

Amanda D. Lotz and Ramon Lobato (Eds.), **Streaming Video: Storytelling Across Borders**, New York: New York University Press, 2023, 362 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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The ascent of streaming video catalyzed a global transformation in production and consumption practices, leading to a marked increase in scholarly research exploring its multifaceted implications. In their book **Streaming Video: Storytelling Across Borders**, editors Amanda D. Lotz and Ramon Lobato aim to analyze how subscription video-on-demand services (SVODs) have impacted global production cultures. The book navigates these services' production strategies across markets and contests the notion of a uniform disruption. It explores how these services engage with, adapt, or challenge storytelling norms. Moving beyond conventional debates that pit global SVODs against local services, this collection highlights how different services complement each other, emphasizing their role in magnifying voices typically marginalized in mainstream media, fostering a renaissance of neglected genres and formats.



In the first chapter, “Why SVOD Commissions Matter,” Lotz sets the stage for the book’s core discussions by outlining the industry adaptations that differentiate SVODs from linear distribution. These changes include the creation of extensive content libraries, catering to specific global audiences, and the monetization of genres and formats that traditional industries might have found challenging. Notably, the chapter underscores the profound influence of technological advancements, prompting corresponding shifts in economic frameworks and production norms (p. 22). The chapter offers a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic shifts and transformations occurring in the storytelling landscape within the context of SVODs.

In the second chapter, “Conceptualizing the National and the Global in SVOD Original Production,” Lobato, Alexa Scarlata, and Stuart Cunningham distinguish between national and global SVODs, highlighting significant disparities in their programming strategies. While global services offer a wide range of titles, their content primarily reflects a U.S.-centric focus, often described as “a transnationalized American offering with an international-flavored seasoning” by Albornoz and Garcia Leiva (2022, p. 64). Consequently, these services contribute to a more cosmopolitan viewing experience. In contrast, national SVODs curate an extensive selection of local content, encompassing familiar genres and a substantial back catalog. Typically affiliated with traditional media conglomerates, these services demonstrate a nuanced comprehension of local audience preferences. Their deliberate emphasis on commissioning original content serves as a counterbalance to cultural imperialism and the influence of Americanization (p. 41). The authors posit that

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the seemingly discrete categories of global and national become interconnected, particularly in the realm of storytelling.

The next sixteen chapters cover various markets and provide insight into distinct issues. For instance, in chapter 4, "OTT Is Exactly What TV Is Not: Structural Adjustment and Shifts in Indian Scriptwriting," Ishita Tiwary explores the evolving norms of screenwriting in India. Similarly, Jennifer Kang, in chapter 10, "A New Style of K-Drama in Netflix Originals: Generic and Stylistic Experiments in Korean 'Genre Dramas'" examines how Netflix's distinct goals have facilitated the emergence of alternative narratives and storytelling styles that deviate from traditional Korean drama conventions. In chapter 16, "SVOD Original Film Commissioning: Expanding the Boundaries of Commercial Film?" Christopher Meir examines the disruptive impact of SVOD commissioning on the film industries of the United States and Europe, analyzing the commissioning and acquisition strategies employed by various SVODs.

Throughout the book, multiple threads are interwoven. The first is that SVODs affordances offer more creative latitude in content creation. Asli Ildir's chapter 5, "Challenging Cultural and Political Taboos: A Turkish SVOD's Experiments in Taboo Comedy," highlights how SVODs leverage their freedom from regulations to experiment with controversial subjects through humor. Additionally, Deborah Castro and Concepción Cascajosa's chapter 8, "Originals with a Spanish Flavor: Netflix's Cable Girls and the Reinvention of Broadcast TV Drama for Video-on-Demand Services," along with Godwin Simon's chapter 18, "iROKOTv Originals and the Construction of Gender Relations in Nollywood Family Films," both shed light on how SVODs' original content portrays contemporary perspectives on gender politics and narratives of female empowerment.

A central theme resonating throughout the chapters is the enduring association between television and the reinforcement of a nation's identity (Straubhaar, 2007). This theme is examined considering the specific challenges faced by SVODs in integrating a sense of national identity into their localized originals. Notably, Michael L. Wayne's chapter 3, "Place in Netflix Original Police Drama: Local Signifiers and Global Audiences," and Joaquín Serpe's chapter 6, "Argentina on Demand: Streaming Crisis, Gangsters, and Athletes," offer compelling insights into this subject. Of particular significance is the impact of prominent U.S.-based streaming services such as Netflix on this narrative. In chapter 7, "Girls from Ipanema and Netflix's Deviations from Brazilian Serial Storytelling Norms," Simone Maria Rocha and Livia Maia Arantes argue that *Coisa Mais Linda* (Girls from Ipanema; Cedroni & Roth, 2019–2020) breaks away from traditional Brazilian *telenovela* norms. However, they suggest that the show fails to offer a comprehensive portrayal of Brazilian culture, superficially addressing it without integrating cultural elements effectively into the narrative.

The culmination of this debate is in chapter 12, "Long Live the Rainbow Nation? How Showmax and Netflix Originals Narrate Cultural Diversity in South Africa," authored by Collen Chambwera, and chapter 13, "The Return of Indigenismo in Netflix Mexico," written by Juan Llamas-Rodríguez. Chambwera emphasizes a surprisingly deeper level of contextualization and recognition of South Africa's racial dynamics in Netflix productions as compared to those commissioned by Showmax, a domestic service. This discrepancy is attributed to the distinct target audiences sought by each service, with Netflix targeting a more international

and diasporic viewership, while Showmax focuses on a national and elite demographic. Conversely, Rodríguez critiques Netflix's Mexican originals for reproducing the national ideology of *indigenismo*—which celebrates the country's indigenous past while simultaneously excluding indigenous communities from active political participation—to “inject a local flair into narratives of global aspirations” (p. 229). Consequently, the commissioning of local narratives by U.S.-based streamers reveals the complexities inherent in balancing global comprehensibility with the authentic portrayal of local cultural heritage.

Considering the affordances of SVODs, specifically their ability to reach niche audiences across the globe (Lotz, 2022), the book highlights the fact that these services attribute value to genres and formats that were hitherto overlooked by the film and television industries. A compelling illustration of this phenomenon is the surge in teen dramas commissioned by SVODs across various key markets, as exemplified in the subsequent chapters: Fairouz Samy's chapter 9, “The Secret Life of the Jordanian Teenager: Netflix and Storytelling Opportunities in MENA”; Luca Barra's chapter 14, “Dark Narratives or Sunny Stories? Appropriating Global Teen Drama in Italian Netflix Originals”; and Anna Potter's chapter 15, “SVODs' Innovation in Children's Content.” These chapters shed light on the historically underserved audience aged 10–15 years within linear ecosystems. This emphasizes the unique monetization potential that SVODs bring to genres that have previously been marginalized, particularly by free-to-air television.

Moreover, the potential of SVODs to invigorate diverse genres is further accentuated in Lisa Lin's chapter 11, “A New Era of Creative Freedom: How Tencent Originals Are Reinvigorating Chinese Talk Shows.” Lin emphasizes how streaming talk shows deviate from the conventional neutral tone of broadcast shows, delving into contemporary societal conflicts in China. Additionally, in chapter 17, “To All the Romantic Comedies I've Loved Before: How Netflix Reinvigorated a Genre,” Alexa Scarlata highlights how streaming services have enabled the financial success of diverse movie genres, particularly romantic comedies, challenging the traditional theater window-driven model that prevailed before the rise of streaming (p. 309).

This collection is situated in a scholarly environment that prioritizes Anglophone markets and U.S.-based streamers, underscoring the necessity for a more comprehensive outlook that acknowledges the realities encountered in streaming video storytelling across varying countries. While adept at integrating viewpoints from diverse global markets, with valuable insights from several cultural and industrial backgrounds, the challenge of fully capturing such multifaceted contexts remains evident. Some chapters skillfully navigate the nuances of their respective domains, yet others only manage to scratch the surface, leaving readers somewhat detached from the essential contextual underpinnings. Nevertheless, the book's merit lies in its insightful analysis of those whose narratives are prioritized and how SVODs challenge traditional storytelling norms. By shedding light on this dynamic, the book prompts readers to contemplate the wide-ranging implications of this paradigm shift on a global scale, illuminating the transformative potential it holds for the creative landscape. Catering to both academic and general readers interested in streaming video, the work strives to ignite a robust global dialogue, fostering a more nuanced discussion about the profound consequences of this phenomenon.

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