THEY FOLLOW: EXPERIMENTS IN FORMAL DISTRIBUTION OF CONTEMPORARY HORROR FILMS

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Introduction

Horror films (and related sub-genres) have proved to be historically suitable for alternative ways of distribution and exhibition, either formal or informal (in the terms proposed by Lobato and Ryan, 2011 and Lobato, 2012). This is due to a series of intertwined factors:

- A remarkable range of mid to low budget (even «no budget») productions.
- A long-standing, hardcore fanbase, eager to discover comparatively obscure titles through festivals or specialized distribution companies (deemed as more authentic that mainstream releases with a wider public in mind).
- The transnational condition of horror, which allows for a broader circulation and re-contextualization of titles produced outside the limits of English-speaking countries (Lobato and Ryan, 2011).
- A more diverse range of criteria for assessing the pleasures provided by such films, which go beyond established «highbrow» perceptions of technical or artistic quality (Walker, 2014).

All these factors combined are key to the perception of horror films as comparatively «low-risk» products in terms of return of investment, which in turn stimulate controlled forms of experimentation regarding distribution, including what is considered, in a given period and territory, as the standard delay between windows of exploitation.

Drawing from the consideration of distribution, and its disruptions, as a valuable approach to filmmaking in order to understand the complex relationships between audiences and industries (Lobato and Ryan, 2011, p. 189), we will analyse the role of horror films in the changing landscape of film distribution, and particularly digital distribution, in the first two decades of the 21st century. We consider that the horror genre has been a fruitful testing ground for the limits of the very core of the windowing system, from the reduction of the delay between theatrical and home releases to the different possibilities of Video-On-Demand (VOD) (Tompkins, 2014). Our research shows that the horror genre has headed different tentative trends in formal distribution, anticipating in some cases important shifts in the film industry as a whole.

As we will show throughout this chapter, digital distribution has proven to be a tricky and fluid object of study. This proves to be true even when we approach agents forged in the digital economy, such as Netflix or Amazon Studios, developing their film strategy in a changing environment marked by uncertainty and growing competition.

We will begin this section by introducing some general considerations regarding the changes in formal distribution in the first two decades of the 21st century. Even if informal distribution, (from homemade VHS or DVD copies of a given movie to Bit Torrent activity or YouTube uploads), has been extensively used for horror films (Lobato and Ryan, 2011; Walker, 2014) we will focus our analysis mainly in formal distribution. Specifically, we will discuss the issues regarding the shortening of the delay between theatrical to home releases and the different typologies of VOD releases, ranging from simultaneous releases, also known as Day&Date or D&D, to Ultra-VOD releases (where VOD precedes theatrical release) or Direct-To-VOD (with no theatrical release). We have identified three main «waves» of experiments, broadly situated in time and our study will be centered on how horror (and related sub-genres) fit into these different waves, and to what extent they anticipate and reflect the potentialities, and also the challenges and contradictions of emerging forms of formal digital distribution, that might shape the future of distribution and also production.

Methodology

For our research, we have selected a sample of horror movies produced from 1999 to 2018 classified according to different criteria ranging from budget, production and distribution companies and release strategies. We have carried out a preliminary non-random selection of 130 titles, circumscribed to the American market, looking for significance and also diversity. We have taken into consideration factors like profitability, variability (regarding sub-genre and production size), cultural significance and singularity in terms of release strategy, at an individual and company level. Our database has included a series of items to be analysed, like key actors (particularly distributors) or delay from main theatrical release to VOD/ Home release. We have also looked into each global timeline of promotional screenings and releases, including festivals and limited territorial releases. In this chapter, we will show some relevant examples for each wave looking for change but also continuities.

Release experiments in a transitional period

Experiments with the windowing system have been carried out for years to try to re-accommodate the industry to the changing landscape of digital consumption practices. New forms of digital distribution have been instrumental in a progressive shortening of windows, not without uncertainties related to consumer behaviour and the interdependence of producers, distributors and exhibitors (Waterman and Lee, 2003).

In Figure 1 we can observe how the delay between the theatrical and home video release has been steadily shrinking, from an average of 200 days in 1998 to less than 120 days in 2014. We will come back to this graph when considering the specific case of horror.

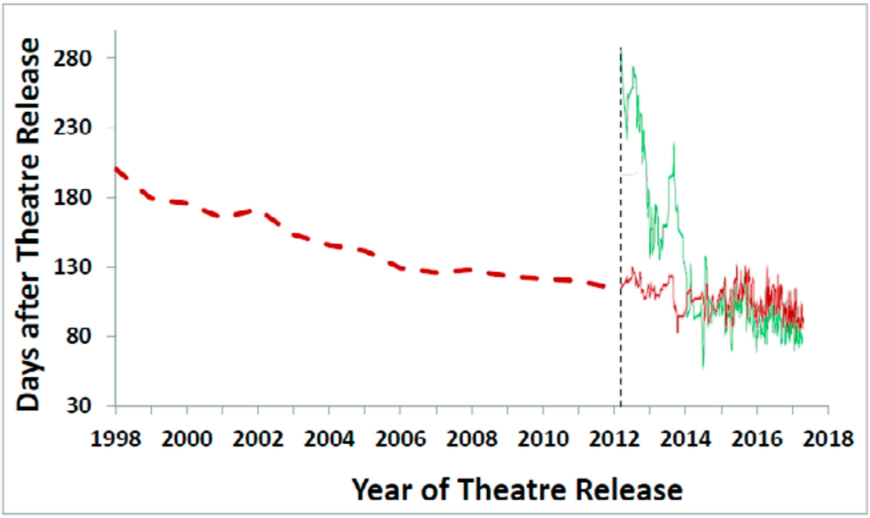

Figure 1: DVD and electronic sell-trough release windows (1998-2017).
Source: Granados and Mooney, 2018 (Reproduced with permission)

For the purposes of this section we will cover what we have conventionally called a «transitional period», roughly established between mid-2000s (when Steven Soderberg's film *Bubble* was released on a Day&Date scheme) and the 2010s, when digital actors like Netflix or Amazon consolidated their own film production and distribution strategy. In this transitional period, we have distinguished three intertwined and overlapping moments or «waves»: the first wave of independent experiments that took place in the mid-2000s, later tactical movements carried out by some bigger companies in the early 2010s and the unfolding strategies by US-based but global digital content actors like Netflix from the mid-2010s.

If we observe the evolution of the windowing system during these years, we can appreciate that horror movies are a good exponent of the continuing trend of shortening windows:

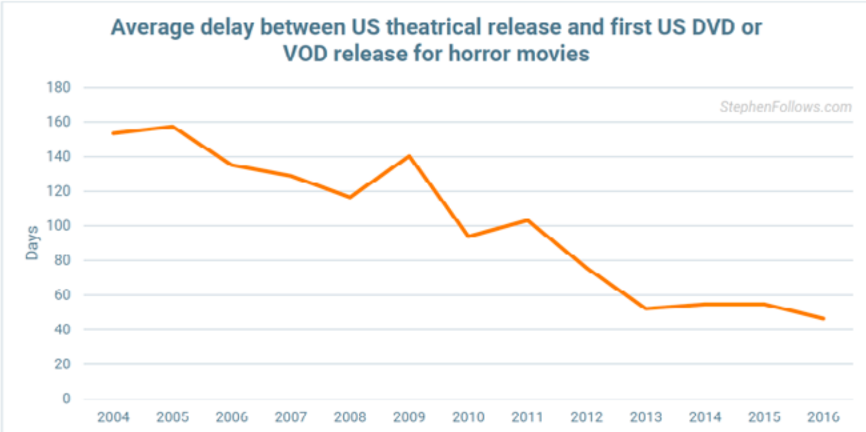

Figure 2: Average delay between US theatrical release and first US DVD or VOD release for horror movies. Source: Follows, 2017 (Reproduced with permission)

If we compare this illustration with the more general graph reproduced in Figure 1, it can be deduced that this trend has been proportionally taken even further, particularly after 2011, when release windows for horror movies fell under the psychological barrier of 100 days. By 2013, the delay was getting closer to the 50-day mark, less than half of the timing for Hollywood movies (see Brueggemann, & Thompson, 2014, or Granados & Mooney, 2018).

Taking into account budget size and the chronological evolution of release delay in our sample, we consider that a three-wave categorization is a useful way to describe alternative strategies to the standard windowing system, taking horror films as a reference. Indeed, there are some continuities between the general experiments and those addressed specifically to horror titles, but we will also point out some interesting differences.

In the following subsections, we will now focus on each wave, starting with a general overview to the experiments taking place in the film industry and then to horror film distribution.

Early digital experiments with windowing systems

Industrial context

In the mid-2000s there was already a growing concern regarding the sales of physical copies of home video. In this context, the Internet was seen as an opportunity as well as a menace, because of piracy and the changes in consumption that affected the entertainment industry. It can be argued that the first wave of systematic experiments in digital distribution were carried out in good measure because of the increasing difficulties in commercializing independent films through theatrical releases (Cunningham, 2015; Perren, 2010). The idea of streaming feature films or even of experimenting with simultaneous releases dates back to the late nineties, with start-ups like iFilm and films like *Quantum Project* (2000) (Iordanova and Cunningham, 2012), But it was not until the mid-2000s when companies like IFC and Magnolia started to conduct some more systematic experiments on simultaneous releases. Both IFC and Magnolia are subsidiaries of bigger companies, AMC Networks and 2929 Entertainment respectively, thus providing the necessary economy of scale to keep on performing these controlled experiments through time. Furthermore, both also have interests in exhibition (Perren, 2010), a move that, years later, Netflix would be considering to counterbalance the criticism towards the legitimation of Netflix's film originals. It is important to note that 2929 Entertainment produced Steven Soderberg's *Bubble* (2005), the starting point for its strategy of Day&Date releases and considered a turning point at the time (San Filippo, 2011; Nelson, 2014). In its turn, IFC started to experiment with VOD and Day&Date releases in 2006 with CSA: The Confederate States of America (Hildebrand, 2010, pp. 24-26). These companies have also experimented with alternative distribution of horror films through Magnet Releasing, a branch of Magnolia Pictures, or IFC Midnight. In addition, Lionsgate, a mid-size studio participated by 2929 Entertainment, will play a key role regarding the experimentation with shorter windows for their horror films.

The case in horror: shrinking activity.

A good place to start can be the resurgence of «indie horror» as a viable trend, made popular by the extraordinary success of the *found footage* film *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999 (Sexton, 2012). The film was already a case of window shortening in a peak time for DVD releases, with just about 100 days between theatrical and DVD release (the average for Hollywood movies in the late nineties was 180 days according to Illustration 1). At that time, low budget horror was being subjected to direct-to-video releases, as in the case of low profile sequels like *From Dusk to Dawn 2* (1999, Dimension Films, 1999) or *Candyman: Day of the dead* (1999, Artisan). It was also a time for mainstream horror films like *House on Haunted Hill, The Haunting, The Rage: Carrie 2, Stigmata* or *Lake Placid* (all with budgets exceeding $20 M), which complied with the standard windowing system (Warner's *House on Haunted Hill*, for instance, went for 172 days), but they were not generally well received among horror fans.

It can be stated that *The Blair Witch Project* changed the scene for horror films radically in terms of production, distribution and promotion. Its rushed sequel, *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (2000, Artisan) had a very short window release of only 85 days, tied to a series of special DVD and CD releases, which can be considered as an early experiment in adding value to the home video release through a lesser delay; however, the film performed disappointingly at the box office. Thus, even if during the first half of the 2000s there was a greater interest in distributing low budget horror films, most titles complied with the pattern of window releases as well as with the actual average delay between theatrical and home release, ranging from 110 to 140 days (as seen in Illustration 2). Anyway, some significant titles were released under a relatively shorter window scheme, that is, around or even below the 110-day mark, even if it did not yet crystallize into a consistent trend.

Table 1 shows the already noticeable gap between titles released under standard and short window strategies. For instance, mainstream horror titles like *The Amityville Horror* remake (2005, Metro Goldwyn Mayer) or *Constantine* (2005, Warner Bros), were released under a standard window of more than 160 days, while all the installments of the popular New Line franchise *Final Destination* would be released with a delay longer than 130 days. At the same time, however, other similarly budgeted franchises like *Underworld* and *Resident Evil* (both distributed by Sony's Screen Gems), tended to go for shorter releases between 100 and 110 days (only exceptions being the first *Resident Evil* film and *Underworld*: evolution, which went for slightly longer delays). Other films over a $10M budget, like *The Grudge* (a remake of the Japanese horror film *Ju-On* from 2002), *The exorcism of Emily Rose* and further —and bigger budgeted— installments of the *Saw* franchise were released also with a short delay.

Thus, budget would not seem to be as determinant as company’s strategy. A good example is Lionsgate: as we have seen previously, Lionsgate would become renowned by its Day&Date strategy in the 2010s, but experiments with the windowing system were already in motion through franchises like *Saw*, which consolidated a slate of theatrical release around Halloween and home release the following January, with a consistent delay of around 100 days. Another defining moment would come in 2007 with another ultra-low budget «sleeper hit», *Paranormal Activity*, distributed by Paramount Pictures. Just like in *Saw*, the subsequent *Paranormal Activity* franchise would stick to a short window strategy covering from October to January. More interestingly, it would inform the strategy of the company for further horror films to come, like in the J.J. Abrams production *Cloverfield* (2008), a bigger budgeted *found footage* film tied to an ambitious transmedia promotional campaign and released in a considerably short window of 85 days.

This last example links to another effect of the *Blair Witch Project* phenomenon in relation to horror films: the impact of its promotional website, which played with the blurring between fiction and reality. The campaign displayed a cheap but effective way to raise expectations and reach younger demographics (Telotte, 2001). Furthermore, it allowed other independent films, inside and outside the horror genre to find new ways to become known and relevant by embracing the possibilities of the Internet as a platform for content creation and communication, and even distribution, in coincidence with the popularization of video sharing platforms like Vimeo or YouTube. We would like to vindicate here the early work of Lance Weiler, an independent filmmaker and transmedia innovator who preceded *Blair Witch Project* in 1998 with *The Last Broadcast*, a «lost in the woods» *found footage* horror film which was also accompanied by a website and even an *Alternate Reality Game* (ARG). His follow-up, *Head Trauma*, (2006), was also a transmedia horror film which was connected to a website with graphical, textual and sound content (Hope is missing) that anticipated and complemented the events that shaped the narrative universe of the film (Pitts, 2007). *Head Trauma* went for a limited theatrical release and a short release window of 58 days, and it holds some interesting connections to the sort of experiences carried out in this first wave outside the limits of the horror label by agents like Magnolia and IFC.

Release tactics by bigger film companies

Industrial context

In early 2010s, some mainstream agents started to experiment with alternative ways of distributing content prioritizing new digital distribution outlets, particularly D&D and Ultra-VOD. This is the case of Lionsgate with drama films like *Margin Call* (2011) or *Arbitrage* (2012) (Miller, 2012; Nelson, 2014, p. 65; August, Dao and Shin, 2015, p. 22), and also The Weinstein Company, through its subsidiary Radius TWC, with titles like *The Bachelorette* (2012) (Vary, 2012). Even major players like Sony tried Ultra-VOD in 2011 with Adam Sandler's *Just* *go with it* (Szalai and McClintock, 2011), while Universal aborted a planned Ultra-VOD release that same year, *Tower Heist*, in fear of a boycott by exhibitors (McClintock, 2011; Nelson, 2014).

The case of horror: windows shatter

In this period, short delay releases have already become more common, which concurs with the general trend shown in Illustration 2. If we observe significant titles from the period, as shown in Table 2, we will be able to notice how some tentative experiments have become much normalized, with more companies involved, even those tied to big studios. New kinds of experiments started to arise, particularly connected to the increasingly popularity of VOD, digital downloads, and streaming services like YouTube or Netflix that, in 2012, already accounted for half the Internet traffic in North America (Daileda, 2013).

Magnolia's subsidiary, Magnet Releasing, would become an essential actor in this second wave for its commitment to short delay and simultaneous releases for horror films, as already shown with 2009's *House of the devil* (see Table 1). Specialized in distribution of selected low budget US and foreign titles, Magnet would experiment with shorter windows with *The Innkeepers* (2011, 81 days), *John Dies at the End* (2012, 67 days) and the anthology horror film V/H/S (2012, 60 days). The bid was taken a step further for another anthology film, *The ABCs of Death* (2012), in which Magnet experimented with Ultra-VOD a month ahead of theatrical release. This strategy would be repeated for *V/H/S 2 (*2013), *V/H/S Viral* (2014) and *The ABCs of Death 2* (2014). However, only announcements by bigger companies received attention of the specialized press. This was the case of two Paramount-distributed films, *Paranormal Activity: the Ghost Dimension* and *Scouts Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse* (both 2015), which reached home video formats only 17 days after theatrical release (Lang, 2015).

Still, the most interesting cases were Radius TWC productions. The first was the *post-apocalyptic sci-fi* film *Snowpiercer* (2013), a South-Korean film shot in English with an international cast ensemble:

in this case, VOD came just two weeks after theatrical release, which was particularly surprising as *Snowpiercer* was considered a high-end specialty product, that is, potentially appealing to wider audiences. As Brueggemann and Thompson (2014) state, *Snowpiercer* was an important attempt towards finding a right balance between theatrical and VOD, even though its idiosyncrasy, (a film based on a graphic novel, with a cult director) made it harder to replicate. Also, the secrecy surrounding its VOD release date contributed to a more favourable predisposition on the side of exhibitors, making it an integral part of its box-office success.

Another -and quite different- example was *It follows* (2014). The film was intended to be released under a similar strategy, that is, a limited theatrical run and VOD release two weeks later. But when it became an unexpected box-office phenomenon, exhibitors exerted pressure to go for a wide release and thus delay VOD, while cable companies and platforms would eventually press for keeping to the original plan of early VOD release (Brueggemann, 2015). After contradictory statements, the VOD date was eventually delayed allowing for a longer theatrical run, consequently, fitting the new standard window established at around 90 days (Han, 2015).

The emergence of new digital agents

Industrial context

One of the most disruptive movements in contemporary film production and distribution has been the entrance of new agents, specifically global Video-On-Demand services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO Max, Hulu (only available in Japan and the USA) or Disney+.

With all their own particularities, each of these services is committed to deliver exclusive original content, initially limited to TV formats, but in some cases expanded to original feature films. This has been done in two different ways: through rights acquisition in top festivals like Sundance, the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) or

South By Southwest (SXSW), also key markets for horror films, or acting as production or co-production companies. Still, the biggest difference between these agents lies in exhibition and distribution strategies: while Amazon and Hulu's bid goes for a theatrical run (wide or limited), closer to a standard 60-90-day delay before making their films available in the platform, Netflix commits to a variety of strategies, including limited theatrical runs in specific territories, but also Day&Date and Direct-to-VOD.

The case of horror: the Netflix Paradox

The controversy regarding the aggressive strategy of Day&Date or direct-to Netflix releases is squarely connected to what can be considered as a *feature film* (or more precisely, a culturally legitimized *feature film*), in relation to theatrical exhibition. Precisely, the particularities of the horror film in terms of distribution has favored their suitability for experimentation, as observed in Table 2.

From this table, we can observe how the trend for window shortening, consolidated through wave two, has reached a standard around the 80 or 90 day mark, which again corresponds to the data from Figure 2 and is a sign of continuity. Distribution divisions of big studios becoming more active in the horror market, like Columbia or Universal Pictures, have followed the way opened by Paramount, Screen Gems (Sony) or New Line/ Warner in setting this new standard, and this trend has also been adopted by the younger but expanding company A24. Again, smaller companies have gone one step ahead: thus, *The Invitation* (2015, Drafthouse Films), *The Void* (2016, Screen Media Films), *The Eyes of my Mother* (2016, Magnet Releasing) or *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016, IFC Midnight) are examples of Day&Date releases, involving theatrical and VOD, while *Holidays* (2016, Vertical Entertainment), opted for a Ultra-VOD strategy.

As for Netflix, it is important to understand that it adapts its strategy to the key audiences and markets for each product. Thus, we can observe how acquisitions from 2016, like Mike Flanagan's *Hush* or

I am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House Were released as Direct-To-Netflix, after being presented in top Festivals like SXSW or TIFF. The subsequent Mike Flanagan film, Stephen King's adaptation *Gerald's Game* (2017), was already developed as a collaboration between producing company Intrepid Films and Netflix, going for a similar release strategy (Festival premiere and Direct-to-Netflix). A different case is *The Ritual* (2017), a British film acquired for international distribution by Netflix at TIFF, but which first had a theatrical run in the UK. Apparently, a similar case is Alex Garland's much anticipated film *Annihilation* (2018), with Netflix acquiring worldwide rights but with a first theatrical run in the USA. In this case, producing company Paramount was concerned about the film not being appealing enough for wider audiences, opting for a short theatrical run in the USA while selling the rights worldwide to Netflix. This posed the idea of using Netflix as a way to avoid the marketing costs of international theatrical distribution (Kit, 2017). This might explain the different windowing delays in both cases, that is, 119 days in the case of *The Ritual* and only 17 in the case of *Annihilation*. Therefore, the *Annihilation* case seems to be closer to *The Cloverfield Paradox* (2018), another Paramount film (this time co-produced with Bad Robot), which became unexpectedly released as a Direct-to-Netflix, in a much-publicized surprise announcement of immediate release just after the 2018 edition of the Super Bowl. The film was met with mostly negative reviews and it was suggested that Paramount used Netflix as a safety net to avoid a box-office bomb (Spiegel, 2018).

Conclusions

Experiments in informal and formal distribution of horror films abound, even if it has not been enough considered in the specialized literature (see, for instance, the scarce reference to distribution strategies in the otherwise exhaustive Horror Report). Our research, even if limited at this stage to the American market and English-speaking titles, has shown how different horror titles and distribution companies have been experimenting during the first decades of the 21st Century with the windowing system, predating the future steps to be taken in other kind of titles. These experiments have not been limited to low budget films or small independent companies: in fact, many experiments have been carried out by subdivisions of Majors (Sony, Warner, Paramount, Columbia, Universal or 20th Century Fox), Mini-Majors (Lionsgate, A24), or companies tied to bigger corporations (IFC, Magnolia). A historical approach has been useful to identify different moments, expressed as waves of experiments, which obeyed to various motivations regarding changes in consumption practices, emerging technologies and disruptive strategies by new actors.

As shown by the data and the literature, while following a similar path along time when compared to Hollywood titles, the trend towards the shrinking of windows has been much more noticeable in the case of horror films. But horror has also played a relevant part in experiments with riskier strategies, like Day&Date, Ultra-VOD or Direct-to-VOD. For instance, what seemed contingent in relation to specific experiences in the general approach to the second wave has proved to be much more systematic when we look specifically at horror. Looking at companies and actions taken, it can be said that despite being sometimes undervalued as «popular culture» in contrast to *art-house films*, in terms of distribution, horror is often closer to independent films than to mainstream *blockbuster* movies. These ties have been strengthened around what has come to be labelled as «Art Cinema Horror» (Howell, 2017), associated to titles like *It Follows, The Babadook, A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night, What We Do in the Shadows* (all from 2014), *The witch* (2015), *Get Out* (2017), *Hereditary* (2019), *Us* (2019), *Midsommar* (2019) or *The Lighthouse* (2019). The case of *It Follows* shows that when box-office expectations rise, also does pressure to expand release windows towards what is considered an already established standard.

Although it is easy to establish continuities across waves, each one offers some significant shifts in terms of emerging and consolidating trends, showing a feedback between the industrial environmental conditions in a given moment, distributor decision-making and popular cycles (like *found-footage*, supernatural tales set in homes, exorcisms or *art-house horror*). It can be stated that the second wave highlights the growing presence of VOD as a home consumption pattern through different platforms, while third wave is clearly dominated by specific subscription services based on the release of original content, like Netflix.

The «Netflix effect» has already been formidable, becoming the window of choice to decrease the risk for some anticipated titles with bigger budgets, either in the domestic or the international market. But it is also the main gatekeeper for what is produced and distributed, while also being an agent extremely reluctant to give away any data that could allow to evaluate the performance of a given movie. It is still soon to assess if further experiments in alternative releases in formal distribution will be subdued by the sense of security provided by an established global actor, eager to acquire original content to build a seemingly infinite catalogue. Or, on the contrary, if it can help to give more exposure to films that otherwise would be lost in the sometimes extremely long and difficult rounds through festival and international market circuits, thus appearing as more appealing, profitable products. This could also be the case for international horror titles, which can become global phenomena through platform distribution, as it was the case of Spanish film *Veronica* (2017). New platforms like HBOMax or Disney+ are increasing the competition based on secure talent for exclusive original production aimed at different audiences, territories and ways of consumption. And horror will keep having a pivotal role in this scenario.

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