MEDIA FIELDS
JOURNAL

A Film Walks Onto the Internet:
Digital Distribution's Identity Crisis

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The exact start date of online film distribution is difficult to identify with certainty, but at least one movie claims to have actively led cinema's migration to the Internet. On 11 March 2011, director Sebastian Gutierrez's film *Girl Walks Into a Bar* (US) was released as a free streaming video on YouTube, the same night it played at the South by Southwest Film Festival.[1] While the independent film market is no stranger to unusual release patterns, the producers of *Girl Walks* ignored usual distribution windows in favor of free availability supported by a single-sponsor (Lexus), and they had no subsequent plans for a theatrical run.[2] Moreover, the film was conceived with this online context in mind; a September 2010 press release announced the film as the "first major motion picture created exclusively for web distribution," a tagline that, with slight variations, persisted throughout its promotion and release.[3]

But what exactly does it mean to be the first major motion picture created exclusively for the internet? As a piece of ad speak this is both ambiguous and telling. Exclusivity narrows the field of contenders to debuts and first-runs rather than online aftermarkets or even simultaneous multi-platform releases. "First" is an attempt to plant a flag in film history, and it also signals an audience-attracting novelty factor. The veracity of the claim to being first is immediately suspect, however—this claim is notable for what it casts aside: the online films that presumably do not count. Only months prior, in January 2011, the crowdsourced documentary *Life in a Day* (dir. Kevin Macdonald, et al, US and UK)[4] premiered at the Sundance Film Festival with a simultaneous YouTube live stream, although its wide release did not technically arrive until after *Girl Walks*.[5] And long before 2011, online video had already reached feature length and impressive scope in independent productions like *Star Wreck: in the Pirkinning* (dir. Timo Vuorensola, Finland, 2005)[6] or *Four Eyed Monsters* (dir. Susan Buice and Arin Crumley, US, 2005),[7] to name just two.

The core of this tagline would then seem to be its "major motion picture" status; perhaps these other films simply weren't major enough in this campaign's estimation." "Feature film" would imply a set duration,[8] but major motion picture resonates with decades of

movie promotion history while remaining too vague in its implications to be proven or disproven. "Major motion picture" asserts event status and exists entirely as a value judgment, a mark of distinction with an opaque referent. If being the absolute first is too difficult to prove, a film online can still try to establish significance in ways difficult to disprove—such as claiming to be the most cinematic.

In his book *On-Demand Culture*, Chuck Tryon argues that new distribution models "have altered not only the economics of the film industry but also the perceived value of the movies themselves."[9] In this essay, I will use *Girl Walks* as an entry point for examining the second half of that claim, the less tangible valuations and battles of status encountered in digital distribution. By embracing a single-sponsor/free release model, *Girl Walks* downplays traditional economic concerns and instead allows a focus on the semantic stakes, the visible effort to remain "major" and the uncertainty of pursuing web distribution without wishing to cede any of the special status that comes with being a film rather than more typical web content. Considering digital distribution in this light reaffirms that this is not just a question of reconfiguring business models, but also a question of status. The potential gains and losses in this transition, beyond the financial, pertain to film's previously privileged reputation in media hierarchies and our collective ability to readily discern among media forms.

Official Trailer for *Girl Walks Into a Bar* (Sebastian Gutierrez, US, 2011)

Girl Walks Into a Bar . . .

Despite the tagline's reminder that this is, in fact, a film, much of *Girl Walks* is actually well designed for its online viewing context. The film is a series of episodic encounters, short scenes between a few characters at a time, with storylines only converging later on. It is also heavy on dialogue and low on action, making it a good fit for the very small screen. On YouTube, the film could be viewed continuously or broken into eight separate videos (aligning with scene breaks) to ease loading times and to make the eighty minute runtime

seem less daunting on a platform known for quick clips. Again demonstrating a desire to uphold *Girl Walks*'s status as a feature film, director Gutierrez, for his part, has stated that he would prefer people watch it "as a movie (rather) than as a playlist."[10]

Girl Walks seems to bear the mark of its distribution conspicuously in at least one scene: a visit to a nudist ping-pong club where all actual nudity is obscured by black censor bars.[11] This visual joke could register regardless of screening context, but it takes on special resonance as a potential nod to the YouTube rules of content and conduct. It functions as a knowing reference to the movie's in-between status: here is an elaborate set piece the likes of which we would not usually see in online video, and yet we can't really see it. Indeed, user comments on this video segment suggested that many viewers perceived this as actual censorship on the website's part rather than an active design of the filmmaker.

But in other ways the film seeks to avoid fitting in too well with its digital surroundings. Even with the optional chapter breaks, the film is feature length, and therefore it has a more sustained narrative than was (and is) common for YouTube videos. The production values are also notably polished, as *Girl Walks* is filmed in HD digital and edited to professional standards. Gutierrez has said in interviews that he was concerned from the outset with making it very clear that *Girl Walks* was still a "proper movie with dolly shots and steady cam shots and a plot and good actors and production design and production value."[12]

Perhaps most significantly, *Girl Walks* also clearly advertises its Hollywood credentials and celebrity participation. The film is in part "major" simply because it announces itself as such, with a press release and the involvement of production company Shangri-La Entertainment to help verify its pedigree. Celebrity as an exploitable element also goes a long way in setting this film apart from its user-generated surroundings. The sprawling ensemble cast featured recognizable faces like Carla Gugino, Rosario Dawson, and Danny DeVito, whose participation served as a tacit endorsement of this new hybrid film project as well as a continual visual reminder for audiences that this was the work of professionals. If *Girl Walks* was trying to be the first of a kind, then part of the battle was not only attracting an audience but also making sure the film was high profile enough to appear anomalous—that no one would mistake this movie for just another video.

Figure 1. A promotional post from the *Girl Walks Into a Bar* Facebook page. Several cast members filmed short "vlog" style endorsements for the film in another effort to make the film online-friendly while still using celebrity as a promotional tool.[13]

When is a Film not a Film?

While the particulars of *Girl Walks* help explain some of its approach to making internet-ready cinema, much of the "major motion picture" distinction is actually external to the film itself. Distribution channels have often been popularly linked to assumptions about the form and quality of certain media. In this way, one of the biggest concerns over digital distribution is in fact a carryover from past forms—one need only look to the perennial TV versus movies rivalry,[14] the presumed inferior status of the direct-to-video market, or the connotation of arthouse theaters as opposed to the multiplex to recognize that media has often been defined by its venue and interested in disavowing its others.[15] Some of these reputations are a result of industrial categories, while others gained significance through more informal audience knowledge. But regardless of origin, entries into the media marketplace have had to contend with these assumptions and self-define accordingly.

While some critics have argued that traditional media labels are already largely outdated in a digital environment,[16] media industries appear reluctant to surrender certain categories so easily. The preemptive strike of *Girl Walks*'s tagline is a further indication that industries have an active interest in maintaining and policing the taste divisions linked to distribution. Premiering film content online could be perceived as ceding ground, and it risks losing

whatever special advantage film still holds over its competition. It is in this context that "major motion picture" stops functioning as boilerplate ad lingo and takes on larger significance as well as a note of defiance. The challenge of embracing the presumed future of media distribution while still holding onto the prominence of the cinema is revealed to be not only a question of maintaining quality, but something further reinforced through discourse—labels and signifiers of professionalism that might be soon be approaching their sell-by date.

This contemporary concern over distinguishing among forms is not unique to film, but it does have particular resonance here. As Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson have pointed out, a large percentage of conversations about digital distribution have focused on television, while film has remained comparatively "less adaptive."[17] Other scholars have furthered this divide by generally framing digital content with the language of television—original series, web TV, indie TV, and so on.[18] Film, on the other hand, is still a less certain presence online even in 2015, at least for exclusive/original content - which is part of why *Girl Walks*'s tagline is hard to dismiss entirely. The year 2011 seems late to be claiming firsts in digital distribution, but it is genuinely difficult to determine milestones when the process has been spread across so many platforms and obscured by competing, still-evolving vocabulary. One side effect of film's more tentative approach to digital distribution is that the popular terms often don't quite seem to fit. Even once business models have been determined, movies then have to find their niche and stand their ground in a rhetorical field where the terms have largely been defined around other media.

For cinema in particular, digital distribution continues a move to media viewing in domestic spaces, which removes the "going" from "moviegoing" and risks turning film into an object of inconspicuous consumption. Worse still from an industry standpoint is the possibility of eliminating all difference, of online distribution rendering professionally produced media suddenly indistinguishable among a sea of web content. If all entertainment media were delivered from the same source, the question of how to leverage difference to attract audiences would become even more vexing.[19] The risk here is not just a financial one, but also a question of branding and loyalty for the movies as a concept as much as for individual titles. Movies still require a theatrical run to qualify for Academy Award consideration, but whether either of these markers still holds any particular meaning for audiences who have since embraced a multitude of viewing options is an open-ended question. We know that audiences can view movies in different ways now, but does that also mean that we see them differently?

Figure 2. In another promotional post from the film's official Facebook page, *Girl Walks Into A Bar* is used to start a conversation about distribution and the future of film, quite directly in this case.[20]

Stop Me if You've Heard this One Before

Given recent developments in video-on-demand and day-and-date releasing, the release plan for *Girl Walks Into a Bar* now seems less strange but still forward-looking. In 2015, independent films frequently stream online before, during, after, or even in lieu of a theatrical run. However, the anxiety over media classifications and properly standing out in the online market remains the most prescient element of *Girl Walks*'s release and its accompanying extratextual concerns. At that relatively early stage, the battle lines were already drawn – and the fight is, then and now, one of reputation.

While movies and original series can now be found online in a number of genres, forms, and platforms, the unifying element among these is frequently the agreed upon necessity of establishing "major" status. Online distribution is invested not only in standing out from the competition, but in doing so by specifically drawing on the reputation of past forms, thereby asserting legitimacy by association with the film and television models that are purportedly being left behind. The October 2014 announcement of Adam Sandler's four-picture deal with Netflix made headlines as a bold entry into film production for the company despite the fact that their own, lower-profile Red Envelope Productions, an indie film financier and distributor, already came and went years prior.[21] Perennial box-office draw Sandler skipping the big screen is considered inherently more newsworthy than independents that would likely have found most of their audience in ancillary markets anyway—a logic that is not lost on Netflix and other emerging distributors. Similarly, press surrounding the Emmys for the past few years has often pointed to online programming as the next big frontier. It is already all but taken for granted that online series can still be referred to as TV shows despite the growing distance from actual televisions,[22] but for a web series to win a major television award is a potential breakthrough, ostensibly leveling any doubt as to whether online content is on par with television proper.[23]

The underlying logic in examples like these is that one of the most effective ways for digitally distributed media to stand out is to resemble TV and movies as much as possible, and that these previous modes are still the standard by which success is measured. It remains to be seen whether this middle ground is just a characteristic of industries in transition, a means of easing viewers into new environs by maintaining familiarity, or a sign that certain dominant forms, vocabulary, and promotional tactics will continue to replicate even in an online context. For the time being, companies producing original content for the internet are still waging the war of respectability, pointedly maintaining select ties to old forms in order to turn heads and guide expectations. And in the race to push media forward, it seems that the most stable status symbols are currently found by reaching backward.

Notes

1 "Shangri-La Entertainment," YouTube, 2 March 2011, https://www.youtube.com/user/ShangrilaEnt. As of February 2015, Gutierrez's film and a few promotional videos were still the only content on the YouTube channel for Shangri-La Entertainment. Sometime between February 2015 and the publication of this article, the distribution window seems to have since closed, as the original free videos on the Shangri-La account have been disabled (but not deleted—thumbnail images and links remain).

2 This would make *Girl Walks*, at its release, what Elissa Nelson has termed FVOD/AVOD, or Free/Advertising Video on Demand. Elissa Nelson, "Windows into the Digital World: Distributor Strategies and Consumer Choice in an Era of Connected Viewing," *Connected Viewing: Selling, Sharing, and Streaming Media in the Digital Era*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson (New York: Routledge, 2014) 62–78. *Girl Walks* was eventually released to DVD and other online platforms. As of 2015, the FVOD window has closed, and YouTube now charges for VOD rental of the film.

3 Shangri-La Entertaiment, "Shangri-La Entertainment Announces a Gato Negro Film, 'Girl Walks Into a Bar,'" *PR Newswire*, 22 September 2010, www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/shangri-la-entertainment-announces-a-gato-negro-film-girl-walks-into-a-bar-103520559.html. The main variation in this tagline was substituting the word "Internet" for "web distribution" in later promotions.

4 *Life* was extensively promoted as a collaborative filmmaking experiment, so there are many co-directors credited alongside Macdonald. The initial call for participants can still be found online. "Life in a Day," *Official Google Blog*, 6 July 2010, googleblog.blogspot.com/2010/07/life-in-day.html.

5 *Life*'s 27 January 2011 premiere was a one-time screening, while the general, online release followed in July of that year. *Girl Walks* entered general release before *Life*, then, and had online exclusivity in mind. For a discussion of *Life* and its role in trying to "democratize" film festivals, see Chuck Tryon, "Reinventing Festivals: Curation, Distribution, and the Creation of Global Cinephilia," *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2013) 155–72. Tryon also points out that SXSW had already experimented with simultaneous VOD screenings in 2010, the year before *Girl Walks*, although this was in partnership with the Independent Film Channel and official cable providers' VOD platforms rather than taking advantage of the relative freedom of YouTube.

6 This itself is billed on the official website with the more modifier-laden "one of the first feature-length quality special-effects films ever to be released online for free". "Introduction," *Star Wreck: In the Pirkinning*, accessed 20 February 2015, www.starwreck.com/introduction.php.

7 *Four Eyed Monsters* was another early feature film on YouTube, although the actual timeline is complex due to the film's many component parts and multi-platform releasing. Susan Buice and Arin Crumley, *Four Eyed Monsters*, accessed 20 February 2015, foureyedmonsters.com. Geoff King, "Industry 2.0: the Digital Domain and Beyond," in *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2014), 77–121.

8 A recent editorial on how we might measure film/TV/internet divides indicated that definitions of feature length vary according to different guilds and film organizations, but that 80 minutes is a commonly cited standard. Devin Faraci, "What are 'the Movies' Anyway?" *Badass Digest*, 8 February 2015, badassdigest.com/2015/02/08/what-are-the-movies-anyway/.

9 Tryon, *On-Demand Culture,* 18.

10 Liz Shannon Miller, "Will *Girl Walks Into a Bar* lead Indie Films to the Web?" *GigaOM*, 12 March 2011, gigaom.com/2011/03/12/girl-walks-into-a-bar-youtube/.

11 This scene is the sixth of eight in the segmented version of the film.

12 Lance Carter, "SXSW Interview: Director Sebastian Gutierrez talks about his new films 'Electra Luxx' and 'Girl Walks Into a Bar' (the 1st Internet movie!)," *Daily Actor*, 21 March 2011, www.dailyactor.com/2011/03/interview-director-sebastian-gutierrez-elektra-luxx-girl-walks-into-a-bar-internet-movie/.

13 "Girl Walks Into a Bar" Post, Facebook, last modified 1 March 2011, accessed 9 November 2015, https://www.facebook.com/girlwalksintoabar/. These vlogs are also currently offline along with the rest of the YouTube channel for Shangri-La Entertainment, but were in themselves an interesting hybrid - the filming style deliberately much closer to typical YouTube aesthetics.

14 Christopher Anderson, "Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television," *The Essential HBO Reader* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008) 23–41. Anderson discusses the immortal "It's not TV, it's HBO" slogan as a similar example of media fighting its own surroundings via semantic distinctions. Michele Hilmes also wrote a notable overview of the ways in which the legacy of television as subordinate to film has been replicated in academic hierarchies. Michele Hilmes, "The Bad Object: Television in the American Academy," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 1 (2005): 111–16.

15 This kind of competition manifests in ways too numerous to fully account for here. For a notable exploration on media forms responding to perceived threats by self-defining and positioning themselves against each other, see Paul Young, *The Cinema Dreams its Rivals: Media Fantasy Films from Radio to the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

16 Devin Faraci has succinctly claimed, "while the old borders have fallen we're still uselessly marking them on maps." Faraci, "What are 'the Movies'?".

17 Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson, "Introduction: Mapping Connections," *Connected Viewing*, 4–6.

18 A 2011 web posting by Aymar Jean Christian opens by proclaiming, "It's official: the web has gone the way of TV," a sentiment that is present in many of his Televisual.org writings, although he is not the only scholar to mobilize these terms or focus on this TV/internet relationship. See Christian, "Netflix and Original Programming: If they Build It, Will We Pay?," *Televisual*, 17 March 2011, tvisual.org/2011/03/17/netflix-and-original-programming-if-they-build-it-will-they-come/.

19 Henry Jenkins, "Introduction: 'Worship at the Altar of Convergence': A New Paradigm for Understanding Media Change," *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1–24. Jenkins has critiqued the "black box" theory that all media might converge into one distribution method, but it is still a worthwhile hypothetical considering that general audiences are increasingly watching television online or otherwise consuming media on whatever screen is handy. Even in 2006, Jenkins was already noting that old media was less at risk of complete obsolescence and would more likely see a change in "function and status" alongside new developments (14).

20 "Girl Walks Into a Bar" Post, Facebook, last modified 21 March 2011, accessed 9 November 2015, https://www.facebook.com/girlwalksintoabar/.

21 Emily Steel, "With Four New Adam Sandler Films Netflix Takes Aim at Theaters," *New York Times*, 2 October 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/10/02/business/media/with-four-new-adam-sandler-films-netflix-takes-aim-at-theaters.html; Anthony Kaufman, "Netflix Folds Red Envelope; Exits Theatrical Acquisition and Production Biz," *Indiewire*, 23 July 2008, www.indiewire.com/article/netflix_folds_red_envelope_exits_theatrical_acquisition_and_production_biz.

22 The holdover of "TV show" as the popular term could be for many reasons—serial narratives have long been linked to television, basic formats for online series have so far generally resembled television precedents, and with the proper knowhow online media can in fact be streamed directly to television sets. But it is also possible that this continued link to television culture is a deliberate rhetorical move, again reinforcing the notion that these offerings are something other than strictly web content.

23 Ben Travers, "Why Netflix Being Shut Out at the Emmys is a Loss for Creators Everywhere", *Indiewire*, 26 August 2014, www.indiewire.com/article/why-netflix-being-shut-out-at-the-primetime-emmys-is-a-loss-for-creators-everywhere-20140826. This is one among many for Netflix/Emmys stories. Travers compares a potential win for a Netflix series to be a "glass ceiling in need of shattering."