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Streaming Minority Languages: The Case of Basque Language Cinema on Netflix

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Abstract

This article explores the way Basque language cinema is adapting to streaming platforms, focusing on the case of the three Basque language films that have made it to Netflix: *Loreak* (2014), *Handia* (2017) and *Errementari* (2018). Firstly, it explains Netflix particularities and its emphasis on diversity, among other reasons that could explain the platform's interest in these particular films. Secondly, it describes the way these aforementioned films have landed on Netflix and the impact this exhibition has had. I base my research on in-depth interviews with directors Jon Garaño and Paul Urkijo as well as producer Xabi Berzosa to know the insights of the process. More broadly, the article discusses the impact that becoming available on Netflix and other SVOD platforms might have for Basque cinema, especially when it comes to production and transnational distribution. On the other hand, I will also point at the challenges that this new landscape poses for the Basque audiovisual industry, and non-hegemonic languages in general.

The streaming revolution, of which Netflix is currently the epitome, is changing the production, distribution, exhibition and consumption model globally, and policy makers and Basque institutions should take this transformation seriously. *Loreak*, *Handia* and *Errementari* should not just become happy exceptions.

Keywords

Diversity, streaming, Netflix, Basque cinema, minority language.

1. Revolutions

We may call it the digitalization of communication, the streaming revolution or the platformization of culture. Regardless the term we use or the aspect we focus on, the truth is that the emergence and the propagation of the internet marked the beginning of a change in the paradigm of the production, circulation and appropriation of symbolic goods. An ongoing process –which shows no signs of stopping– that is led by new and gigantic global actors that greatly exceed state frameworks and that, regarding the media sphere, is clearly marked by the hegemony of audiovisual contents. Suffice it to say that streaming video accounted for the 60.6% of the global internet traffic in 2019 (Spangler, 2019). That figure has been hugely exceeded in 2020 due to the global pandemic of covid-19 and the lockdown adopted by many countries in the world, as reflected in the latest report on internet traffic, *The Global Internet Phenomena Report* (Sandvine, 2020).

Concurrently, the first decades of the 21st century have also witnessed the development of yet another revolution, although on a more limited scale. I am referring to the flourishing and consolidation of a new Basque cinema, mainly filmed in Basque, that, since 2005, has been

providing titles in a steady and increasingly recognized manner, both in the Basque Country and abroad. Although the new Basque cinema was born mainly with an internal audience and market in mind as well as with a reliance on comedic and subversive traditions of popular culture, “it quickly moved to capture also a [Spanish and] global audience by transforming itself into what is considered art cinema” (Gabilondo, 2021).

In the following sections I should like to explore a case in which the two circumstances explained above –the streaming revolution and the new Basque cinema– come together: the *platformization* of Basque cinema and, more precisely, its journey on the streaming platform *par excellence*: Netflix. I base my study on the analysis of the trajectory and reception of these films, and also on interviews with the protagonists of this convergency, film directors Jon Garaño and Paul Urkijo, and producer Xabi Berzosa, from Moriarti Produkzioak.

Through this case study, my goal is to ask long-term questions concerning the adaptation of audiovisual contents in minority languages to the new digital paradigm. I use the term *minority* –and none of its equivalents such as *minorized*, *non-hegemonic*, *regional* or even *indigenous*– after Cormack (2007, p. 1), who proposes that *minority* expresses more accurately the particular weakness of these languages, i.e., that they are dominated by a surrounding majority language.

Then, how is the streaming revolution affecting films in minority languages? Is audiovisual diversity –even more– in danger in the digital context, taken into account its concentration and oligopoly, globalization and the diminishing influence of state and substate levels of government? Despite it all, are there still chances to invigorate those contents or, at least, is there any space for resistance, a sort of digital trench where linguistic diversity can continue to develop and even find new audiences?

Although the challenges are huge, there are some hopeful signs that encourage the fight for the promotion and celebration of cultural and linguistic diversity, also in these times of streaming.

2. The Coming of Age of Basque Cinema

In March 2016, the news arrived that Basque film *Loreak* (Jon Garaño & Jose Mari Goenaga, 2014) would be available on Netflix. This seemed the culmination of an exceptionally successful trajectory for the small Basque filmography, that was living a hopeful streak since the year 2005 in which *Aupa, Etxebeste!* (Asier Altuna & Telmo Esnal) was released. Supported by the public corporation EITB and, since 2009, by a new fund for the financing of cinema in co-official languages integrated into the General State Budget, Basque language cinema was for the first time in history benefitting from a regular production and exhibition of feature films. Basque language, absent from this format since the 1993 release of *Urte Ilunak* (Arantxa Lazkano), had persisted with dignity in short films, documentaries and animated films. But since 2005, it was aspiring to take off and conquer the space of the fiction feature film. This new wave of Basque cinema has been marked by two characteristics: a more natural use of Basque language (de Pablo, 2012, p. 79) and the thematic distancing from the Basque conflict, so prevalent in the previous decades (Gabilondo & Colmeiro, 2012, p. 94), to focus on questions of personal identity such as gender and sexual orientation.

As Basque language cinema flourished, another more prejudicial tendency accelerated in the audiovisual medium: the proportion of channels with contents in Basque dramatically decreased, matching up, on the one hand, with the arrival of the Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT), which barely provided a new channel in Basque (ETB3) while it added dozens of channels in Spanish; and, on the other hand, with the raise of streaming, which added a new and virtually infinite range of internet contents. At the time, Basque cinema was envisioned as the only site for hope while television channels, ETB1 and ETB3, kept drowning and losing audiences massively against the avalanche of contents in Spanish and other languages.

In 2014, after almost a decade of steady production in Basque, came *Loreak*, the second feature film by Moriarti Produktzioak, a creative team based on San Sebastian that had already earned prestige and created expectations for numerous successful short films, documentaries and a promising first feature film, *80 Egunean (For 80 Days)*, 2010). According to Xabi Berzosa, producer of the film, these expectations were crucial when it came to finance *Loreak* with a relative ease¹. And *Loreak* met those expectations, at least in terms of critical reception and awards, if not so much commercially.

By the time Netflix came to Moriarti, the film had already achieved a number of significant milestones: it was the first film in Basque selected for competition in the official section of the 62 San Sebastian International Film Festival², and also the first to be selected by Spain for competition in the 88 Edition of the Oscar Academy Awards. It seemed natural that it became the first Basque film to be released on Netflix –although not on Netflix Spain because it had already been sold to other national streaming platforms.

However, its acquisition by the main SVOD platform would go beyond the mere anecdote because the next title of the creators of *Loreak*, the long-awaited *Handia (Giant)*, was released on Netflix a few months after its official theatrical premiere. Also in 2018, the debut of young filmmaker Paul Urkijo, *Errementari (The Blacksmith and the Devil)*, 2018), which was fully shot in Basque as well, reached the streaming platform. Although it does not account for the whole experience of Basque cinema on platforms (it is worthy to mention the ample catalogue of Basque films on Filmin), this small package of three Netflix films does have a bigger significance, more qualitative than quantitative, given the hegemonic and global character of the platform, and this is why I have chosen it as case of study.

3. Netflix and Diversity

Netflix was founded in 1997 to offer mail-delivery renting services for a recently born format: the DVD. The weight of this new optic disc, much lighter than VHS, made it possible to sustain a business based on postal shipments. It was not until 2007, ten years after its foundation, that, coinciding with the arrival of broadband and video compression technologies, Netflix decided to offer an additional service of streaming contents for its subscribers. At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, with the proliferation of satellite television, Digital Terrestrial Television, cable television and VOD, and with the notion of *quality television* widely incorporated (McCabe & Akass, 2007), a new audience accustomed to varied and quality on demand contents consolidates, together with a new audiovisual scenario that is niche and diversity oriented (Hilmes, 2003, p. 63). Netflix seized the momentum and took the final step: in 2012 the platform started to produce original contents based on big data knowledge gathered during the times on which it delivered DVDs by mail, informed by what it is that the public wants and looks for (Havens, 2014). Thus, Netflix becomes a rather particular SVOD (Subscription Video on Demand) company, aiming to be a first window exhibition platform for original contents that it will release exclusively. By then, its global expansion is already unstoppable, and Netflix sets up very quickly in every country in the world, except for continental China, North Korea, Syria and some other minor territories. According to the letter addressed to the shareholders during the third semester of 2020³, Netflix has over 195 million subscribers over 190 countries and has become the epitome of “over the top television” or, at least, the platform that has grabbed the biggest piece of the cake.

¹ In a phone interview conducted on 14 November 2019.

² It should be noted that a year after the premiere of *Loreak* in San Sebastian, the festival launched the Global in Progress program, support network for non-hegemonic language films in postproduction phase.

³ Shareholder letter about performance in the third term of 2020, published in: https://s22.q4cdn.com/959853165/files/doc_financials/2020/q3/FINAL-Q3-20-Shareholder-Letter.pdf.

If anything, what characterizes Netflix's meteoric growth is its constant adaptation, whether technological or cultural. One of its strategies to adapt and keep on growing has consisted in understanding cultural discourses in vogue and attending to one key concept in our contemporary cultural climate: I am talking about the notion of diversity. In the Anglo-Saxon corporate context, diversity refers to all those policies and practices which include and meet the needs of people whose traits are different to the typical or traditional group members, creating a new inclusive culture which values the talent of all candidates, and whose diversity is seen as wealth (Herring, 2009, p. 209). Beyond the corporate context, diversity has been described as an "emerging ideology" (Jackson *et al.*, 2019, p. 537) and a value that is reaffirmed in public discourse (Bell & Hartman, 2007), appealing to women as much as to LGBTBI or ethnical minorities. In short, diversity seems to be the fashionable word to describe our modern world.

However, different voices have denounced that this "diversity" label has been ultimately used to obscure the reality of racial, ethnic and gender inequalities (Collins, 2011, p. 517) present in organizations and societies, void rhetoric or corporate propaganda. Sarah Ahmed goes even further and describes diversity politics as a mere branding strategy (2007, p.254), one which allows for the accumulation of value through language, through the symbolic, failing to do anything to actually change the situations of inequality.

In fact, Netflix does not hide its desire to see its brand linked to the concept of diversity and inclusion, and its first strategy is directed to its Human Resources management. Their webpage details this commitment to diversity, to the extent of pointing to the reasons that have led them to it, namely, a diverse Human Resources management as the path to reach a diverse audience: "Netflix is a global company, with a diverse member base, which is why the content we produce reflects that: global perspectives, global stories. As we grow globally, we know that we must have the most talented employees with diverse backgrounds, cultures, perspectives, and experiences to support our innovation and creativity"⁴.

According to Jenner (2018, p. 140), in creating a transnational brand, the emphasis on diversity is crucial. Their resource groups for employees give an account of Netflix's understanding of diversity. Thus, among the groups that Netflix employees can belong to, we find groups devoted to those with diverse physical or mental functionality, racial and ethnical diversity, gender and sexual diversity... Netflix exhibits empathy and support for all these *deviations* from the norm.

But this appreciation of diversity is also evident in two other spheres: the audiovisual representation of its contents and its promotional practices. The diversity of representations promoted by Netflix can be traced back to *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), the second series produced by the platform, which is set in a female prison full of black and latino inmates and which is crossed by lesbian plots. After the success of this prison series new titles featuring African Americans (*The Get Down*, *Dear White People*, *When They See Us*), Asian Americans (*Always Be My Maybe*, *Master of None*, *To All The Boys I've Loved Before*) or Latinos (*One Day at a Time*) have captured the audience and have been pampered and overtly promoted by Netflix. This emphasis on diversity is undoubtedly a branding strategy, but a clarification of the terms in which this diversity is understood, structured, produced and published is enormously significant when it comes to understanding Netflix (Jenner, 2018, p. 116).

However, it is not only about the representation of minorities traditionally marginalized by Hollywood. Several advertising events have also focused on underlining Netflix's inclusive nature by seeking the celebration of artists and creators that belong to different minorities. In June 2018, the spot *A Great Day in Hollywood* was released, celebrating African American artists that work for Netflix. Through a video and a photograph, and counting on the presence

⁴ Netflix jobs: <https://jobs.netflix.com/diversity>.

of 47 artists among whom we find directors Spike Lee and Ava DuVernay, the event paid tribute to the photo *A Great Day in Harlem*, the iconic photograph taken in 1958 in vindication of the talent of African American jazz musicians. In March 2019, *Make Room* came out, an advertisement in which the actress of Nigerian descent Uzo Aduba, one of the leading characters in *Orange is the New Black*, talks about the importance of making room for all those underrepresented minorities, from the point of view of ethnicity as much as gender. The video features Hannah Gadsby, famous for her feminist and LGBTBI monologue *Nannette*, Yalitza Aparicio, leading character in *Roma*, some actresses from the cast of the multicultural show *GLOW* and many other women belonging to ethnic minorities.

4. Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in the Netflix Era

Keeping this context in mind, in the following paragraphs I will focus on another type of diversity and inclusion attempt: linguistic and cultural diversity, a concept that has been in use at least since the negotiation in the World Trade Organization of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) that took place after the Second World War. It was in this framework that the concept of “cultural exceptionality” was born in 1993, supported by France and Canada, in an attempt to defend cultural and linguistic diversity against the homogenizing force of US globalization. From the beginning, the promotion of this exception was mainly related to the audiovisual field where American hegemony was particularly prominent (Burri, 2010, p. 1063). In 2005, perhaps in search of a greater consensus, the idea of “cultural exception” was replaced by the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. The preface to the Treaty already points to linguistic diversity as a fundamental part of this desirable cultural diversity. As Amezaga and Martínez (2019, p. 107) observe, although the point was to defend particular languages and cultures, since this task rested on States themselves, they have often disregarded the defence of minority languages within their borders, choosing to defend the majority language under the pretext that it is endangered by the American avalanche. Within the frame of the European Union, the different programs that have been advanced to defend linguistic and cultural diversity have turned, according to different authors (Herold, Primorac *et al.*, Pérez & Deogracias) into “broken promises” or halfway solutions that satisfy neither the defendants of diversity –for their inefficiency– nor the advocates of free market –for their protectionism. Whether for political or economic reasons, the defence of linguistic diversity by State members of the EU has always been very limited when dealing with minority or regional languages. A clear example of an unsuccessful attempt in the promotion of a minority language cinema took place in Catalonia in 2010, when the Generalitat approved the Catalan Cinema Law only to be appealed both by the Spanish Constitutional Court and by the European Commission for going against free market (Manías–Muñoz *et al.*, 2017).

In the last decades, the notion that American cultural imperialism is sweeping global cultural diversity has been qualified by different authors considering the growing diversity of audiovisual contents and their greater and freer world-wide circulation. Thus, flows have been identified that can be transnational or translocal (Kumar, 2006, p. 57), or even capable of trespassing different linguistic and cultural regions (Straubhaar, 2007). Of special interest is the volume edited by Thussu (2007) where, from postcolonial and post national perspectives, there have been identified numerous media “counter-flows” that resist, at times successfully, the current mainstream.

The streaming revolution and, more precisely, the practices of the leading SVOD platform Netflix, have further complicated the debate, whose future is thus foreseen rich and exciting. In its attempt to reach new markets beyond the American, Netflix has included on its catalogue contents in many other languages from the territories into which it expands, but it also has made many of these audiovisual contents available on its global catalogue (Basilisco & Raimond, 2016, p. 375), an unprecedented event in the American audiovisual industry.

Although some platforms like HBO and Amazon Prime are timidly beginning to follow the same strategy, Netflix remains the one that still distinguishes from its competitors by the presence of different languages in the contents it produces and distributes. The emergence of this novel trend can be traced back to the successful *Narcos* (2015–2018), a Spanish/English bilingual series that uses both languages in similar proportions. Together with *Narcos* but more discreetly came out *Club de Cuervos*, the first original series by Netflix in a language other than English (in Spanish), and a year later *3%* was released, a Brazilian series fully shot in Portuguese. From then on, contents in languages other than English have multiplied to the point that at least 36 original languages are present today on the platform, while dubbing and subtitling continued spreading as well. When introducing its brief Hermes Translation project in March 2017, Netflix itself confirmed that English would not be the platform's main language for much longer⁵. According to Jenner (2018, p. 25), this effort reflects Netflix's role as a new transnational actor and has its goal in becoming accessible to the largest number of audiences possible.

Nevertheless, and despite these advertising announcements, English remains effectively the most frequent language on Netflix, and with 73 million US subscribers (over 37% of the total) this trend does not seem likely to change in the short term. To better approach this phenomenon, since February 2020 we have access to Netflix's daily updated ranking of the 10 most viewed contents in the world. Among the ten most viewed shows in the world in 2020 – according to the data provided by the platform, which needs to be taken with caution (Spencer, 2020)–, only two had been shot in a language other than English: the German *Dark* and the Spanish *La casa de papel*.

However, there are already signs of a change in trend facilitated by the Netflix strategy. A recent audience study carried out with users of the platform in the US proves that users have gradually changed their tendencies and are increasingly consuming contents from abroad and in languages other than English after the recommendations of the algorithm and the *binge watching* strategy (Limov, 2020).

But which are these languages other than English and what role do minority languages play on Netflix's global catalogue?

5. The Tower of Babel in the 21st Century

For the purposes of this article, the main tool to track the number of different languages present on Netflix has been the languagelearningwithnetflix.com catalogue which aims to guide foreign language students in their search for audiovisual material in their language of study. Thanks to this catalogue, contents can be traced by language and also by the countries in which they are available. This, together with the use of ExpressVPN which releases country restrictions and allows access to the global Netflix catalogue to conduct relevant check-ins, gives us a rather accurate idea of the number of languages handled by the audiovisual products of the platform. We must not lose sight of the fact that, given the changing nature of the catalogue, with titles coming in and out constantly from the menu, the most we can aspire to is a picture of the moment. In the following paragraphs I will refer to November 2020 and the titles than can be seen world-wide, unless specified otherwise. Likewise, I do not take into account the languages in dubbings and subtitling but only the original languages in which contents were shot.

Thus, we can state that the most spoken languages in the world are all present in Netflix and available in every country (Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, Bengali, Hindu, Portuguese, French, Russian...), but also European languages with fewer speakers (Czech, Dutch, Croatian, Icelandic....). African languages that had been so far absent from global circulation

⁵ Netflix corporate blog: <https://media.netflix.com/en/company-blog/netflix-is-looking-for-the-best-translators-around-the-globe>.

commercial cinema are beginning to fight for their own place, as it is the case with *Wolof* in *Atlantique*, a Cannes prize-winner film that has been acquired by Netflix. Even languages from the so-called stateless nations can be found, as in the successful miniseries *Unorthodox* (2020) which is mainly shot in Yiddish.

I would like to elaborate on this, given that, among the non-hegemonic languages from Europe, the co-official languages of Spain are particularly prominent. Catalan is the most represented one, with four series from public corporation TV3 (*Merlí*, *Bençiguts a la família*, *Si no t'hagués conegut* and *Les de l'hoquei*) and two films (*Incerta Glòria*, *La propera pell*), followed by the already mentioned Basque language cinema. Finally, it is worth mentioning the series *O sabor das margaridas* (*Bitter Daisies*), produced by the public Galician television, as the only fiction content available today in Galician. This *Galician noir* series of remarkable success is already working on its second season with Netflix's support. Among the aforementioned titles, it should also be noted that Basque is the only co-official language that has not delivered a fiction series, sticking to the feature film. This anomaly will be dealt with later.

Going back to Basque cinema, how do these minority productions reach the most important streaming platform of our days?

In order to elucidate this question, we must elaborate on a number of new circumstances that are specific to *over-the-top television*, and also to the context of digital globalization. On the one hand, on demand television seems to have opened the way for the niche: it is no longer necessary for a content to win large audiences. The subscription model used by Netflix, that is, the display of unlimited contents for a fixed amount per month, also pushes in that direction since it facilitates a release from the traditional demands of advertisers to gather large audiences. From the point of view of the consumer, Netflix –as any other SVOD– seeks to offer the subscriber not a great hit he or she cannot miss but rather the sense of an infinite offer, that there is always something available, like in a 24/7 free buffet. Reed Hastings, CEO of Netflix, explains it concisely: the platform's biggest competitor is sleep (quoted in Hern, 2017). This *boutade* lets us see what Netflix is seeking, which is nothing but app-efficiency, that is, the highest average number of hours in the platform per subscriber. Because the platform we most use is the platform we do not cancel. That explains the obsession with binge watching, with preventing sleep from getting hours of viewing time. At the same time, the longer we stay hooked to its streaming, the more the platform will know about us, and the more data it will accumulate to further design a strategy of content that will keep us watching. Netflix's predilection for the serial fiction over the feature film is best understood after this logic: a series of many episodes, let alone of many seasons, guarantees audience loyalty and plenty of viewing hours. A single film, successful as it may be, will only keep us hooked for a couple of hours.

Given these conditions, it is no surprise that the Netflix model (still on its DVD renting phase) exemplifies the long-tail strategy. According to this strategy, popularized by Chris Anderson, cost reduction of storage and distribution in the internet era makes it no longer necessary to focus business in a few but greatly successful products. Many products for minorities can accumulate bigger audiences than a single product for the majority. Thus, a minimalist film shot in a non-hegemonic language like *Loreak* might get an audience, probably small but which, in addition to many other small niches, would still be profitable in terms of app use. Ted Sarandos, Chief Content Officer for Netflix, put it this way: "We invest in a lot of content for really small audiences too, because it's still valuable for subscribers who are really engaged fans of a particular program, and, therefore, it's a valuable investment for us. We're fortunate because we have unlimited inventory space. It allows us to value content in more ways than just mass numbers" (Quoted in Curtin *et al.*, 2014, p. 136).

It should not be forgotten that Netflix hopes to dominate the world, its growth in the US –with over 73 million homes subscribed– seems to have peaked and now its efforts concentrate abroad. This global audience may not have a particular predilection for English.

One last reason for linguistic diversity has to do with the compulsory implementation from 2020 onwards of the 2018/1808 European Union regulation that demands streaming platforms that want to operate in EU territory to offer 30% of European contents. As part of this strategy for Europe, the opening of a Netflix hub in Madrid, the headquarter that serves as “an access port to European and Spanish-speaking countries at once” (Avedaño, 2019), makes full sense. In fact, Netflix organizes not so much around countries but around languages. Francisco Ramos, responsible for the Hispanic Original Contents, is a Madrid-based Mexican who is responsible for Spanish contents world-wide. Two Spanish global successes (*Élite* and *La casa de Papel*) confirm Netflix’s good judgement to opt for Spain as site for its headquarters, but this does not have to be beneficial for the other languages of the State. The European regulation to promote European contents does not mention language at all.

Netflix’s language diversity is real –at least in historical and relative terms, that is, in comparison to other similar platforms– but we should not be misled: this diversity could be simply read as opportunistic transnationalism (Rawle, 2018, p. 87), be it for commercial, political or structural reasons.

6. Basque Language Cinema on Netflix

6.1. *Loreak* (Flowers)

It is precisely Itziar Ituño, actress in the successful series *La Casa de Papel* (*Money Heist*), who stars in *Loreak*, the first film in Basque to cross the threshold of Netflix but which, unlike the two others, did not premiere on Netflix Spain. This was because the acquisition took place later than in the other cases. An agreement had already been reached with another SVOD platform and Netflix was interested in holding exclusive rights.

An ensemble film supported by the great performance of the three leading female characters, *Loreak* presents us with a telling and subtle approach to isolation, grief, death and the fleeting nature of memory. It is a minimalist film, rich with silences and blank stares and with a powerful subtext. In short, it is not a film for big audiences.

Asked about the reasons that might have led Netflix to acquiring *Loreak*, Jon Garaño⁶ mentions the “prestige” that the film carried, after its run in the San Sebastian Film Festival (where its direct competitor, *Magical Girl*, also available on Netflix, won the main prize) and its attempt to run for the Oscars. According to Garaño, at a time of growth like this, “platforms are seeking to cultivate their catalogue and, in Netflix’s case, to create a brand, giving the impression that they have it all, that they embrace it all.”

Xabi Berzosa, producer of the film, believes that in this “all you can eat” buffet that Netflix has turned into, Basque films need to be able to develop their own identity, something distinctive that makes them stick out, because otherwise they will be condemned to irrelevance.

Therefore, *Loreak* fits in the platform’s long-tail strategy, representing a small but prestigious and quality product that is also cheap for Netflix. Although the exact amount paid by Netflix remains strictly confidential, we know that the global budget of the film totals 1.8 million euros, which is a low figure in the global market of filmmaking.

But what happens with that distinctive feature, that brand that can position Basque cinema in that long tail that, according to Netflix, has no end? Can a distinct identity for Basque cinema truly substantiate under the wing of a global giant like Netflix?

⁶ Interview conducted via Skype on October 16, 2018.

6. 2. *Handia (Giant)*

Nowadays, if anybody can create that distinctive identity, that is Moriarti Produksioak. After *Loreak*, Netflix did not lose track of this creative team and when the time came to finance their next feature film, the platform offered to contribute. This is the most remarkable qualitative change from *Loreak*. By virtue of an agreement with distributors, *Handiak* was backed up by Netflix before the premiere of the film, which explains why its budget doubles *Loreak's*, from 1.8 million to 3.5 million. This way, *Handia* becomes the production with the largest budget in the history of Basque cinema, exceeding the average of Spanish cinema as well, which in the year 2018 was 3.1 million Euros. According to Berzosa, Netflix's contribution increased by one third the final budget of the film. This does not mean that Netflix contributed that amount but that the other funders raised their contributions when they knew about the SVOD platform's support, as in a speculative bubble.

The investment was needed because *Handia* is a historic film with plenty of special effects. Set in Gipuzkoa during the Carlist wars, it recounts the life of a real character, Migel Joakin Eleizegi Ateaga (1818–1861), known as The Giant of Altzo, who suffered from gigantism and became a freak show attraction for survival. The film follows Migel Joakin and his brother Martin, wound in the war and therefore unable to work in the hamlet too. The story unfolds at a slow pace, as is customary with Moriarti's cinema, and ellipses and subtext are once again key narrative tools.

More spectacular as it is for its exquisite historic setting, its diverse European locations and the special effects that re-enact Migel Joakin's bizarre gigantism on screen, it does not look like a film for large audiences either. After a second premiere that followed its huge success in the ceremony of the Goya Film Awards, its audience at cinemas topped 133.000 spectators, a figure that is not spectacular but made it the most viewed Basque film in history. In the Spanish context, rather than the discreet ticket sales and audience in cinemas, *Handia* stood out for the praise it received from the critics and the industry, turning out to be the most awarded film in the 2018 Goya Ceremony. It won 10 awards from 13 nominations, losing, though, the Best Picture Goya to Isabel Coixet's *La librería (The Bookshop)*.

Asked about the possibility that, after its economic contribution, Netflix interfered in the creative process, Jon Garaño delivers a resounding no. The agreement was made with distributors and there were no contacts whatsoever between the filmmakers and Netflix. According to Garaño, the only difference was the bigger budget that resulted and made possible that they shot the film they wanted just like they wanted. What did Netflix gain in supporting *Handia*? Again, in words of Garaño and Berzosa, the prestige and quality that was expected of Moriarti.

Without knowing the viewing figures, which Netflix hides, both Garaño and Berzosa point to a greater flow of comments and ratings in platforms like imdb.com and filmaffinity.com once the film was made available for Netflix subscribers.

6.3. *Errementari (The Blacksmith and the Devil)*

The third Basque movie on Netflix's catalogue is not by the Moriarti factory but by a young director, Paul Urkijo, who authors *Errementari, The Blacksmith and the Devil* (2018), sponsored by Álex de la Iglesia in co-production tasks. Set like *Handia* in the period after the first Carlist war in a village in the province of Araba, the film is an effective fantasy piece based on a story from the Basque folklore: a blacksmith so evil that tricked the devil himself. Atmospheric and naive, self-parodic at times and full of humour, the story also stands out for reproducing with great accuracy a Basque dialect from Araba that is already extinct.

As with *Handia*, Netflix joined the project before it was finished. Once again, by means of an agreement with the distributor that was signed when the film was at editing stage, Netflix contributed an "important proportion" of the budget, what was needed for postproduction. Given that it is both a historic and a fantasy film where hell itself and a convincing puppet-

like devil –embodied by the same actor that played the giant of Altzo, Eneko Sagardoy– are recreated, the postproduction part was crucial to achieve the impeccable making of the film. So much that, according to Urkijo⁷, the film only got so far “for Netflix’s support.”

Asked about the interests that could lie behind Netflix’s move, Paul Urkijo is certain that genre was key. “The fantasy genre works very good on an international scale, its fandom is used to watching films from different backgrounds and languages, and Netflix is very interested in cultivating this genre.” Generally speaking, Urkijo’s experience was very positive: not only could he finish the film he envisioned thanks to the financial injection, but he also could reach global audiences, if not in movie-theatres around the world (which he deems highly complicated), at least in living rooms around the world. Asked about the feedback received, he states that it comes in a roundabout way, mainly from social media. He specially highlights the moment in which Mexican director Guillermo del Toro praised the film on Twitter. From then on, he received numerous compliments by the Anglo-Saxon public. Again, the director denies any creative interference by Netflix, whose involvement was limited to the distribution agreement that, in this case, was world-wide. The film is therefore a Netflix original, which is not so much about the film being produced by Netflix but about the company owning the exclusive rights of VOD exhibition.

7. What Can We Learn from the Experience? Challenges and Opportunities

The opportunities Netflix has provided for the three Basque films on its catalogue seem rather obvious. In two cases, it has ensured their viability by financing the projects. On the other hand, the global distribution offered by Netflix would have been impossible through traditional theatrical exhibition. This could have been achieved in other platforms, but only Netflix has over two hundred million homes subscribed and is present in every country in the world. From the point of view of the Basque language, which is a minority language, being present in a platform that reaches homes throughout the world means a great endorsement and a first step towards recognition. Urkijo confirms that he has received messages from spectators telling him that they first learned about Basque thanks to the film. This exoticism, according to Urkijo, is an extra asset for the feature film.

However, the Netflix factor also casts shadows and uncertainties. There is no reason to suspect that Netflix has any special sensibility for minority languages. The inclusion of Basque on its catalogue seems to obey the circumstantial reasons that this work has tried to sketch, namely: the good moment Basque cinema is living in the context of Spanish cinema, the prestige that niche films might offer and, in the case of *Errementari*, the key of genre, which is crucial to a fandom that may not be large but is deeply committed.

However, the long-tail strategy associated with the Netflix model from which Basque language cinema might have benefited seems to be living a difficult time, if not completely doomed. Immersed in the biggest battle of its history after the emergence of direct competitors (Disney+, WarnerMedia, Apple TV Plus...), Netflix is increasingly trying to hold on to blockbusters to ensure its leadership. “To meet the expectations it has created for itself, the company that essentially invented the business of streaming entertainment must create a diverse pipeline of viral hits with global appeal” (Lev Ram, 2019). The inclusion since 2020 of a Top10 where their own originals predominate seems to be aimed at this quest for the global hit.

Other voices had already warned about the mirage of the long-tail strategy. In this vein, Enrique Bustamante warns about the empty “speeches of the preachers of the long tail” when, in fact, what big SVOD platforms do is nothing but reinforce “the strategies of blockbusters and the transnationalisation of their symbolic contents” (2018, p. 15). Furthermore, with new actors at play, competitors who are not sleeping hours precisely but giants like Warner, Apple

⁷ Interview conducted by mail on February 2, 2019.

or Disney (large conglomerates that, unlike Netflix, are involved in other activities than streaming), it is possible that we are to witness big changes in commercial strategy. Now Netflix is investing in big and small projects. But if competitors force the platform to choose, it is safe to say that it will go for the big ones.

Without any knowledge as to what the future will hold in such a changing scenario, what remains clear is that streaming has come to stay, and no matter how traditional actors from the audiovisual system may resist, its hegemony is going to be more and more established every day (whether this hegemony is led by Netflix or by some other VOD platform).

What can Basque language cinema do to adapt to this new scenario? First and most obvious, produce: generating audiovisual products that perform a public function and reach its closest audience first but are then able to reach the entire world has never (at least technically) been easier. Despite the fact that the audiovisual market is in the hands of global supra-state actors, there is something that public entities –state or regional– can do. In this sense, EITB's paralysis is striking. And I am not thinking so much in cinematographic production, which they have supported, as in the absence of Basque television fiction in the last three years and a half. As I write these words, in the fall of 2020, three miniseries have been announced, thus breaking the tendency of the last two years in which EITB has barely produced any fiction product in Basque. As Otto i Marín⁸ says, public entities have to turn into big content factories that can then travel to as many distribution windows as possible, and among them, streaming will undoubtedly be essential. Serialized fiction is the star product of streaming for reasons already explained, so EITB's desertion is particularly blatant at this moment of expansion and prosperity for this type of audiovisual content.

It is worth remembering, however, that the state film law has eliminated the fund for the financing of co-official languages that so successfully promoted this new wave of Basque language cinema. And the same can be said about European policies: the UE regulation to promote European contents does not play in favour of minority languages, which are not even mentioned in the text. Without regulation and without specific financing, the landscape is not hopeful.

Furthermore, the big global platforms that are already sharing out the gains cannot be either the final goal for this type of cinema in a minority language. If it finally turns out that the long tail strategy has its days numbered in these hegemonic spaces, it would be a better strategy to approach other models of streaming which have been directed to the niche from their inception. The aforementioned case of Filmin would be an example. With the support of the Generalitat de Catalunya, the Catalan platform has recently launched FilminCAT which, using Filmin's resources, offers a platform with contents in Catalan (dubbed, subtitled and original). As proof of this sensibility to minority languages, in February 2020, Filmin presented its channel Filmin Euskaraz (Filmin in Basque), where it compiles all its contents in Basque: a total of 67 titles so far that include feature films, documentaries and children's films.

In short, without a favourable regulation, the cinema in Basque and in other minority languages is at serious risk. Big global actors like Netflix should not be the final goal for this type of cinema –although, if it were, it should not be disregarded. Other platforms far removed from blockbusters and global success could be of greater help, as exemplified by Filmin. Fortunately, technology works in favour of variety and less mainstream options.

Without regulation and production, and without searching for alternatives to hegemonic streaming, the case of these three Basque films rowing upstream could be in danger of becoming a mere historic anecdote.

⁸ In the lecture *Digitalización y transformación del ecosistema audiovisual. Amenazas y oportunidades para las lenguas y las culturas subalternas: del Broadcast y la TDT, al Broadband y el 5G*. Held in Bilbao, October 4, 2019, and hosted by the Coppieters Foundation.

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