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How Amazon Is Operating Like a 1970s Studio

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

By Brian Formo

It hasnâ??t officially happened yet, but with ***Manchester by the Sea*** primed to have many Oscar nominations (itâ??s looking like a lock for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Original Screenplay, and likely for Best Supporting Actor and Best Supporting Actress), prepare to see this sentence reported over and over: Amazon Studios beat Netflix in the race for a streaming service to receive Oscar nominations for Best Picture. But that statement actually bears little resemblance of the reality of the space that Amazon occupies as a film production and distribution company. Unlike Netflix, the film and television divisions of Amazon operate differently. While their TV originals are created to gain more subscribers, the film production is there for a streaming service. For films, Amazon Studios is a prestige-hunting studio and theyâ??re playing by the Hollywoodâ??s theatrical rules, not asking the industry to bend to their will like Netflix is.



If youâ??re a fan of auteurs and cringe at the state of the current studio system, you should be grateful for what Amazon is doing. They are filling theaters with films from some of our great indie directors who could not get studio support. By the time 2016 closes, Amazon will have released films from **Kenneth Lonergan** (*Manchester by the Sea*), **Whit Stillman** (*Love & Friendship*), **Park Chan-wook** (*The Handmaiden*), **Jim Jarmusch** (*Paterson* and *Gimme Danger*) and **Nicolas Winding Refn** (*The Neon Demon*). All of those films were acquired at film festivals, but after only existing for two calendar years (

Spike Leeâ??s ***Chi-Raq*** was the companyâ??s first dip into theatrical entertainment, released last December), Amazon is already stepping up to develop and distribute new films by **Todd Haynes** (*Carol*), **James Gray** (*The Immigrant*) and **Doug Liman** (*Edge of Tomorrow*) and theyâ??ve even entered the animation arena for a film based on the ***Emily the Strange*** series of books.



Park Chan-wookâ??s *The Handmaiden (*Photo via Amazon Studios/Magnolia Pictures)

The key to Amazonâ??s 2016 success is primarily banking on established directors, but the key to their awards success is that theyâ??ve fully embraced the theatrical experience. Unlike Netflix, which screens their original films in a few theaters the same day that they release the film online for any subscriber to watch, Amazon is playing the long game with their releases. Amazon has teamed with indie distributors like Bleeker Street and Roadside Attractions to co-distribute many of their 2016 titles and with *Manchester by the Sea*, ***Love & Friendship*** and **Woody Allen**â??s ***CafÃ© Society***, theyâ??ve even landed a few in the top 10 for box office receipts in a given week. We need to stop calling the film division of Amazon Studios a â??streaming serviceâ?• because it takes months for their films to land on Amazon Prime, the same way that most theatrical films take months to land on any streaming rental service. Sure, itâ??s free to subscribers at a certain point, but itâ??s after a title has carefully ran its course in theaters.

While Netflix has drawn the ire of theater owners by offering their films online at the same time theyâ??re putting titles in select theaters to be eligible for Oscars, Amazon hasnâ??t rocked the boat. Itâ??s clear that theyâ??re not trying to reinvent the distribution system, but instead they desire the prestige that comes from releasing acclaimed works.

Instead of trying to lead a revolution of providing home entertainment, Amazon is operating instead like a 1970s studio. Often considered the greatest era of Hollywood (and dubbed the â??Second Golden Ageâ?•), the 70s saw distributors like Paramount operate under a corporate conglomerate (Gulf + Western for Paramount) to earn cool points for that corporation by being associated with great works of art. As the heads of production at Paramount during that time, **Robert Evans** and **Richard Sylbert** ushered in ***The Godfather, Rosemaryâ??s Baby, Chinatown, Nashville*** and ***Days of Heaven*** and also brokered a deal to co-distribute films with Universal and MGM. Many of the films that were distributed by Paramount at the time did average at the box office, but they were nominated and won many awards, which put Gulf + Westernâ??s business types in close proximity with famous actors and directors while being celebrated for making cerebral works.



Nicolas Winding Refnâ??s *The Neon Demon* (Photo via Amazon Studios)

Of course, post-***Jaws*** and ***Star Wars*** the corporations and conglomerates no longer sought just prestige but also blockbuster returns. Priorities shifted and eventually you can see where film got to this current sequel and universe-obsessed point for the big studios. Most of the Hollywood studios have heads of production that come from the corporate world, not from the film world.

Amazonâ??s approach fits the 60s and 70s Paramount model not just because theyâ??ve aligned with co-distributors and are releasing prestigious films that make for an esteemed and commendable awards slate party, but also because Amazon Studiosâ?? **Roy Price** (Head of Amazon Studios) and **Jason Ropell** (Worldwide Head of Motion Pictures) have brought in two well-versed movie producers and distributors, **Ted Hope** and **Bob Berney**, as the head of production (Hope) and distribution/marketing (Berney).

Hope was one of the most prolific indie film producers of the 90s and early 2000s. His Good Machine production and sales company ushered in some of the biggest new auteurs at their earliest incubator stages, from **Hal Hartley**â??s ***Trust***, to Haynesâ?? ***Safe***, **Ang Lee**â??s ***The Ice Storm***, **Todd Solondz** â??s ***Happiness,*** **Alejandro GonzÃ¡lez IÃ±Ã¡rritu**â??s ***21 Grams*** and **Todd Fields**â?? ***In the Bedroom***. And Berney ran indie distributor Picturehouse when the (now shuttered) company released such distinguished titles as ***Panâ??s Labyrinth***, ***A Prairie Home Companion, La Vie en Rose*** and 2014â??s ***The Guest***.

Whatâ??s exciting about the film division of Amazon Studios isnâ??t just that Hope and Berney are focusing on established auteurs and giving them an arena to make their films with seemingly no intrusion; itâ??s that the studio isnâ??t under the umbrella of a different corporation. Everything is internal and the areas where Amazon entertainment is looking to growâ??including purchasing rights to stream major sporting events, increasing their TV production with prestigious gets like a two-season miniseries entirely helmed by **David O. Russell**â??have built in methods to increase their subscription service. Add in free shipping on Amazonâ??s multi-billion dollar digital store and the film division appears to have the task of netting more subscribers to Amazon Prime off their job description.



Kenneth Longerganâ??s *Manchester by the Sea* (Photo via Amazon Studios/Roadside Attractions)

At a recent party for their Oscar slate, Deadline reported that there were far more directors and actors in attendance than media and agents. The party wasnâ??t just about *Manchester by the Sea*. It was an opportunity to let directors and actors know that their bottom line is different than Hollywoodâ??s. Like Amazonâ??s purchase of IMDb, thereâ??s a service theyâ??re providing for obsessed film fans.

What remains to be seen is whether Amazon Studios will strike up deals with up-and-coming directors who might have exciting projects without their own name recognition. Or if Amazon Studios will let indie darlings like A24 and IFC unearth those talents first. But, with Hollywood being a difficult place for many of our great directors like Todd Haynes and James Gray to even get a film made without pre-existing fandoms, Amazon is an answer to film fanâ??s prayers. And in case you hadnâ??t noticed, even their animated intro logo for their film releases (which zooms through a city to the marquee of a movie theater) highlights that theyâ??d like you to venture out to the cinema, rather than stay in and stream.

lost-city-of-z-charlie-hunnam-tom-holland

James Grayâ??s *The Lost City of Z* (Photo via Amazon Studios)

chi-raq

Spike Leeâ??s *Chi-Raq* (Image via Amazon Studios)

Image via Lionsgate

Woody Allenâ??s *Cafe Society* (Image via Amazon Studios/Lionsgate)

love-and-friendship-sevigny-beckinsale-2

Whit Stillmanâ??s *Love & Friendship* (Photo via Amazon Studios/Roadside Attractions)

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Category

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