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STREAMING CULTURE

Subscription Platforms and the
Unending Consumption
of Culture

David Arditi



STREAMING CULTURE

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Praise for *Streaming Culture*:

Streaming services led by Netflix, Disney+, Spotify, Amazon Prime, Apple Music and YouTube now dominate the audiovisual world. How did we get here and why does it matter? Combining a rich understanding of political economy and the cultural theory of Raymond Williams, Arditi provides a much-needed critical guide to this not-so-brave new world and its wider significance for understanding the shifting dynamics of global capitalism.

–Vincent Mosco, Author of *The Smart City in a Digital World*

David Arditi's new book offers a compelling, accessible take on the rise of streaming culture. Spanning multiple media, including movies, TV, music, and games, Arditi shows how streaming carries us, willingly or not, into a world of unending consumption, in which media users themselves become the product.

–Chuck Tryon, Professor of English, Fayetteville State University, USA

From music to TV to video games, streaming has altered the way that we consume and experience popular culture and goods. In this engaging, highly readable account, David Arditi explains how streaming came to disrupt so many industries and ways of life, exploring its capitalist roots, tendencies, and

impacts. Loaded with examples that will speak to every audience, Arditi has produced a text that is astonishing in its depth and breadth and is essential for understanding a modern digital society.

–**Mary Chayko**, Interdisciplinary Professor, School
of Communication and Information, Rutgers
University, USA

With *Streaming Culture*, David Arditi provides an engaging blueprint for understanding the expansive impact of streaming services. Theoretically rich, historically grounded, and full of examples from a range of media forms, Arditi offers fresh insights into how streaming platforms are reshaping media culture.

–**Alisa Perren**, Associate Professor, Department of
Radio-Television-Film, University of Texas at
Austin, USA

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Subscription Platforms and the Unending Consumption of Culture

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION: CAUGHT IN THE STREAM

On the first day of my Introduction to Popular Culture course, I always ask my students the same question: what is your favorite part of popular culture? In the fall of 2014, I was surprised when 10 students responded “YouTube.” It shouldn’t have been surprising, but in my mind, YouTube remained a means to consume other areas of popular culture. However, to my students the mix of streamed culture on the popular video sharing platform pointed to a cultural form in-and-of itself. For them, YouTube is not just a place to stream hand-me-down culture, but a site of novel cultural production in its own right. Streaming culture is both a noun and a verb (discussed further below). As a noun, streaming culture refers to the cultural practices surrounding websites like YouTube. As a verb, streaming culture speaks to the act of consuming culture using internet and communication technologies. My students identify with streaming culture as a quintessential aspect of popular culture.

Streaming culture changed the way that I teach Introduction to Popular Culture because it enabled me to quickly engage with things that I’ve never seen myself. Later in the

same semester, these students introduced me to “Alex from Target.” The simple picture of a kid bagging items at Target became a meme, viewed by millions. After searching for “Alex from Target,” we streamed Ellen DeGeneres’ interview of him. While no one could explain the attraction to Alex, we were able to witness his 15 minutes of fame. While a photographic meme, “Alex from Target” displays all of the qualities of streaming culture (defined below).

Then came Danielle Bregoli, at the time known as “Cash Me Outside Girl” to my students, in 2016. I’d never heard of her, but they encouraged me to look her up. We watched as a class as Bregoli berated Dr. Phil’s studio audience to “cash” her outside. Her taunting was universally streamed by my students before I ever heard of her. The out-of-control teen had millions of people mocking her worldwide—note: cyber-bullying is part of streaming culture. Now in 2020, Bregoli is a rapper by the stage name of Bhad Bhabie. Streaming culture allows Bregoli to “cash in” on “cash me outside.” People stream her music on Spotify, videos on YouTube, remix her songs on TikTok, and watch her reality TV show on Snapchat. We don’t know if people listen to her raps because they think she’s the jam or to mock her. The fact is, it doesn’t matter which one is the case because Atlantic Records, Warner Brothers Music Group, and Bhad Bhabie cash in on hundreds of millions of streams across digital platforms regardless.

Of course, none of this is surprising. YouTube has been a part of my own cultural imaginary since I worked on my Master’s. From bandmates uploading videos of themselves playing guitar to friends sending me videos like “Evolution of Dance.” YouTube has been both a site of “sharing” (a term wildly popularized in digital culture, discussed in Chapter 2) and production. Perhaps I didn’t think of YouTube as a type of popular culture because it always stood as a place for

consuming other types of popular culture. It is a site of participatory culture— “in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content.”¹ Thinking in terms of participatory culture, YouTube seems like just another way for users to share videos. But with the world of vloggers (i.e. video bloggers), comedians, musicians, skaters, and filmmakers who all produce content specifically for YouTube, clearly, YouTube is a type of popular culture.

The cultural world is at our fingertips. Much like my experiences in my Introduction to Popular Culture class, I increasingly find myself looking up obscure pop culture references. Not only can I find answers to my inquiries online, but I can view the content! This is a massive change from the early Internet when it took time for people to write about their cultural obsessions on the web and for others to find them. Over time, the content available has snowballed as people move from one obsession to the next and their content remains available, potentially forever. As a result, now you can find a wiki, blog, or website on just about everything.

A wiki is a website that allows users to edit content collaboratively. Wikis enable users to update content on a given subject. While many have claimed that the Internet brings democracy, wiki technology provides one of the few examples of a democratized web.² They allow collectives of people to act like hive minds. If one person creates a website, the content will be limited, but through wikis, anyone who knows something or has a thought about a subject can edit the content. While Wikipedia is the most notorious wiki where people update encyclopedic information about everything, wikis are available in any number of forms from Genius (a lyrics database that allows users to comment and interpret lyrics) to WikiHow (a how-to database where users upload videos and instructions on different tasks).

Blogs, on the other hand, are regularly updated websites that list their content in order with the most recent at the top of the page.³ Anyone can create a webpage using a blog platform without any idea how to code, which makes this platform widely accessible. Popular blog platforms include Wordpress and Blogger, which are designed for the amateur blogger. The explosion of blogs and wikis enables anyone to upload content to the web—in many instances, content only the uploaders find interesting. While this means the world of information is at our fingertips, it also can have distinct effects on culture.

In summer 2019, my wife and I began binge-watching *Game of Thrones* (I cover binge-watching extensively in Chapter 5). We were terribly late to the show and neither of us read the books by George R.R. Martin. As we watched, I felt completely lost about places and people in the show. However, I could easily search the Internet for a topic and read multiple *Game of Thrones* wikis, which explain all types of relationships and histories of the story-line. Unfortunately, there is a downside. As I found myself looking up details that I didn't fully understand, I also saw spoilers. All of the information at my fingertips also means ALL of the information without chronological considerations. Streaming enables us to watch a television series like one really long movie, but it also has the potential of spoiling the ending and details.

None of this was available in the 1990s. In 1995, Windows 95 changed the way we interact with computers by simplifying a computer's operating system interface. However, most people logged on the Internet using a 28.8 kbps modem, usually through an Internet Service Provider (ISP) such as AOL or Prodigy. The ISP played an outsized role connecting users to information before the widespread use of independent web browsers (ex. Netscape Navigator). The early Internet did not work well for multimedia content. I recall clicking on

webpages (that were difficult to navigate) and waiting for images to load. Sometimes people had too much fun with their websites and had fireworks or cascading stars on entry—this slowed down the page exponentially. It's hard to imagine now, but it was really difficult to find what you were looking for on the web and if you were lucky enough to find something, you had to wait forever to view it. Streaming video was next to impossible in the 1990s. Yahoo seemed revolutionary to me in both its search and cataloging functionality. But finding information remained difficult until I discovered Google.

If *Game of Thrones* was around in 1995, my experience would have been entirely different. First, if I did not watch it from the beginning, I would have had to wait to purchase (or rent) the VHS tapes. The entire series would take up a shelf on a bookcase. If I missed an episode in the original broadcast, I would have been out-of-luck. There is a chance that I could have made up random episodes through reruns, but even that would mean watching the episodes out of order. Second, when we started watching the tapes, I would have been unable to bring myself up to speed on the details of the show. On the outside chance that I found an obsessive fan who documented the characters, places and histories of Westeros (the fictional land the story takes place), I would have had a difficult time loading the pages. Finally, while I am not a member of any *Game of Thrones* groups, I know that today I could become part of a virtual community of fans. In 1995, I would have been on my own with no easy way to build community around the show.

From Blogger to YouTube and Amazon Prime to Netflix, these platforms changed the way we consume culture and the cultures that arise alongside platforms. The point of this book isn't to provide a normative value judgement about streaming services, but rather, to demonstrate how things changed and

infer the consequences of these changes. Streaming is part of our everyday lives, and that isn't likely to change anytime soon. We must begin to interrogate streaming culture. How does streaming change our lives? What is streaming culture? What is different between streaming culture and downloading culture or analog culture? Why does streaming culture matter? As this book suggests, streaming culture matters because it fundamentally transforms the way we consume culture and the fundamental structure of capitalism.

CULTURE

Culture is an ambiguous term that suffers from its ubiquity. In this book, I use a "Cultural Studies" approach to the term. In that sense, culture is the process through which people make symbolic meaning out of everyday things.⁴ We make meaning through a shared understanding of symbols. These symbols can be words, signs, or objects. We interpret these symbols individually and collectively. Symbols come to possess meaning only because we exist within communities. In more traditional senses of the term culture, these communities are cultures. I shy away from labelling communities as cultures because of the emphasis on process in my definition and to productively distinguish terminology. Through our interactions with other people, our understanding of a given symbol can change over time and in a specific context. The communities themselves remain fluid. As a member of one community, I may see something one way, but as a member of a parallel community, I may be able to see it a different way. We have no direct control over the changing meanings of symbols. Culture is not static, and as we interact with others, meanings change.

Furthermore, as literary theorist Raymond Williams states: “Culture is ordinary.”⁵ We do not need to go to a special place (museum, concert hall, theater, etc.) to experience culture. Culture is everywhere in our everyday lives. This declaration that culture is ordinary distinguishes it from the notion of “high” culture. A classical conception of culture is that it must be learned. Thinking about culture as learned means that only the wealthy have access to it—to be cultured. People need a special education to appreciate opera or abstract art. But if culture is ordinary, it is part of our everyday lives. In the role that different cultural objects play in our lives, no difference exists between opera and someone playing a guitar around a campfire, Picasso and graffiti, or Shakespeare and HowToBasic. It may seem that the first term in each pairing in the previous sentence is qualitatively better than the second term, but this is a social judgment not devoid of race, class, and gender inflections. And only time will tell if the creator of HowToBasic becomes as canonical as William Shakespeare, both creators produce boisterous comedy of their respective time period. The point is that these cultural artifacts help us to make meaning out of the world around us, and everyone has access to it.

Some cultural theorists popularized the concept of the circuit of culture.⁶ The idea is that there is a constant relationship between cultural consumption, production, representation, identity, and regulation. These unique sites of culture happen together without us thinking much about them. When a television writer works on a script, their identity influences how they construct representations and how they perceive audiences will consume their product. At the same time, the available technologies, dominant media, and policies on content change what the writer will produce. For instance, a television producer may want to produce a show in 4k Ultra HD. However, they come to find out that most of

their audience members continue to use regular HD. As a result, they shoot the show in regular HD. After a few years, imagine that there is a huge move to 4k Ultra, but the show cannot be reshot. On the one hand, the technology of what people use to consume the television show affects the way that the show exists in the world. On the other hand, the decisions about the technology to use reflects underlying social conditions. Streaming culture interfaces with each part of the circuit of culture to change the way we interact with media.

The production and consumption of cultural messages are always complex and disputed. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall described the process of encoding/decoding popular culture messages.⁷ While the processes remain discreet, they never occur independently from each other. As symbols bounce through the circuit, the dominant cultural order tends to have a determining power over the decoded message in the end.⁸ An example that I always give my students comes from the 2012 American presidential election. A journalist asked Ann Romney (GOP candidate Mitt Romney's wife) her favorite television show. She responded *Modern Family*⁹—a sitcom that emphasized non-normative familial situations. In response, one of the show's creators tweeted "We'll offer her the role of officiant at Mitch & Cam's wedding. As soon as its legal."¹⁰ The punch line is that creators designed *Modern Family* to critique the very so-called "traditional" values that Romney espouses. However, the dominant reading of *Modern Family* allows people to believe that these non-normative values are funny, not serious. As a result, and according to one reading, the creators of *Modern Family* actually reinforce conceptions of a "traditional" family. Of course, the message can be decoded differently; for instance, to normalize same-sex relationships as well as intergenerational and cross-cultural unions. Cultural texts, no matter how transgressive, operate within a dominant cultural context, while never losing the