

Column Our film and video history is threatened by the rise of streaming video



Princess Leia 1.0: Misa Uehara as Princess Yuki in "The Hidden Fortress" (Akira Kurosawa, 1958), which heavily influenced "Star Wars." But you can't stream it on Netflix. (Criterion Collection)



By **Michael Hiltzik**

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There isn't much not to like about streaming video. Subscribe to Netflix or Amazon Prime, and you can choose from thousands of film and TV titles with the press of a button. No VHS tapes to get chewed up by a tape player, no DVDs to clutter the living room or collect dust and scratches. Whole seasons of TV series ready for binge viewing for fans with the addictive habits of chain smokers. This is entertainment technology at its best.

Or is it? Film historians and film buffs would beg to differ. For them, the rapidity with which streaming has supplanted discs and tape as a viewing mode is a bug, not a feature. As the mass audience gravitates toward the big streaming services, those services have more incentive to focus their streaming inventory on recent and self-produced titles.

“That crowds out older films,” says David Bordwell, a film historian at the University of Wisconsin. “They’re going to have less and less motive to highlight the classics in their catalogs.” That threatens the economics of film history. “How many restorations of old films will there be?” he asks. “How many foreign titles?”

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— Charles Tabesh, head of programming at Turner Classic Movies and FilmStruck

For classic film buffs, the golden age may have been the 1980s, when the rapid spread of VHS tape players awoke major studios to the commercial potential of marketing their back catalogs for home viewing. The trend continued through the DVD era — Warner Bros., Universal, and Disney were especially notable preservers and marketers of their archives — but it may be fading as physical discs fall out of favor.

Netflix currently offers more than 4,700 film and TV titles for streaming. But only 19 were released prior to 1950, according to the search website justwatch.com. Netflix does include a “classics” genre among its inventory, but its definition is loose enough to encompass the 1970s features “Jaws” and “Grease” as well as the 1927 Fritz Lang silent masterpiece “Metropolis.”

As the big streaming services increasingly define themselves as purveyors of mass market fare, the way that many movie buffs first discovered the glories of cinema history — through serendipity — is evaporating. Several services have sprung up online to serve the classic film buff audience, but they have to be sought out by those with a preexisting interest in the field — and they each require a separate subscription.

“We’re in an interesting moment when it’s never been cooler to be interested in classic movies,” says Nora Fiore, who blogs about classic film as the [Nitrate Diva](#). “Directors and screenwriters like [Edgar Wright](#) and [Quentin Tarantino](#) love to talk about the movies that influenced them. But it’s very hard for people to see those movies the way they did. ‘Star Wars’ is having another moment, but how many people have seen ‘The Hidden Fortress,’ the Akira Kurosawa film that was its inspiration?” (Netflix has “The Hidden Fortress,” but only on its DVD service, which is separate from its streaming subscription.)

Concerns about the decline of physical distribution of film and video fall into two categories: technical and commercial.

It’s true that cultural artifacts from other art forms have been lost over the millennia. Dozens, if not hundreds, of works J.S. Bach is known to have composed have disappeared. Great buildings have been demolished. Classic paintings and sculptures have been destroyed by fire or war, [stolen from museums](#), or transferred to private collections and out of public view.

But film and video may be uniquely vulnerable to the eradication of memory. In part that's because the physical media they were originally recorded on — film stock and magnetic tape — were so fragile. But it may also happen because movies and television programs were from their inception conceived chiefly as commercial products. As a result, they were treated as expendable as soon as their commercial value disappeared. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences [estimated in a 2007 report](#) that fewer than half the feature films made before 1950 and fewer than 20% of those made in the 1920s survive today.

Singer and actress Edie Adams [testified in 1996](#) at the Library of Congress about her efforts to preserve tapes made by her husband, the pioneering TV comic Ernie Kovacs, which were being taped over for news and weather reports. When a dispute arose in the early 1970s over the disposition of the archive of the Dumont network, which failed in 1956 after producing such TV landmarks as Jackie Gleason's original "Honeymooners" sketches, the kinescopes were loaded onto a barge and dumped into New York harbor.

Each technological transition seems to leave more history behind. Film historians say there were fewer classic films available on VHS tape than on 35- and 16-mm film, and fewer still on DVD and a yet smaller selection on Blu-ray discs. At first glance it might seem that digital storage would be a more reliable and perhaps cheaper archival technology than film and magnetic tape — after all, what can go wrong in just storing digital bits and bytes? The answer is: plenty. Digital assets are subject to degradation from "heat, humidity, static electricity, and electromagnetic fields," the 2007 academy report warned.

"You have to monitor digital assets constantly to make sure the files haven't been corrupted," says Jan-Christopher Horak, director of the UCLA Film and Television Archive. They also have to be periodically migrated to new formats, because they can be illegible to new generations of read-and-write technology. (NASA discovered this flaw in 1999, when it was unable to review data from the Viking spacecraft dated in 1975 because all the programmers familiar with the original format had retired or died.)

About 99% of UCLA's roughly half-million titles are archived on analog media — 35- or 16-mm film or videotape — Horak says. Estimates for the creation of a digital asset management system run from \$1.2 million and up, Horak told me. "That's a huge expense for a public archive."

The increasing focus of major streaming services on recent fare has left the field open for niche services. [Mubi](#), a 10-year-old, \$5.99 per month service that now claims 100,000 members, adds one film a day to its streaming inventory of foreign, independent, and art-house fare, and leaves it up for 30 days. [Fandor](#) (\$4.99 a month), a film buff site partially funded by the studio Lionsgate, offers an inventory of 5,000 streamed films with a focus on independent and foreign titles. The service says its speciality focus allows it to acquire films "the big players don't think it's worth their investing in," says Gail Gendler, Fandor's head of programming.

The gold standard classic film channel for historians and film buffs is Turner Classic Movies, a cable channel that also operates the streaming service [FilmStruck](#) — which is now the exclusive streaming distributor for the Criterion Collection, the premier classic film library (from which one can stream "The Hidden Fortress"). A combined [FilmStruck/Criterion](#) subscription costs \$10.99 a month.

“There’s a frustration among classic movie fans that Netflix, Amazon and Hulu give you a smattering of classics, but they’re not robust in that way,” says Charles Tabesh, the head of programming for TCM and FilmStruck. “TCM is kind of the only game in town.” About 150 of TCM’s classic titles are available for streaming on FilmStruck, with plans to more than double that next year — in addition to the service’s independent, foreign, and Criterion offerings.

What worries film aficionados is that the rise of mass-market streaming will sap coming generations of their interest in classic films, which will in turn discourage those services and the studios themselves from continuing to invest in their century-old patrimony.

“Kids today are exposed to so much that they think that everything’s out there,” says Bordwell. “There’s a sense of super-abundance, but there are lots of important films that are not available, including silent films that are impossible to see unless you go to a film archive and watch them on a flatbed moviola.”

Tabesh, for one, thinks it’s possible that digital storage and streaming will be the savior of film history, not its nemesis. “There are a lot of films that have never been available at all, even on DVD or home video, because there hasn’t been a market for them,” he told me. “If anything, digital might make some of these more available to people. There are collectors of DVDs who will feel more safe owning the hard good. But over time, I think the convenience of digital will win out.”

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