

Fandor at the Film Fan's Door

By Rob Nelson
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Run by and for cinephiles, subscription site offers a wide world for adventuresome streamers.



As no single service comes close to offering all that a VOD devotee desires, many streamers prefer to play the field — as much as funds and free time allow, anyway.

At \$8 per month, Netflix's intro-level streaming plan remains a steal, but the identically priced Hulu Plus has its supporters, too, particularly among those who value TV shows more than features. Then, for new releases and catalog titles ordered a la carte, there's Amazon Instant Video or iTunes. (Other networks providing much the same pay-per-view content include Vudu, Blockbuster on Demand and the new Target Ticket.)

Give or take the vintage Hollywood films on Warner Archive Instant, that shortlist covers the vast majority of mainstream fare. But what about the wild world of VOD esoterica? Of the many free and subscription-based outfits touting cult films, little-seen festival indies and other obscurities (including public domain titles of sketchy audiovisual quality), the standout by far is Fandor, available through a Web browser, iPad/iPhone or Roku device at \$4.99 per month, and very much worth it, especially for adventurous streamers. (Two-week trialsubscriptions are available.)

Billed as a "curated online service," one that boasts more than 5,000 shorts and features from around the globe, the classy Fandor turns over half its revenues to the filmmakers whose work is featured — an indication, among many, of its rare goodwill toward artists and audience alike.

That the San Francisco-based company recently hired American indie stalwart Ted Hope as its CEO bodes well for the future, although its current state seems nothing short of phenomenal, with the films slotted into 28 categories, each filterable by year, running time, subgenre and country of origin.

Lumieres, Turk horror, more

Where to begin? Best, perhaps, at the beginning. The pioneering Lumiere brothers are well represented with three dozen “actualities” including **“Workers Leaving the Factory”** (1895), the first film screened for an audience, and **“Arrival of a Train”** (1897), the latter having inspired the myth of viewers cowering before the image of an oncoming locomotive.

In other words, Fandor is film history, but not only of the canonical variety. “The Exorcist” may be a ’70s horror classic, ubiquitous online, but Fandor has **“Seytan,”** its fabulously grotesque Turkish ripoff.

In place of “Superfly” and “Shaft,” the network offers 1973’s **“The Bad Bunch”** (aka “Tom”), a fascinatingly conflicted view of Vietnam War-era race relations not even author Darius James found room to mention in his encyclopedic “That’s Blaxploitation!” Documentaries include everything from 1965’s worshipful **“The Eleanor Roosevelt Story”** to Cuban anti-capitalist Santiago Alvarez’s **“LBJ”** (1968), a film whose few viewers all became avant-garde cinema muckrakers, or so the legend goes. Among Fandor’s “Propaganda” subset of docs is MGM’s notoriously fraudulent **“California Election News”** (1934), wherein studio bit players impersonate ordinary Joes disparaging author Upton Sinclair, whose ideas of socialist reform had won him a Democratic nomination for California governor — along with enemies in high places.

Scarce to nonexistent on other VOD networks, animated shorts number in the hundreds on Fandor, where the category is subdivided into the likes of “Claymation,” “Cel/Hand-Drawn,” “CGI” and “Stop-Motion/Puppetry.” The last of these clickable groupings includes seven shorts by Czech surrealist Jan Svankmajer (“Alice”) and five from the Brothers Quay, whose **“Nocturna Artificialia”** (1979), their earliest surviving film, is offered in high-definition.

Half-animated but nearly defying categorization is **“An Oversimplification of Her Beauty”** (2013), writer/director Terence Nance’s brilliantly verbose and breathtakingly innovative look at the topsyturvy sex life of a neurotic young New Yorker played by the filmmaker himself. Fandor slots the movie in “Romantic Drama,” but it’s more representative of the high standards by which this connoisseur’s network adopts new work to sit beside the old.