

# Contextualising Streaming as a Tactile Medium and Gauging its impact on the Psychosocial Aspects of Culture

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## Abstract

Streaming is the newest technology in the media ecosystem which delivers content from a provider to the consumer almost immediately. Streaming allows the viewers to choose from a vast array of audiovisual . Unlike television, where the viewer can only control which channel he/she watches but not the content itself. Streaming has gained such popularity that streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon among others have turned into full-fledged studios producing films with top-tier directors and stellar casts.

Old-fashioned cable TV with all its attendant categories has been made obsolete since it just cannot offer the same level of involvement and control to the user. Research also showing our visual skills have also improving rapidly and the way knowledge is gaining is changing rapidly too. Perhaps we should go back and think how can we educate young people through visual medium instead of just "old" method where reading for pleasure has gone down.

The first probable use of the word “stream” in connection to the creative domain is the “stream of consciousness” style of writing popularized by 20th century writers such as James Joyce. In such writing, we find that the reader can directly enter the consciousness of the narrator as the writing is in the form of a jumble of thoughts and perceptions, which best seem to imitate the working of the human mind. Streaming, too, is not without its affinities to the mechanism of the human mind. As McLuhan often pointed out, all forms of technology function as extensions of specific human organs. In this sense, streaming serves as an extension of the mind, allowing it to jump back and forth across a multitude of genres going back decades and serving as a substitute to imagination (which is the basic function of all visual media).

This paper aims to find the reason behind the booming popularity of streaming and explore the mechanism of the same while also touching upon the consequences of streaming at the biological and social levels.

Keywords: Streaming, McLuhan, Netflix, Amazon

## **Carving a niche**

For about 160 million people<sup>i</sup> worldwide, that knocking sound now triggers almost a Pavlovian response to chill. Be it catching up on the latest season of Stranger Things or re-watching old episodes of Seinfeld, or even indulging in the catalogue of films offered under the confoundingly specific genre name of “visually striking witty comedies”<sup>ii</sup>, California-based Netflix has proven to their millions of subscribers that they are the ones who knock.

Yet, Netflix is just one part of the streaming puzzle that has grown to dominate the media environment today. Other players include Amazon’s Prime Video and Twitch (for livestreaming), Hulu and the upcoming Disney Plus. There seems to be a myriad of reasons for the ever-swelling success of these streaming platforms some of which have even taken to producing full-fledged movies with seasoned crew and cast, however, the primary reason seems to be the

luxury of instantaneity that streaming affords its viewers that network TV or web browser-based streaming simply cannot.

Although Netflix still relies on conventional television sets to a large extent to stream content, it has very little in common with conventional television programming. The primary difference is Netflix's mosaic-like catalogue which invites you to dip in and out of the various selections tailor-made for you as compared to the linear flow of channels on network television offering little or no control to the viewer in choosing the content. And then there's the nature of the has itself which is shaped to a great extent by the policy of releasing all the episodes of a series in bulk at once and the post-play feature in Netflix. All things considered; streaming is still an evolution of television in the sense that it realizes the potential of television. Granted, streaming as we have it today is not the final destination of television but it represents the refinement of all those aspects of television which define it as a medium.

Philosopher Marshall McLuhan whose works and ideas formed the bedrock of today's media theory believed that all media and technology functioned as extensions of our bodies<sup>iii</sup>. The book is an extension of the eye, the wheel of the foot and clothing is an extension of the skin. Similarly, McLuhan proposed a function for Television as well. This idea is important because it explains quite successfully the reason why television was always so addictive in nature, even before the rise of streaming and ten-hour binges. Growing up in the previous decade, one would often hear about the 'idiot box' and write prolonged essays on its ill-effects. The first that comes to mind even now is deteriorated eyesight. But this does not mean that TV is a visual medium. According to McLuhan, TV is an extension of the sense of touch. TV belongs to the class of media he termed 'cool' to invoke the involvement they offered by bringing the viewer into the world of the TV as against the hot medium of Cinema which lays a firm barrier between the audience and the demigods of the screen. So how exactly does the haptic sense- the sense of touch- opens up deeper avenues into the mind.

### **Mind-Touching**

“One of the facts of television is to remove people's identity. They become part of a corporate peer group just by watching it.”

- Marshall McLuhan

Speaking of touch, let's get back to knocking on wood. That iconic Netflix knock pays tribute to Frank Underwood from 'House of Cards'. This idiosyncrasy of Underwood understandably became wildly popular with its viewers but as a motif, it sheds some light on why TV is a touch-extension. HoC is perhaps the best example of a binge-worthy TV show as it exists today. Various theories have been presented in papers<sup>iv</sup> detailing how characters on the show are designed to reflect the viewers' own vices (which Netflix probably knows about well enough) and act as gateways allowing the viewers to step into the show's universe. The show guarantees complete immersion using narrative strategies that were highly effective in a TV of yore but now have become exponentially more potent. As an example, since most users prefer to binge the whole series in one or two sittings, the writers can focus more on fleshing out characters and their arcs with more attention than in cable television since the viewers won't be burdened with retaining the information for long (but in network TV, the viewers may end up forgetting such details over the course of a week or so as they wait for the next episode to be telecast). Todd Kessler, writer of Bloodlines opines : “So we're feeling more like, we're taking advantage of this storytelling medium, meaning you can watch multiple episodes, you can watch the whole first act at once, which is very different than a network or a cable show, unless you watch it after it's already aired. And so for us, that desire is, we can go deeper, and hopefully create a stronger bond between the audience and the characters.”<sup>v</sup>

The knock-knock is also such a device, used strategically throughout the show to drive home a point made by the black hole of a character that is Frank Underwood. This is emphasized by the final scene senses season two of the show where a resurgent Frank faces the camera as he pauses briefly and delivers the iconic knock on the table which Netflix has immortalized. It has always been the viewer that mattered the most to Frank and this moment, what would have been the original finale of the series, illustrates the same. As Zachary Snider states in his paper, “Binge-watching complex shows such as Mad Men, Breaking Bad, House of Cards and Orange is the New Black and

Damages, psychologically affects the viewers' perceptions of reality by increasing their rate of empathy for shows' characters, and creates confusion when viewers process these shows too quickly, which ultimately hinders viewers' real-world that and interpersonal relationships."<sup>vi</sup> In conditions of such heady immersion then the viewer is lost in a world of pure perception, as he tries to make sense of the tangled web of conspiracies which rarely if ever have a linear or sequential progression, much like the real world. It is truly an "inner trip And such a medium corresponds more readily to the haptic sense than the visual one since, with the haptic sense, everything happens suddenly and follows no set sequence. Additionally, there's the home page of Netflix which allows the viewer a dive into worlds diverse and the eye can do very little to predict what the menu will serve up next.

### **Touch, Streaming and the Mind**

Creation of Adam is a fresco by Michelangelo on the ceiling of Sistine Chapel which depicts the first man and the almighty creator frozen in time as they reach out to each other. It is believed that God is about to impart the spark of life to Adam via touch.

"I refute it thus"

- Dr. Johnson, as he kicked a stone in order to disprove the claims of philosopher Berkeley that all objects exist only within the mind and possess no materiality

The sense of touch was called the "common sense" by McLuhan since it is the sense through which we interact with the world. Touch is also how the other senses function, demanding an interplay of all the senses. The haptic sense, therefore, is more important than one may be led to believe. Seeing is not always believing, as Dr. Johnson demonstrated. It is only by kicking the stone- touching it- that one can unequivocally establish the reality of a thing. The sense of touch, unlike the other senses, may not possess as broad and rich a range of perception, but living without the haptic sense is not too different from tumbling endlessly through the sphere of consciousness. Very much like a ghost. In the recent sequel to Ridley Scott's Blade Runner, we come across a holographic virtual assistant named Joi who undergoes an expensive update that gifts her materiality. This scene, when Joi feels the rain on her skin for the very first time, is a key emotional moment and calls back to the famous "Tears in the rain" sequence from the first part. The question now is if the audience would have connected as well if Joi were to sip Chardonnay and then become aware of her newfound "realness". Therefore the haptic sense is essential to live in the "real" world as we know it. This sense, more than others is tied up with our ability to perceive and be perceived. So why bring up this point now?

The Motion Picture Association of America ran an anti-piracy campaign in 2004 which spawned a popular meme containing the phrase "You wouldn't download a car", to drive home in a parodic manner the point that downloading movies illegally is analogous to stealing cars. At that time it seemed a mite unimaginable that one could provide a rebuttal to the statement by simply saying that they could and would indeed download a car. In 2019, with the help of 3D printing - not so much. Earlier, it was nearly impossible to consider that one could pretty much manifest three-dimensional objects using a desktop computer with an internet connection. Quite simply, it was nearly tantamount to creating something out of nothing. The virtual world was a world cordoned off; it offered splendid distractions to the world-weary mind but it couldn't accomplish such feats as printing assault rifles or the like. Virtual reality was something that pulled you in, offered you the vistas of faraway and exotic lands. But now it's fast becoming possible for that world to reach out to us as well. The virtual world is encroaching upon the real world and in a slow but steady fashion altering the real world<sup>vii</sup>. Cody Wilson, founder of Defense Distributed a non-profit hardware organization that provides CAD files to build firearms using 3D-printers, has got the Washington intelligentsia scratching their heads over the legislative implications<sup>viii</sup> of such virtual-assisted movements in a country where gun violence has long been a bone of contention. All of this contributes to the blurring of the boundary between what is real and what is virtual; in fact recent research<sup>ix</sup> could well suggest that the modern human being's dependence on net based applications has increased to the level that our lives would be unimaginable without them. The arrival of augmented reality and mixed reality applications only serves to underline their progress into the human world<sup>x</sup>.

## Stream of/and consciousness

Ever since James Joyce popularized the technique in his magnum opus *Ulysses*, the stream of consciousness has grown to be a popular narrative technique in literature as well as visual media. Stream of consciousness is a technique where the writing foregoes all formalities of language to best imitate the disorderly swirl of thoughts that populate the mind. What makes this technique so popular is the fact that it is an immersive technique like no other. The words in the text must be said it loud with proper intonation to truly get at the essence of what is being said. Thus it transforms the visual text into an aural utterance. It turns the reader into a participant in the text as he reads and hears the words around him. This technique has been successfully transferred to the screen – with one notable example being Gaspar Noe’s *Enter The Void*, a film which depicts the journey of a soul soon after the body’s death. Here the mobility of senses is required in interpreting the camera movements, which mimic the weightless glide of a ghost, and the background noises. It is a “trip” in the sense that Kubrik’s *2001* was the “ultimate trip”, encompassing the soul’s journey across space and time. This is but the stream of consciousness technique improvised for visual media to heighten immersion.

A happy coincidence seems to be the pairing of the words “stream” and “consciousness”, which also form roughly the title of this paper. There appears to be something keeping these words together, that when one is called upon to represent the workings of the mind it is best done as a stream and if that is true then if one were to take a medium itself termed “stream” then it has to best penetrate and commingle with the components of consciousness.

Why is it called streaming?

Streaming is called so for a simple reason: we can play the media files as they arrive from the server unlike regular downloading which requires the entire file to, unlike the other senses, for it to be playable. As mentioned earlier it is this instantaneity of streaming coupled with its genie-like interface which provides it with an edge in a media environment where everything can be pirated from the black market of the internet. Like the stream of consciousness which breaks all boundaries between narrator and character by providing an unfiltered and unprocessed stream of mental content and essentially eschewing the concept of extant time between narrator and character, streaming too obviates the time lag between the internet and the screen. In addition, consider the post-play feature available in Netflix which allows viewers to start streaming the succeeding episode immediately while the end credits of the previous episode play in a minimized window. And there's also the recommendations algorithm<sup>xi</sup> which lets you find the next show you would probably like just as much. All of this is designed to heighten the experience of streaming. To ensure this smoothness of transmission and viewing, there's an increased demand for high-speed internet connections advertised thus: Don't suffer the buffer. In a streaming environment, buffering is interruptive, it takes one out of the immersion. If you wish to stream then a slow internet connection would be inimical to your plans. Therefore, viewed from a distance, unlike the other senses, we can comprehend this environment as a whole, functioning with the aim of providing an experience of immersion and unlike 3D films and 4D sound technology which heightens the immersive aspect of only one sense visual or aural, streaming manages to necessitate an interplay of the senses to achieve immersion.

That streaming is popular is not news. Ever since the first season of *House of Cards* was released as a bundle of “chapters”, there has been no turning back. Other players like Prime Video and Hulu have managed to carve a niche for themselves in the medium as well, despite the seeming cornucopian depths of Netflix. Binge-watching was once a guilty pleasure but now it is a common practice. The recommendation algorithm functions unnoticeably as it gathers precious user data and turns it into a map of consciousness, detailing all the responses triggered at a specific point in the program. Cary Joji Fukunaga, the showrunner of *Maniac* a sci-fi drama series on Netflix admitted that the “Algorithm’s argument is going to win at the end of the day” and that he rewrote an entire episode which would have destroyed the binge-watching momentum of the viewers. “So the question is do we want to take a creative decision at the risk of losing people?”<sup>xii</sup> If a viewer response is considered negative then that scene is analyzed and the data obtained thus is fed to the creators who may never have such a firm grip on the audience’s responses. The creators must bow to the company as what they have is raw data which cannot ever be negotiated with since streaming facilitates never-before-seen intimacy in polling which leaves virtually zero room for error. Netflix encourages

viewers to optimize everything as long as they're bingeing so that in order to falsify their preferences or hoodwink the algorithm, the viewers need to sabotage their streaming experience on purpose. Netflix has in place a feedback loop where the viewer is the generator of output, and to whom Netflix feeds its input data in the form of recommendations and tailored content for the smoothest transition into the virtual world.

By optimizing everything for the viewer from brightness to color and background music and character traits, streaming services are essentially insuring the mind to accept a certain wavelength of content. Duane Loose<sup>xiii</sup> a prominent graphic designer pointed out the effects of visual animation on the imaginative capabilities of the mind and there are studies dating back to 1985<sup>xiv</sup> about the deteriorating spatial skills of students one of the main culprits at that time was believed to be the idiot box. The brain is the most complex object in the known universe and to most of us who have little time to reflect on what we subject it to as we rush through the bustle of quotidian life, streaming is a relaxant. Netflix and chill. Streaming is a ritual act with set requirements and a modicum of devotion. Such ritualistic acts performed regularly affect the brain in very physiological ways. Binge-watching narrative-heavy shows like House of Cards or Dark understandably impact the brain by "feeding explicit imagery to the visual cortex....This results in the slow atrophy of the muscles of the mind."<sup>xv</sup> As the center of the brain which processes visual input is stimulated relatively more for increased durations of time, neurons fire only in this region senses and the synapses or roadways between various nerve cells of the brain and the visual cortex become atrophied. Streaming is not without its obvious-sounding downsides. This may sound like schoolmarmish disapproval of the latest cool thing that all the hip kids are excited about but, this view only speaks for the considerable shift in culture; four hours of television a day was considered too high barely a decade ago and now most people are hardly settling into a show in that time period. Such shows when binge-watched also create unfair expectations in the viewers from reality and, just as Frank Underwood had millions of his ardent fans banging on furniture and delivering snide asides to thin air, they also lead to imitative behavior.

Netflix brought out an interactive film recently which could not be pirated and was awaited with bated breath by subscribers- Bandersnatch. A part of the Black Mirror anthology, Bandersnatch required active user participation as they were allowed to control the narrative at key plot points. By making a choice, they send the characters down a unique storyline. It is comparable to a video game in the same way that streaming itself is comparable to gaming. Of course, if one believes that video games with wafer thin plots and character arcs can induce violence in gamers, the potency of streaming to influence viewers' minds is tenfold. However, having considered all the ways in which streaming strives to be as loyal to the mind as possible, what sort of data could Netflix obtain from such a show? And Netflix has admitted to collecting data from all the viewers of Bandersnatch<sup>xvi</sup>. If Netflix can map the mind to such an extent that it ends up molding it, then what effect would shows like Bandersnatch have on the unsuspecting audience? Wouldn't this be a decent pitch for a Black Mirror episode?

In the context of streaming as a whole system of technologies and processes, most of which are hidden from the perception of the viewer whose view of reality is already skewed by over-indulgence in these shows, what Netflix can do makes paranoia about front cameras and Facebook data collection tools seem risible. Streaming has much more direct access to the important and individualized aspects of the mind<sup>xvii</sup> itself which if manipulated the slightest may have unpredictable consequences depending on who has access to the data. It was only recently that Netflix disclosed that they were part of a secret data-sharing agreement with Facebook, along with Amazon and Microsoft<sup>xviii</sup>. True, there is close to 40 zettabytes or 40 trillion gigabytes of data<sup>xix</sup> coursing through the real and ethereal veins of the net and to process all this data and still find something worth all that effort is a rather tall order. However, what streaming presents is a more sensitive opportunity for these people to pry into the deepest workings of the mind with their tweezers. Will a day come when Netflix can read your mind? At least when it comes to your Friday-night binge, they say that they can.

## Conclusion

Having established streaming as a new and formidable medium in the context of media theory as given by McLuhan, we have explored the structure of its interaction with the human mind. We've also established that streaming cannot be underestimated as a mere weekend distraction given the level of intimacy between the medium and the viewer it affords. Although extant research shines some light on the psychosocial and physiological effects of the internet as a whole and streaming through the proxy of television, no attempt has been made to delineate the place of streaming when it comes to its place in the man-made environment as an extension of human beings. There is an alarming dearth of data when it comes to studying the effects of streaming particularly on the activities and psyche of viewers. This is diametrically opposite to what streaming platforms are doing as they not only devise new means of obtaining highly reliable data but also put this data to profitable use. In addition, the token disclosures made by tech giants with regard to user data collection and access are unfortunately becoming the norm which if replicated in the case of streaming may lead to unprecedented circumstances.

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