raise awareness around a social issue and ignite action, these films were celebrations of life of familiar public figures. This might explain why these documentaries were so successful theatrically, as audiences tend to view the moviegoing experience as entertaining and are drawn to lighter fare, especially when the films spotlight familiar faces.

To some extent, *Three Identical Strangers* offers a similar experience through its complex narrative unfolding almost as though it were a feature film.²¹ The mysteries and unexpected twists suggested in the trailer, such as the insinuation that there is a darker underside to the feel-good story of the brothers’ reunion, emphasize the feeling of suspense. The promise of a surprising denouement urges audiences to see the film in theaters as soon as possible, discouraging the wait until the film is available to access on VOD or streaming platforms. Although the trailer, as previously mentioned, does hint at the more unsettling themes, these are

provides a possible model for both lowering the theatrical entry barrier and encouraging audiences to vary the types of films they watch in theaters.

20. “THREE IDENTICAL STRANGERS [Trailer] In theaters June 29th,” YouTube video, 2:08, posted by “NEON,” Apr 12, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uM5TQ4f7ycw>.

21. Predictably, a feature film adaptation is already in the works: Alex Ritman, “Three Identical Strangers’ Doc to Be Adapted Into Feature Film,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Jul 19, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/three-identical-strangers-be-adapted-feature-film-1128372/>.

arguably downplayed in favor of framing the film as a beguiling mystery. At the same time, the reveal that comes midway through the film is truly disturbing, making the film decidedly less “soft-edged” than its summer box office counterparts without compromising its commercial narrative.²² Christie Milliken notes that *Three Identical Strangers* “deploy[s] an investigative structure aligned with the thriller genre” and specifically lists rapid cuts, frequent movement in time and place, and cinematic scores as features of the ‘popular documentary thriller.’²³ The documentary’s stylistic elements and narrative storytelling lean into the tropes of the thriller genre, presenting a more familiar structure for viewers accustomed to watching feature films.

In *American Independent Cinema*, Geoff King claims that the theatrical distribution and exhibition aspirations of documentary films are “coterminous with the independent sector” and that even within the sector, their potential for success is marginal.²⁴ Published in 2005, King’s statements accurately illustrate the (limited) space that documentary filmmaking held in the American film landscape during the 2000s. In recent years, the rise in popularity of nonfiction media has been undeniable, not only in film but in television series and podcasts as well. The growing interest in the documentary form is often attributed in part to Netflix’s involvement in acquiring and producing docuseries and films. Since the early 2010s, Netflix’s transition from distributor to full-fledged studio has provoked a nonfiction renaissance where documentaries are no longer relegated to the margins of independent film or to the independent film sector in general. Netflix has pushed back against the documentary/feature film dichotomy, proving that nonfiction media can be just as gripping and entertaining. At the same time, however, the

22. Sims, “Documentaries Are Thriving at the Summer Box Office. Why?”

23. Christine Milliken, “Uncanny Familiarity,” *Docalogue*, Feb 2019, <https://docalogue.com/february-three-identical-strangers/>.

24. Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 255.

company has developed its own brand of documentary storytelling that similarly attempts to confine documentaries to specific categories, delineating what they can and cannot be.

Although Netflix's selection of documentaries is rather limited due to its preference for films that aren't especially boundary pushing in style or content, the company's investment in the sector has introduced the genre to new audiences. This positive feedback loop has contributed to a renewed interest for nonfiction content in the indie sphere. Film sales at the Sundance Film Festival over the past few years reveal a heightened demand for documentary films that has increased their value exponentially. At the 2017 festival, streamers and studios spent millions on nonfiction films with Amazon, Netflix, and Fox Searchlight all spending upwards of \$4 million.²⁵ Since then, however, the presence of streamers in the documentary market has not remained consistently dominant. In 2018, for example, streamers unexpectedly stayed away from the documentary market with Netflix acquiring only a single film, *Shirkers*, at the festival. Rather than diminishing the appetite for documentaries, however, the absence of streamers in 2018 allowed independent distributors to take advantage of the opening.²⁶

Generally, the fluctuating interest of streamers in acquiring documentary films at Sundance does not signal a disinterest in the documentary marketplace and instead coincides with a move towards production. Streamers have been especially interested in producing docuseries, a format well suited for at-home viewing that also offers the potential for additional seasons. Recent streamer-produced docuseries include *Colin in Black & White* (Netflix), *Lorena* (Amazon), and *Ted Bundy: Falling for a Killer* (Amazon), a selection that exemplifies an interest

25. Anthony Kaufman, "Documentaries Are Losing the Theatrical Game, But Don't Despair Yet," *IndieWire*, Jan 3, 2018, <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/01/documentaries-box-office-2017-1201910072/>.

26. Anthony Kaufman, "Netflix and Amazon Aren't Buying Documentaries, But the Non-Fiction Market Is Booming Anyway," *IndieWire*, Apr 17, 2018, <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/04/netflix-amazon-documentary-market-tribeca-hot-docs-1201953235/>.

in documentaries featuring stories and faces already familiar to general audiences. While the streaming giants can in no way be discounted entirely as buyers at Sundance, their move towards production is good news for independent distributors now able to compete for finished films.

The space that Netflix and other streamers occupy in the documentary sector fills the gap left by the VHS market and later, the DVD era, when documentary films could be financed based on projected physical media sales. At the same time, these companies can occupy a larger role as well, such as in the case of the streaming giants' move towards producing original nonfiction content. In addition to bringing documentaries into the mainstream through spotlighting them on the platform, Netflix has established itself as a tastemaker in the sector through producing films that fit its own brand of entertainment. Documentary scholar Joshua Glick provides an in-depth analysis of Netflix's investment in nonfiction, making the claim that Netflix tends to gravitate towards media involving elements of classical Hollywood storytelling. Glick argues that Netflix values "character"-driven media where the individual takes precedence and larger, systemic forces remain in the background. Furthermore, although Netflix documentaries vary greatly in terms of subject and themes, the company generally showcases films that are easily digestible in terms of style and narrative.²⁷ Netflix documentaries such as *The Social Dilemma*, *Fyre*, and *Have a Good Trip: Adventures in Psychedelics* focus on buzzy themes in popular culture already familiar to most viewers. Many of the company's popular docuseries tend to include elements of reality television, most notably in *Tiger King*, the hugely successful docu-reality mash-up featuring larger-than-life personalities. Netflix's preference for 'accessible' documentary media aligns with the streamer's ambitions of popularizing the genre. Through selecting films with

27. Joshua Glick, "Platform Politics: Netflix, the Media Industries, and the Value Of Reality," *World Records Journal* 5 (2021): 59-76, https://worldrecordsjournal.org/wp-content/Article%20PDFs/World_Records_Journal_Vol5_Art09.pdf.

recognizable commercial elements, Netflix attempts to blur the lines between fiction and nonfiction media, understating the documentary label in favor of the general category of “entertainment” or more simply, content.²⁸

NEON’s approach towards documentary both takes advantage of the appetite Netflix has provoked for nonfiction media while pushing back against the ‘Netflix-ication’ of the documentary form and method of consumption. As of 2021, *Three Identical Strangers* remains NEON’s highest grossing documentary at the domestic box office, though 2019’s *Apollo 11* came close with an impressive \$9 million revenue. Looking at the larger picture, four of the distributor’s top ten films at the U.S. box office are documentaries, evidence of its success releasing documentary films theatrically.²⁹ Notably, after *Three Identical Strangers*, NEON’s nonfiction acquisitions did not attempt to replicate the film’s success by solely chasing after documentaries with highly commercial premises. In the past few years, the company has amassed a collection of nonfiction films that are as eclectic as their other offerings. Many are challenging, such as *Honeyland* (2019), a Macedonian fly-on-the-wall style documentary, or *Gunda* (2020), shot in black and white and without any dialogue. On the other end of the spectrum is *Billie Eilish: The World's a Little Blurry*, a celebrity documentary film co-distributed by NEON and Apple TV+.

At the same time as NEON works to expand the definition of documentary, it is inevitably creating its own documentary library through selecting, and therefore assigning value to, a relatively small number of films out of a vast offering. However, the range in narrative,

28. On the streamer’s homepage, categories such as “Trending Now” and “Top 10 in the U.S. Today” facilitate this merging of different types of media, as documentaries, feature films, and television series are advertised side by side.

29. “Neon,” *IMDb Pro* (IMDb.com), https://pro.imdb.com/company/co0623930?s=16bea2b0-1f8e-9773-12a8-42c9afdf31c&site_preference=normal.

style, and language of NEON's documentary films pushes against the idea of the documentary as a "genre" in general. Tom Quinn has described NEON as "genre agnostic," meaning that categories are supposedly insignificant to the company when regarding the potential cinematic value of a film.³⁰ There are indications that this resistance to categorization is influencing the larger industry, such as *Honeyland* becoming the first film to be nominated in both the Best International Feature Film and Best Documentary Feature categories at the 2020 Academy Awards. Looking ahead to 2022, Quinn has expressed optimism that NEON's *Flee*, an animated foreign-language documentary, will continue to challenge the reduction of documentary film to a single category.³¹

***Parasite* and the Popular Foreign-Language Film**

During the acceptance speech following *Parasite*'s Best Picture win at the 2020 Academy Awards, Bong Joon-ho addressed the American public by saying (in Korean, translated by Sharon Choi), "once you overcome the one-inch-tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films." His comment concisely articulates the ongoing struggle foreign-language films face in the U.S., though the barrier of subtitles is only one of the many obstacles that stand in the way of their success. In the last decades, only a select few foreign-language films have achieved mainstream success in Hollywood, including *Roma* (2018), *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), *Amélie* (2001) and *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (2000).³²

30. Davis, "Tom Quinn (Neon co-founder)."

31. Clayton Davis, "Tom Quinn (Neon co-founder)," Mar 9, 2021, in *Variety Awards Circuit*, produced by Michael Schneider, podcast, MP3 audio, 28:03, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/tom-quinn-neon-co-founder/id1536666553?i=1000512269185>.

32. Sandra E. Garcia, "After 'Parasite,' Are Subtitles Still a One-Inch Barrier for Americans?," *The New York Times*, Feb 12, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/12/movies/movies-subtitles-parasite.html>.

Through a traditional slow-burn platform release and a marketing strategy that divulged limited information about the film's plot, NEON achieved the historically difficult feat of making a foreign-language film popular, pushing back against the presumption that foreign-language indie film can only be a niche product.

In *Indie, Inc.*, Alisa Perren tracks the presence of foreign-language films in the American independent sector of the 1980s and 90s. After the early 1980s, foreign-language films experienced a box office decline in the U.S. and few were able to break into the mainstream. This decline has been explained through a number of arguments, such as the belief that the rise of American independent films took the place of European art films in the market, or that Americans were not “sophisticated” enough to be interested in foreign-language films. Perren, however, points out that while many of these arguments hold some truth, they are problematic in that “they all remain bound to highly circumscribed notions of what constitutes a ‘foreign’ film.”³³ By conflating foreign-language films and art films, the foreign-language film is almost by definition excluded from the realm of mainstream cinema. Consequently, the discourse surrounding foreign-language films consistently framed them as sophisticated, high-culture products. The term ‘foreign-language’ itself contributes to this effect as well, automatically ‘othering’ non-English languages with the connotation that they are strange and unfamiliar. In the 1990s, studios did little to push back against these notions, despite subpar box office performances, until the notable move by Miramax to change the public perception of foreign-language films.³⁴ Similar to NEON, Miramax believed in the ability of its foreign-language films to challenge the prescribed boundaries that limited them to a subordinate position in the American independent film world. However, NEON's strategy in the late 2010s differs

33. Perren, *Indie, Inc.*, 187.

34. Perren, *Indie, Inc.*, 182-202.

significantly from Miramax's approach in the 1990s. Exploring these differences gives insight into how American independent cinema's relationship with foreign-language films has changed over the decades, despite the ongoing struggle these films face in trying to break into the mainstream.

NEON bought the U.S. rights to *Parasite* in 2018 after having already established a relationship with Bong Joon-ho through president Tom Quinn's experience working with him while at Magnolia Pictures and RADiUS.³⁵ Before *Parasite*, Bong Joon-ho was already a recognized auteur both in and outside of South Korea. His early films *Memories of Murder* (2003), *The Host* (2006), and *Mother* (2009) were hugely successful at the domestic box office and on the international festival circuit. Importantly, these three films established the director's signature style, which blends (and subverts) commercial genre themes with art-house elements. In the 2010s, Bong directed *Snowpiercer* (2013), his English-language debut starring Chris Evans, and *Okja* (2017), an international co-production of South Korea and the United States released by Netflix. *Snowpiercer* and *Okja* were important stepping-stones towards *Parasite*'s Best Picture win as they reached American audiences and attracted more media coverage in the U.S. than his prior Korean-language films. Due to the fact that Bong had a history of commercial genre films, in addition to English-language work starring western film stars, *Parasite* was able to escape the limiting connotation of foreign-language film as niche art cinema.

Parasite's achievements, and Bong Joon-ho's success in the U.S. overall, fall into the larger movement of South Korean media gaining popularity globally. The Korean Wave, or *hallyu*, refers to the exponential growth of Korean popular culture around the world. American

35. Eric Kohn, "'Parasite' Distributor Tom Quinn Explains How the Movie Became an Oscar-Winning Hit," *IndieWire*, Feb 10, 2020, <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/02/parasite-oscars-distribution-tom-quinn-interview-1202210320/>.

audiences, and especially younger generations, have become familiar with Korean media through highly successful K-pop groups (*BTS*, *TWICE*, *BLACKPINK*) and Korean dramas (*Boys Over Flowers*, *Reply*, *Descendants of The Sun*). Furthermore, established auteurs who were major figures in the Korean New Wave, alongside Bong Joon-ho, recently directed films that did exceptionally well in the United States; 2016's *The Handmaiden* was Park Chan-wook's highest grossest film in the U.S., beating his English-language film *Stoker* (2013), while Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* (2018) performed well theatrically and on the awards circuit. Similar to Bong Joon-ho, these filmmakers have been producing genre-bending films with art-house tendencies since the 90s that appeal to both domestic and international audiences.³⁶ The overall rise of *hallyu* in the United States, including the growing interest in auteur-driven Korean cinema, was a huge factor in priming *Parasite*'s success.

The resistance English-speaking U.S. audiences have towards foreign-language films is often associated with a general aversion to subtitles. Having to read subtitles is thought of as an additional effort that takes away from the pleasure of watching a movie for entertainment. In a *Vox* article explaining the debate over subtitles, Aja Romano points out that “the disdain toward subtitles has been systematically, culturally ingrained in many moviegoers throughout the world by nationalist governments,” referring to the history of dubbing as a tool of fascist propaganda.³⁷ Despite the struggle the majority of foreign-language films have continued to face at the box office, however, foreign-language media has arguably become more commonplace than it used to be. In part, this is likely due to the global presence of streamers such as Netflix that create

36. For an in-depth historical study of the New Korean cinema movement, see: Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves*, (London: Wallflower, 2009).

37. Aja Romano, “The debate over subtitles, explained,” *Vox*, Feb 20, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/2/20/21134355/subtitles-or-dubs-which-is-better-parasite-debate-history-anime>.

popular original content in languages other than English. In order to increase the reach of their films and television series, Netflix adds subtitles to its original content in 28 languages, offering more subtitle options than the majority of media services.³⁸ Netflix has demonstrated an ongoing interest in Korean dramas specifically and produced its first original Korean series, *Kingdom*, in 2019. That same year, the streamer entered a partnership deal with Korean cable TV network JTBC, evidence of its belief in the high commercial potential of Korean media.³⁹

However, as noted by Ramon Lobato, Netflix’s translation efforts are organized around “its priority list of ‘official languages,’” a list that has grown over time but includes only widely spoken languages. Furthermore, though Netflix encourages its U.S. subscribers to overcome resistance to non-English language media through its promotion of foreign-language originals such as *Money Heist*, *Lupin*, and *Élite*, the viewer does not necessarily have to overcome the “barrier of subtitles” due to the availability of English-language dubbing.⁴⁰ In her insightful article on Netflix’s dubbing practices, Sánchez-Mompeán argues that the streamer has actually incited a dubbing revival through its commitment to providing Anglophone speakers with high-quality English-language dubs.⁴¹ Netflix’s dedication to dubbing is perhaps best represented through the fact that foreign-language content automatically defaults to the English language

38. Garcia, “After ‘Parasite,’ Are Subtitles Still a One-Inch Barrier for Americans?”

39. Patrick Brzeski, “Netflix Bolsters K-Drama Lineup in Multiyear Deal With South Korea’s JTBC,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Nov 25, 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/netflix-bolsters-k-drama-lineup-deal-south-koreas-jtbc-1257822/>.

40. Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), ProQuest Ebook Central.

41. Sofia Sánchez-Mompeán, “Netflix Likes It Dubbed: Taking on the Challenge of Dubbing into English,” *Language and Communication* 80 (2021): 180–90, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2021.07.001>.

dubbed version, if available, encouraging viewers to watch content dubbed rather than subtitled.⁴²

NEON's strategic partnership with Hulu (discussed more in-depth in the following section) allows the distributor to give foreign-language films a theatrical release, important for generating buzz and awards campaigning, while also increasing their reach through a guaranteed home on a popular streaming platform. Notably, *Parasite* was released to stream exclusively on Hulu (as per the NEON-Hulu partnership) without the option of an English-language dub. When a Twitter user tweeted the streamer complaining about the lack of dubbing, Hulu replied, "if you don't want to read subtitles, you can always learn Korean!" taking a firm pro-subtitle stance in contrast to Netflix (though Hulu does offer English-language dubs on some of its content).⁴³ As a result of NEON's deal with Hulu, established in 2017, almost all of the distributor's films end up streaming only on Hulu. By establishing a hub of high-quality foreign-language films that do not offer an English-language dub, NEON and Hulu's partnership makes these films accessible to a wide audience while pushing English-speaking viewers to give subtitled media a chance. Similar to Netflix, Hulu also promotes foreign-language and English-language content on its platform side-by-side, challenging the 'othering' of foreign-language films.

In recent years, foreign-language awards contenders have typically opened between mid-November and mid-December in order to guarantee they will still be playing in theaters during the peak of awards season. Following a successful festival run, NEON opted not to wait and

42. In 2018, Netflix publically voiced the belief that U.S. subscribers prefer dubbed content over subtitles even though consumers told them the opposite, see: Janko Roettgers, "Netflix's Secrets to Success: Six Cell Towers, Dubbing and More," *Variety*, Mar 8, 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/digital/news/netflix-success-secrets-1202721847/>.

43. Christi Carras, "Hulu to 'Parasite' haters: 'If you don't want to read subtitles,' learn Korean," *Los Angeles Times*, Apr 9, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2020-04-09/parasite-hulu-tweets-digital-release-twitter?fbclid=IwAR1QAjvR0kFyO7FFain6tUkRRypS37HY_UlyxIwNI1gPJXb_xQHJ9kVOvtg.

released *Parasite* in theaters just days after it screened at the New York Film Festival, taking advantage of the growing buzz. *Parasite* opened in the U.S. on October 11, 2019 in only three theaters, the IFC Center in New York City and the Landmark and Arclight Hollywood theaters in Los Angeles. Across these three theaters, the film grossed an impressive \$393,216 during its opening weekend. *Parasite*'s opening weekend success, as well as its status as winner of the 2019 Palme d'Or, resulted in overwhelmingly positive media buzz. Articles such as *IndieWire*'s "If You Want to See 'Parasite' This Weekend, You'll Need to Fly to Los Angeles" and *Vanity Fair*'s "Parasite Crushes Specialty Box Office Records in U.S. Debut" contributed to the hype surrounding the film, framing the limited theatrical opening as an exclusive event.⁴⁴ During the following weeks, the film gradually expanded in theaters as word of mouth continued to spread. By late January, the film had crossed the \$30 million dollar box office threshold to become NEON's top box office grosser, passing the previous record holder *I, Tonya*.⁴⁵

Though NEON's decision to open *Parasite* earlier than usual may have broken the norm, *Parasite*'s gradual theatrical expansion is an example of a typical platform release. The slow-burn release strategy, typical for independent films, depends on word of mouth and media attention to build over weeks in order to sustain a theatrical run.⁴⁶ Geoff King describes a similar strategy in the release of *The Blair Witch Project* and *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, as both films

44. Yohana Desta, "Parasite Crushes Specialty Box Office Records in U.S. Debut," *Vanity Fair*, Oct 14, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/10/parasite-box-office-opening-weekend>; Tom Brueggemann, "If You Want to See 'Parasite' This Weekend, You'll Need to Fly to Los Angeles," *IndieWire*, Oct 11, 2019, <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/10/parasite-sold-out-new-york-los-angeles-1202180813/>.

45. Jeremy Fuster, "'Parasite' Crosses \$30 Million, Becomes NEON's Top Box Office Grosser," *The Wrap*, Jan 26, 2020, <https://www.thewrap.com/parasite-crosses-30-million-becomes-neons-top-box-office-grosser/>.

46. Chris Lee, "Parasite Is Getting Rave Reviews. When Can You Actually See It in a Theater Near You?," *Vulture*, Oct 17, 2019, <https://www.vulture.com/2019/10/where-to-watch-the-korean-movie-parasite-in-the-u-s.html>.

were “placed purposefully in theatres that would not be large enough to accommodate the expected audience.”⁴⁷ Even though the hype from the festival circuit was enough to all but guarantee a strong opening for *Parasite*, selling out screenings at three theaters likely made a bigger splash than a wide opening would have. By January, *Parasite* was playing in over 800 theaters, and expanded to a staggering 2,001 theaters following its Best Picture win in February.⁴⁸ By the time the film’s theatrical run was put to an end by the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, it had amassed over \$53.3 million at the domestic box office.⁴⁹ In addition to its awards wins, marketing campaign, and media hype, one factor that may have contributed to *Parasite*’s success both in theaters and on streaming is its “rewatchability” potential. Paul Dergarabedian of Comscore, quoted in *The Hollywood Reporter*, argued that the film’s complex nature “[made] it required viewing not only in the movie theater, but on home video where audiences [could] take the time to study the nuances.”⁵⁰ The film’s unexpected yet meticulously set up twist at the end lends itself easily to multiple viewings. As a director famous for his attention to detail, Bong Joon-ho invites the viewer to take a closer look the second time around, this time equipped with the knowledge of what will happen at the end.

Similar to its slow-burn theatrical release plan, NEON’s marketing strategy worked to create ‘buzz’ around the film while continuing to frame it as an exclusive event that had to be experienced in person. The trailer mainly used footage from the first half of the film and NEON

47. King, *American Independent Cinema*, 29.

48. Pamela McClintock, “Oscars: ‘Parasite’ to Dramatically Expand Theater Count Following Historic Win,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Feb 10, 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/oscars-2020-parasite-expand-theater-count-historic-win-1278373/>.

49. “Parasite,” *Box Office Mojo* (IMDb.com), https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r11258849793/?ref =bo_gr_rls.

50. McClintock, “Oscars: ‘Parasite’ to Dramatically Expand Theater Count Following Historic Win.”

was careful not to reveal any of the spoilers or twists, showing just enough to lure audiences to the theater.⁵¹ While the trailer hints at the way Bong Joon-ho's films fail to fall under a single genre, its fast-pace and suspenseful music emphasize the film's thrilling elements. Notably, the trailer does not include plot details specific to South Korea. On a surface level at least, the apparent themes of capitalism and wealth inequality feel universal. In Perren's analysis of Miramax, she notes that the company's foreign-language films were its most accessible in terms of narrative and style, in a deliberate attempt to increase commerciality and balance out the hard-to-sell foreign-language element. Through marketing, Miramax underplayed the "foreignness" of these films and created a narrative that pushed universal themes instead.⁵² While NEON has clearly decided to go a different direction as evidenced by the fact that so many of its foreign-language films are challenging and decidedly political, *Parasite* does stand out as one of its most accessible foreign-language releases (compared to, say, *Monos* [2019] or *New Order* [2021]). Even compared to Bong Joon-ho's other Korean language films, such as *Memories of Murder* (2003) or *Mother* (2009), *Parasite* does not engage as directly with issues specific to South Korea.

This isn't to say the film isn't political, but rather to propose that the film's political criticism is broad enough to be relatable for a wider global audience. *Parasite* exposes the class divide and decaying job market that has increasingly worsened in South Korea despite the country's rapid economic growth since the 1960s. Although the film speaks directly to domestic issues such as the overpopulation of Seoul and rising youth unemployment, the central themes

51. Anthony D'Alessandro, "'Parasite' Crosses \$11M, On Its Way To Potential \$20M: How NEON Turned The Bong Joon-Ho South Korean Pic Into A B.O. Success," Nov 10, 2019, <https://deadline.com/2019/11/parasite-bong-joon-ho-box-office-marketing-success-1202781944/>.

52. Perren, *Indie Inc.*, 192-194.

are relevant to American viewers, many of whom have experienced the effects of wealth disparity in the United States.⁵³ In an interview with *Deadline* about the marketing strategy for the film, NEON's Chief Marketing Officer Christian Parkes commented that "[NEON] didn't look at [*Parasite*] as a foreign film [but as] a Best Picture contender ... in that context, it removed any barriers."⁵⁴ While this statement perhaps underplays the many factors that led to *Parasite*'s Best Picture win, it underscores the same desire Miramax had to emphasize universality and challenge the assumption that foreign-language films were inaccessible for American audiences.

Although *Parasite*'s unprecedented success broke through boundaries constraining foreign-language films and led to a heightened interest in international fare, the future viability of these films is in no ways guaranteed. Miramax's hopes to make foreign-language fare popular seemed to be realized through the success of *Life is Beautiful* (1999), an Italian film that made history when it was nominated for seven awards at the Academy Awards and became the highest-grossing foreign-language film ever in the U.S.⁵⁵ Despite the success of the film, however, foreign-language films continued to struggle at the box office throughout the 2000s and studios remained wary of their commercial potential. Nonetheless, trends in the 2010s suggest real changes regarding the attitudes of audiences towards foreign-language media, due in part to Netflix's efforts to challenge the limiting connotation of foreign-language film as art film. NEON has leaned into the possibilities of foreign-language film as commercial through

53. It's interesting to note that many comparisons that have been made between *Parasite* and Netflix's most recent (and biggest) foreign-language hit *Squid Game*, a South Korean television series that also functions as a critique of economic inequality and the impossibility of upwards mobility under capitalism, see for example: Inkoo Kang, "Why does 'Squid Game' resonate so well in the U.S.? It may be its portrayal of economic despair," *The Washington Post*, Oct 8, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/tv/2021/10/08/squid-game/>.

54. D'Alessandro, "'Parasite' Crosses \$11M, On Its Way To Potential \$20M."

55. Perren, *Indie, Inc.*, 199.

extensive marketing campaigns and release strategies that challenge the idea of “foreign-language” as a quality or genre, similar to the company’s practices regarding documentary film. At the same time, NEON has refused to compromise its taste for “cinematic” foreign-language films, continuing to bet on films directed by established auteurs with art-house tendencies that often deal with challenging material. This is perhaps best exemplified through its 2021 slate, which includes Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Memoria*, Julia Ducournau’s *Titane*, and Joachim Trier’s *The Worst Person in the World*.

Palm Springs and the Rise of Streamers

At the 2020 Sundance Film Festival, NEON and Hulu made a historic Sundance buy, beating out competitors A24 and Netflix in a bidding war to jointly acquire Andy Samberg-led comedy *Palm Springs* (2020).⁵⁶ The cost was reported to be \$17.5 million but may have actually been closer to \$22 million.⁵⁷ At the time, this broke the record to make it the biggest deal to have ever occurred at Sundance. Although the time-loop comedy *Palm Springs* may not have been as artsy and experimental as some of NEON’s other projects, it demonstrates one of the ways in which NEON has been able to collaborate with streaming services in mutually beneficial ways. As streaming services become increasingly powerful in the indie sector, NEON has leveraged its reputation as a distributor that genuinely believes in its films in order to prove its viability to filmmakers. Through a strategic partnership with Hulu, NEON is able to maintain its position as an important cultural intermediary between films and audiences while also reaping the benefits of a guaranteed streaming home for its slate.

56. Lindahl, “As Sundance Finally Makes Big Deals, It’s Ruled By Streaming.”

57. Mike Fleming Jr, “Value Of Hulu/NEON ‘Palm Springs’ Deal Is Actually \$22 Million; How Streamers Ruled 2020 Sundance,” *Deadline*, Feb 3, 2020, <https://deadline.com/2020/02/hulu-neon-paid-22-million-palm-springs-streamers-dominated-sundance-film-festival-1202850004/>.

Beyond the *Palm Springs* deal, 2020 was a historic year for Sundance as the streaming giants asserted their commanding presence through a number of notable acquisitions. Three other films were sold for over \$10 million, a number that was once astronomical for a Sundance buy but is beginning to look unremarkable as streamers drive prices up (Apple later broke the *Palm Springs* record, paying a whopping \$25 million for *CODA* at the 2021 Sundance Festival⁵⁸). The presence of streamers able and willing to spend astronomical amounts on independent films has changed Sundance in undeniable ways. Companies such as Apple, Amazon, and Disney can outbid everyone without risking anything financially. The growth of conglomerate-owned streaming services has given already-monolithic companies the power to dominate the film distribution business, including the independent sector. The rise of streamers also risks disrupting the traditional practices of independent film financing. Typically, independent filmmakers finance their projects through selling rights before production begins, often working with a sales agent to negotiate deals with local distributors on a country-by-country basis. Streamers, however, are mainly interested in worldwide rights, placing independent filmmakers in a difficult position regarding pre-production deals that could deter streamers later on.⁵⁹ Additionally, streaming services are primarily data-driven and subscriber-driven, an important distinction to make when comparing them to the Big Five studios. The quantity and diversity of offering takes precedence, moving the focus away from individual films to the importance of the library.

58. Mike Fleming Jr, "Apple Lands 'CODA' For \$25M Record Setting WW Deal; First Major Virtual 2021 Sundance Film Festival Sale," *Deadline*, Jan 30, 2021, <https://deadline.com/2021/01/coda-apple-record-deal-2021-sundance-film-festival-north-of-twenty-five-million-dollars-1234683970/>.

59. Steven Zeitchik, "Streaming has changed the Sundance Film Festival. And maybe not for the better," *The Washington Post*, Feb 1, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/02/01/streaming-has-changed-sundance-film-festival-maybe-not-better/>.

Although *Palm Springs* was originally slated for a theatrical release preceding its availability on Hulu, the Covid-19 pandemic caused the United States to shut down all theaters in March 2020 and consequently, NEON and Hulu chose to release it simultaneously on the streaming platform and in drive-in theaters that July. The limited theatrical release allowed NEON to organize special screening events, such as having Andy Samberg introduce the film. The primary way that audiences watched *Palm Springs*, however, was through streaming. While streaming services are notorious for not releasing their data, Hulu claimed that the film broke its opening weekend record for most views and was the most talked about Hulu original film on Twitter.⁶⁰ A contributing factor to *Palm Springs*' success was that Hulu's library also included *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, a television show starring Samberg, and *Saturday Night Live*, where Samberg was a cast member for many years. By amassing content starring the same actor, Hulu can specifically target subscribers who have demonstrated interest in their other films. A Forbes article published shortly after the Sundance acquisition rightly predicted *Palm Springs*' success on Hulu, making the argument that the planned theatrical release would mainly serve as "glorified marketing for the film's eventual 'forever home' on Hulu."⁶¹ The implications of this statement for independent distribution companies could be grim, especially considering that the film ended up becoming an instant hit on streaming, seemingly bypassing the role of the independent distributor altogether.

60. Zack Sharf, "Palm Springs' Sets Hulu Streaming Record with Biggest Opening Weekend — Exclusive," *IndieWire*, Jul 14, 2020, <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/07/palm-springs-streaming-record-hulu-opening-weekend-1234573145/>.

61. Scott Mendelson, "Sundance: Why NEON And Hulu Paid Record \$17.5M For 'Palm Springs'," *Forbes*, Jan 28, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2020/01/28/sundance-why-neon-and-hulu-paid-record-175m-for-palm-springs-with-andy-samberg-cristin-milioti-and-camila-mendes/?sh=760060bd1728>.

NEON and Hulu's output deal has been framed as "cutting edge," allowing the two companies to acquire projects together in some cases while NEON continues to acquire other projects separately.⁶² Under the current deal, almost all NEON releases end up streaming exclusively on Hulu following a theatrical release, with the streamer only able to refuse NC-17 rated films. Established in April 2017, the same month as the release of the first NEON-distributed film, *Colossal*, the partnership with Hulu immediately gave NEON an edge in the distribution scene. Partnering with a streaming service allows the company to make riskier decisions with the knowledge that a set percentage of the cost will be recuperated. For Hulu, one of the big players in the streaming arena, NEON's art-house, genre-driven fare serves as one more way of appealing to consumers deciding between an increasingly large choice of streaming services.

Shortly before the NEON deal in 2017, Hulu also signed similar output deals with other independent companies such as Annapurna, Magnolia, and IFC Films.⁶³ In 2019, Hulu and Bleecker Street signed another exclusive output deal, granting Hulu exclusive SVOD rights for all future releases.⁶⁴ Taking advantage of independent distributors as being free from conglomerate Hollywood, and therefore generally outside of a vertically-integrated system, streamers such as Hulu have sought to ink exclusive deals that make the streamer the singular SVOD outlet for their new releases. Taking a look at Hulu's history and current ownership helps to illuminate the reasons behind the streamer's output deals with independent distributors. In

62. Chris Lindahl, "As Sundance Finally Makes Big Deals, It's Ruled By Streaming," *IndieWire*, Jan 27, 2020, <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/01/sundance-palm-springs-neon-hulu-streaming-acquisition-sale-1202206508/>.

63. Patrick Hipes, "Hulu & NEON Ink Exclusive Output Deal," *Deadline*, Apr 21, 2017, <https://deadline.com/2017/04/hulu-neon-licensing-deal-movies-1202073767/>.

64. Anthony D'Alessandro, "Hulu & Bleecker Street Partner On Exclusive SVOD Deal," *Deadline*, Aug 5, 2019, <https://deadline.com/2019/08/hulu-bleecker-street-partner-on-exclusive-svod-deal-1202661486/>.

2017, Disney's acquired 21st Century Fox, including film and television studio 20th Century Fox (now 20th Century Studios). This huge acquisition resulted in Disney controlling a majority of stakes in Hulu. In 2019, Comcast agreed to sell its minority share to Disney for a sale price of at least \$5.8 billion, effectively giving Disney full control of the streaming service.⁶⁵ Disney's decision to operate its two streaming services, Hulu and Disney+, separately, rather than combine the two, is unsurprising. While Disney+ primarily distributes media produced by the Walt Disney Studios that conforms to the studio's family-friendly brand, Hulu offers Disney the opportunity to capitalize on media often produced by other companies and targeted towards different audiences. Additionally, through the streaming service, Disney is able to collaborate with true independents such as NEON.

In the press, streaming has recently been framed as a "new hope" for indie film, using the argument that audiences are more willing to experiment and watch independent films at home where they are free to stop watching at any time.⁶⁶ *The Hollywood Reporter* described streaming as a "lifeline" for indie producers and distributors, "making financing possible for a range of movies that would otherwise be nearly impossible to get made."⁶⁷ At the same time, these publications and others have also signaled less optimistic attitudes towards the convergence of independent film and streaming services, such as the fear that streamers will put an end to the word-of-mouth distribution model for smaller films that depend on a gradual theatrical expansion

65. Edmund Lee, "Disney to Buy Comcast's Hulu Stake and Take Full Control of Streaming Service," *New York Times*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/14/business/media/disney-hulu-comcast.html/>.

66. Julia Greenberg, "Netflix and Amazon Offer Indie Filmmakers Hope (And Lots of Money)," *WIRED*, Jan 28, 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/01/netflix-and-amazon-offer-indie-filmmakers-hope-and-lots-of-money/>.

67. Scott Roxborough, "Cannes: How Streaming Is Helping, Not Killing, the Indie Film Business," *The Hollywood Reporter*, Jul 8, 2021, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/cannes-streaming-helping-killing-independent-film-1234979168/>.

over a period of weeks.⁶⁸ *IndieWire* critic David Ehrlich referred to Netflix as “a graveyard with unlimited viewing hours,” criticizing the way the service accumulates content without giving individual films the attention they deserve.⁶⁹ In *New York Times* opinion piece, “Don’t Let Amazon Eat the Film Industry,” Patricia Aufderheide warned of the “eerie similarities” between pre-1948 Hollywood (preceding the Paramount Decree) and today’s streaming era, voicing a skeptical attitude towards streaming giants holding so much power in the independent film world.⁷⁰ These conflicting viewpoints within the trade press and entertainment journalism demonstrate the uncertainty surrounding the rise of streaming services and their impact on the distribution landscape.

Writing about the streaming debate through a case study of Netflix, Geoff King ironically concludes his argument by refusing to come to a single conclusion, rightly pointing out that the answer of how the streaming service has impacted the independent sector varies depending on who is asked.⁷¹ For NEON, the streaming giants have generally not prevented the distributor from acquiring the films it chases after. Though NEON is often competing with streamers for the same films, its proven dedication to the theatrical experience and demonstrated success with awards campaigns appeal to the filmmakers it wants to work with more than Netflix’s pitch.⁷² As noted by *The Hollywood Reporter*, making a deal with a streaming giant generally means “giving

68. Ted Mundorff, “Hollywood’s Big Streaming Pivot Will Be Costly for Indie Films (Guest Column),” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Dec 18, 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/hollywoods-big-streaming-pivot-will-be-costly-for-indie-films-guest-column-4105503/>.

69. David Ehrlich, “Netflix Keeps Buying Great Movies, So It’s a Shame They’re Getting Buried,” *IndieWire*, Apr 17, 2017, <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/04/netflix-bad-for-movies-theaters-okja-tramps-1201806272/>.

70. Patricia Aufderheide, “Don’t Let Amazon Eat the Film Industry,” *New York Times*, Oct 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/03/opinion/amazon-antitrust-movies.html>.

71. King, “Game-changer or a new shape to familiar dynamics?”

72. Sarah Colvin, interview by author, November 10, 2021.

up on the fantasy [...] that your movie will become a box-office phenomenon and make you rich.”⁷³ Through working with NEON, filmmakers can hope for a box office hit while also taking comfort in the knowledge that their film will have an extended life on a streaming service after the theatrical run. One of NEON’s biggest assets is its proven track record of serving filmmakers and their films through hardcore campaigning. The distributor is interested in developing long-term relationships with directors, a relationship that streamers don’t care about as much. This means organizing Q&As, festivals, and other events that spotlight the director and their work, preventing films from getting lost as they often do in the streaming “graveyard.” Although *Palm Springs* perhaps did not require NEON’s assistance to become a hit on Hulu, it’s difficult to imagine films such as *Three Identical Strangers* or *Parasite* reaching the same success if they had only been released on a streaming platform.

NEON describes its partnership with Hulu as “a great working relationship” because Hulu recognizes the assets the company brings to the table, choosing to work with leading indie distributors instead of only competing against them.⁷⁴ Through its reputation of campaigning hard for films, even when they aren’t directed by known auteurs or featuring big name actors, NEON is able to appeal to filmmakers who might not want to work with streamers that prioritize the library over individual films. Tom Quinn’s description of the company as “just a group of cinema lovers” is relevant here, as the distributor has adopted a brand identity that emphasizes a genuine love for film, instilling trust in the directors it works with. In this sense, NEON is also an important intermediary between filmmakers and Hulu; its partnership with the streamer

73. Pamela McClintock, “Netflix Movies: Producers Weigh Hidden Downsides,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Mar 19, 2015, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/netflix-movies-producers-weigh-hidden-782403/>.

74. Colvin, interview by author.

allows it to take advantage of the increased reach of a streaming platform, but only after it has already established a film's value through a marketing campaign and theatrical run.

Conclusion

Through mapping out NEON's rise from newcomer to imminent mini-major in only five years, I have examined a critical period in American independent cinema marked by the rise of streamers, changing viewer preferences, and increasing uncertainty regarding the future of distribution. Due to an expansion of new viewing platforms and changing audience practices, the last decade resulted in a wave of risk-taking and innovative practices for distributors, with mixed results. In order to distinguish itself from the competition, NEON has intentionally embraced its role as a Bourdieusian cultural intermediary, underlining its expertise as a means of both instilling trust in filmmakers and signaling the value of its films through strategic marketing, distribution practices, and a selection of films that fit its indie brand. Though the company has not gone so far as competing leading independent distributor A24 to sell its name (see the company's extensive selection of A24-branded merchandise), the NEON logo has become a marker of quality and 'good taste' in the indie sector.

From its beginnings, NEON expressed a commitment towards the theatrical experience and eclectic, boundary-pushing films. The company's deals with Hulu and Apple TV+ demonstrate how the distributor has found opportunities to work with streaming services, influential new players in the distribution landscape that, arguably, hold even more power than the Hollywood majors. The growing involvement of streamers in the indie sector has elevated types of films that previously occupied a marginal, art house status, such as foreign-language films and documentaries. Simultaneously, streamers have formed a new oligopoly that threatens smaller distributors and holds a dangerously large amount of power in shaping and limiting the

definition of independent film. NEON's partnerships, however, allow the distributor to work with streamers while retaining its position of power in shaping the value of the film through a preceding theatrical run.

In the months following the March 2020 Covid-19 pandemic shutdown in the United States, Hollywood was forced to undergo rapid and considerable changes in regards to the production, distribution, and exhibition of media.⁷⁵ Despite the state of uncertainty that has permeated the industry from March 2020 to late 2021, NEON appears to be thriving, with plans to release a company record-breaking eighteen films in 2021. Four of NEON's 2021 international releases, *Titane* (France), *Flee* (Denmark), *The Worst Person in the World* (Norway), and *Memoria* (Colombia) have been selected by their respective countries as the entry for Best International Feature Film at the upcoming 94th Academy Awards. While the list of nominations will not be announced until February 2022, NEON's impressive slate of critically acclaimed films bodes well for the company's award prospects.

Even so, the blow that the pandemic delivered to movie theaters cannot be understated, and the effects are continuing to be seen through lackluster specialty box office numbers. As the end of 2021 nears, the market is still recovering very slowly, due in part to the absence of key older demographics still hesitant to return to theaters. Like many other distributors, NEON's response has been to experiment with different distribution strategies in the hope of luring audiences back. In the case of *Pig*, released in July 2021, and *Titane*, released in October 2021, a limited theatrical release proved very effective, as both films exceeded expectations at the box office by appealing to younger crowds. Additionally, both films were made available on VOD

75. For a detailed account of the impact of the COVID-19 on Hollywood, see Kate Fortmueller's *Hollywood Shutdown: Production, Distribution, and Exhibition in the Time of Covid*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021). Kindle.

platforms only 17 days after opening theatrically, showing how multiple forms of distribution can coexist by targeting different audiences. One of NEON's most anticipated films of the year, *Spencer*, was given a wide release in over 1,000 theaters and opened with a disappointing \$2.1 million, but the decision to release it on VOD only three weeks later proved lucrative.⁷⁶ Given the awards buzz already surrounding the film and Kristen Stewart's performance, it's also likely that theaters will re-book it leading up to the Academy Awards in March.

Generally, NEON's experimentation with release strategies continues to bet on the theatrical, true to the company's brand identity. This commitment to the cinematic experience is perhaps best exemplified by the distributor's plan for the upcoming release *Memoria*, which will play in one theater at a time, turning the film into a kind of "never-ending, moving-image art exhibit."⁷⁷ NEON's president of distribution has compared the strategy to a band going on tour, performing for only one audience at a time. Notably, the film will not be made available on VOD or streaming platforms because it is "not an online experience," a decision that has inspired both admiration and indignation.⁷⁸ While certainly not a feasible distribution method for most films, this unconventional strategy demonstrates NEON's willingness to take risks and experiment freely, making bold moves that have contributed to building the distributor's status as a leading tastemaker in the indie sector.

76. Jill Goldsmith, "'Spencer' Snubbed, 'French Dispatch' Steady – Specialty Box Office," *Deadline*, Nov 7, 2021, <https://deadline.com/2021/11/spencer-the-french-dispatch-box-office-1234869593/>.

77. Ryan Lattanzio, "'Memoria': Neon Sets Never-Ending Theatrical Tour for Weerasethakul's Latest, One Screen at a Time," *IndieWire*, Oct 5, 2021, <https://www.indiewire.com/2021/10/memoria-apichatpong-weerasethakul-neon-nationwide-tour-release-1234669107/>.

78. Geoffrey Macnab, "Neon's Elissa Federoff talks 'Memoria' roadshow and flexible release patterns," *Screen Daily*, Nov 23, 2021, <https://www.screendaily.com/news/neons-elissa-federoff-talks-memoria-roadshow-and-flexible-release-patterns/5165391.article?adredir=1>.

NEON's status in the indie sector is also due in part to its track record of successful awards campaigning. Being nominated, and especially winning, is seen as "a seal of quality" and is one of the few ways for art-house independent films to be truly profitable, often leading theaters to re-book films due to renewed interest.⁷⁹ Award shows also function as important cultural intermediaries, assigning value to films through deciding which ones deserve recognition. In recent years, however, there has been an increasing amount of backlash towards prestigious award shows such as the Academy Awards, accusing the (majority white, male, 65+ year old) voters of not accurately representing the diverse American population. While NEON continues to campaign hard for its films, it also works to push award shows in new directions instead of appealing to voters with films that fit the predictable Oscar 'formula.' For instance, the distributor admits that experimental horror film *Titane*, despite winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes, will "probably not be Oscar bait."⁸⁰ As the case of *Parasite* shows, however, NEON has already demonstrated that achieving the unprecedented is possible.

The period of time from 2017-2021 can be characterized as the first phase of NEON's existence as a distributor, a brief yet eventful five years that transformed a newcomer into one of the most influential and recognizable independents. NEON's growth and success has brought the company to a perhaps inevitable next step: a move into production. With twelve films already in the works, NEON is diving in headfirst. Historically, independent distributors hold a poor track record of shifting to in-house production. In *Indie, Inc.*, Perren notes that most independent distributors in the 1980s with similar impulses to expand into production ended up bankrupt, with Miramax being one of the few to successfully make the move.⁸¹ Nonetheless, the rise of

79. Colvin, interview by author.

80. Colvin, interview by author.

81. Perren, *Indie Inc.*, 46.

A24 from smalltime distributor to studio in the 2010s offers a blueprint for NEON to follow.⁸²

When Tom Quinn was asked about NEON's foray into production, he directly referenced two A24 films to describe the budget range the company intends to work in (between *Moonlight*'s \$1.5 million and *Hereditary*'s \$10 million).⁸³

As NEON begins to move into production, its status in the indie sector will likely continue to grow. Despite NEON's vision of itself a group of cinema lovers "who never compromise in what [they] believe in," its inherent commercial interest as a distributor should not be overlooked; even if it is open to risk-taking, the company must be profitable in order to survive. It must also be recognized that NEON was founded by two white men, already industry veterans, who were given the capital from the very beginning to compete with the big studios. The majority of independent distributors are not ever able to reach this level of status, preventing them from exerting a large amount of influence and relegating them to occupy a marginal space in the sector. Analyzing NEON's influence as a cultural intermediary should serve as a reminder to be critical of trusting any single entity to determine what films are valuable.

82. Interestingly, however, recent trade press suggests that A24 may be exploring a multibillion sale, see Matt Donnelly, "Indie Film and TV Studio A24 Explored Sale With \$3 Billion Asking Price," *Variety*, Jul 13, 2021, <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/inside-a24-billion-dollar-sale-1235018988/>.

83. Scott Feinberg, "'Awards Chatter' Podcast — Tom Quinn (Neon)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, Feb 12, 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/awards-chatter-podcast-tom-quinn-neon-1279179/>.

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