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In pursuit of authenticity: Netflix's algorithmic cosmopolitanism

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Abstract

Netflix's competitive edge lies in its capacity to make its programmes travel. Its digital architecture and content strategy are aligned to achieve this objective. While Netflix has expanded its commissioning footprint to seek out local narratives, this pursuit of cultural specificity is shaped by commercial imperatives. Cultural specificity is no longer self-contained but reconstructed and performed as authenticity for an algorithmic infrastructure. Consequently, Netflix's catalogue resembles a Derridean universe in which cultural difference is reconfigured as algorithmic *différance*. As the meaning of cultural values is deferred in time and space, the value of cultural meaning becomes fleeting and uncertain.

Keywords

algorithmic studies, cultural authenticity, cultural specificity, digital architecture, digital culture, Netflix, streaming dramas, streaming platforms

Introduction

This article makes a twofold argument. It contends that Netflix's competitive edge lies in its capacity to make its programmes travel, and that the platform's digital architecture and content strategy are aligned to achieve that specific objective. The article then explores how this strategy influences the nature of Netflix's programming. While some of its content is designed to cross borders, the online service has significantly expanded its

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commissioning footprint to seek out authentic local narratives. However, this pursuit of cultural specificity is shaped by commercial imperatives. In the digital realm, cultural specificity can be (re)constructed to align with a global recommendation system. When local producers are expected to deliver cultural authenticity, they are essentially generating meaning for a foreign audience, as a culture cannot be authentic in and for itself. Thus, cultural specificity becomes externally defined and based on its intelligibility to other cultures. Its value is deferred to others and determined by algorithmic logic, turning cultural difference into what the article calls algorithmic *différance*.

This article follows a progressive narrative arc. The first section outlines the economic context and highlights the profound shifts witnessed in the media and entertainment industry in the streaming era. The media and entertainment sector is not just transitioning from a legacy model; streaming involves a full reconfiguration of value creation and audience engagement. The rules of the platform economy prevail in the streaming industry, where scale provides a distinct advantage. The section explains how *transnational network effects* impact streaming and why Netflix is particularly well-positioned to benefit from them.

The second section delves into Netflix's digital architecture, arguing that it has been deliberately engineered to leverage scale and harness network effects. The following section investigates the international circulation of Netflix shows, introducing a typology that classifies content according to its origin and capacity to cross borders. Then, the article examines Netflix's commissioning strategy, demonstrating that its investments are aimed at optimising the global reach and impact of its content.

The final section analyses the textual characteristics of travelling content. Some Netflix productions are crafted for transnational appeal, while others are rooted in local storytelling. This article contends that the streamer's search for cultural authenticity is driven by the firm's commercial interests and that cultural specificity is manipulated to fit patterns of transnational consumption. In its search for authenticity, the platform reshapes cultural specificity whose meaning is externally driven and defined by its intelligibility to other cultures. Its meaning is *deferred* to the global recommendation system, thereby transforming cultural difference into algorithmic *différance*.

This article contributes to our knowledge and understanding of Netflix by bridging two distinct bodies of literature. The first examines global streamers' digital infrastructure and business model, including the literature on platform capitalism, which is crucial to analyse the streaming industry and understand why a few global platforms have acquired unprecedented scale and power. The second focuses on textual analysis of streaming content. This includes film and television studies that undertake genre analysis, interpret textual and narrative features, and study catalogue composition. By bridging these two research traditions, this article offers a more holistic perspective on Netflix's operations.

This research adopts a hypothetico-deductive approach, formulating working hypotheses that were subsequently tested through research interviews with senior TV executives based in the UK. The findings indicate that, in the British market, Netflix's commissioning practices are largely shaped by the imperative to serve local audiences. These insights informed the development of a content typology and theoretical framework that highlight the dual importance of the local and the global in Netflix's commissioning strategy.

The global shift

The streaming industry is highly concentrated, not least the Subscription Video on Demand (SVoD) sector, where the bulk of the worldwide revenue is captured by three services: Amazon Prime Video, Disney and Netflix. Together, they collected 90% of the total SVoD income in Europe in 2023, earning €14.2 billion and accounting for 85% of the SVoD viewing time (Grece and Tran 2023: 14; Iancu, 2025: 22). In the UK in 2024, they captured 37 out of the 38 average daily minutes of SVoD/AVoD viewing (Ofcom, 2025: 23). Globally, these three services have around 650 million subscribers between them in 2025.

Multiple streaming platforms operate in any given market, and some local services such as Shahid (Middle East), JioHotstar (India), GloboPlay (Brazil), and TV2 Play (Denmark) post strong performances in terms of viewing hours and/or number of users/subscribers (Albornoz and Krakowiak, 2024; Esser et al., 2023: 8; Szalai, 2024). However, countries where local platforms dominate the SVoD market are far and few between, and the three streaming giants usually monopolise the leading positions.

Netflix, the object of this study, is particularly dominant. It is not merely the world's leading SVoD platform, it is the market leader in most countries in which it operates, as is the case across South East Asia, Latin America, North America, Western Europe, at least three territories in Asia Pacific (Australia, Korea, Japan) and two in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates) (Albornoz and García Leiva, 2022: 64; Albornoz and Krakowiak, 2024: 130; Cunningham and Scarlata, 2020: 150; Centre national du cinema 2024: 172; Esser and Steemers, 2026: 20; Gjylbegaj and Mousa, 2025: 132; Kim, 2022; 1509; Khalil and Zayani, 2024: 173; Ofcom, 2025: 22; Parsons interview, 2025, with additional data from the trade press; Tse, 2024: 112). Two independent factors explain this concentration.

First, digital technology enables streaming giants to reach global audiences by scaling distribution at low cost. Technologically, it is simpler to broadcast locally than internationally but it is more efficient to stream on a global scale. This efficiency stems from the cloud-based infrastructure deployed by streaming giants. While they make limited investments in proprietary infrastructure such as content delivery networks (CDNs), they outsource most of the workload to large cloud providers (Ali et al., 2025). Cloud computing offers the flexibility and scalability needed to complete a variety of tasks, including content distribution and data collection without significant capital expenditure. It is far more cost-effective for online platforms to contract out media delivery tasks to cloud suppliers which amortise infrastructure costs across multiple industrial sectors (e.g. banking, health) and territories.

It would be prohibitively expensive for Netflix to build a global distribution infrastructure. Instead, the company has opted to outsource all its distribution tasks to Amazon Web Services (AWS). As a cloud provider, AWS amortises its infrastructure costs across a broad client base and geographic footprint, including thousands of media and entertainment companies. Cloud computing favours large digital platforms over smaller rivals due to economies of scale: the more subscribers a platform has, the lower the *average* cost per user. Thus, global streaming services incur lower connectivity costs per user compared to smaller digital platforms (Chalaby, 2023).

Second, streaming is not just a technological shift, it marks the emergence of a new ecosystem that embeds television within the platform economy (Chalaby, 2024). This economy is characterised by the dominance of a few players because scale provides a decisive advantage (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Kenney and Zysman, 2020; Poell et al., 2022; Srnicek, 2017). Netflix, for example, can distribute the cost of content production across its vast subscriber base, resulting in the lowest cost-per-view ratio in the industry. The cost of *Adolescence* (2025), for instance, was spread across 145 million views for the first half of 2025 alone (Netflix, 2025e). This raises a key question: how is the advantage that scale provides optimised in the streaming industry?

One of the defining characteristics of platforms is their ability to generate network effects. According to network effects theory, the value a user gains from a platform increases with the number of other users engaging with it (Gawer, 2014: 1240–1; Parker et al., 2016: 16–34; Steinberg, 2019: 97–102). When positive network effects occur, a platform becomes more beneficial as its user base grows. A historical example is the rapid expansion of the telephone network in the early 20th century: as more households adopted the technology, the network's utility grew, creating a self-reinforcing dynamic – referred to as an 'attraction loop' – that led to widespread adoption in a short period (Belleflamme and Peitz, 2021: 13).

Today, network effects are most evident in the video-sharing sector, dominated globally by YouTube and TikTok (Burgess and Green, 2018). These platforms host billions of videos, drawing in vast audiences. As user numbers and engagement rise, content creators and organisations are incentivised to contribute more videos, attracted by the potential for greater reach and advertising revenue. YouTube's attraction loop is so potent that national broadcasters like TF1 in France and Channel 4 in the UK run channels on the platform to increase their reach.

At first glance, subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) platforms may not appear to benefit from network effects, as users typically do not interact directly. Nevertheless, an increase in subscribers can enhance the overall value of the service for all users, especially when the platform's digital infrastructure and content strategy are designed to foster such effects.

Since entering the South Korean market in 2016, Netflix has heavily invested in licensing and producing local dramas (Ju, 2024: 431–4). These efforts have resonated with Korean audiences, who predominantly consume domestic content (Wayne and Ribke, 2024: 1356). This strategy has paid off, enabling Netflix to secure a leading position in Korea's SVoD market by the early 2020s (Kim, 2022: 1509). However, local competitors like Wavve and Watcha still offer a broader selection of Korean programming (Kang, 2024). Netflix's success can be attributed to its ability to provide a sufficient amount of local content to attract Korean viewers, while also offering a diverse range of international content, including Hollywood films and Japanese anime. This combination of local and global programming has helped Netflix outperform its domestic rivals.

A similar pattern is evident in other markets, such as Spain, where Netflix has also made significant investments and emerged as the dominant SVoD provider (Albornoz and García Leiva, 2022: 64). Despite competition from local services like Movistar+, which produce and license more Spanish content (Hidalgo-Marí and García-Escrivá, 2024: 40–6), Netflix maintains its lead by offering a compelling mix of local productions and a wide

array of international titles. This includes a substantial selection of US content as well as non-English and non-Spanish programming, such as Korean dramas, which have proved popular among Spanish audiences (Albornoz and García Leiva, 2022: 78).

In both Korea and Spain, Netflix's market position would be undermined without local content, but it is the platform's extensive and diverse library that gives it an edge over local rivals. Scale, however, has no intrinsic benefit and is only turned into a competitive advantage when network effects are generated transnationally by making content cross borders. In theory, when subscribers in one country enjoy content originally produced for another, both groups benefit from each other's growth. Increased subscriber numbers in one market generate the revenue and incentive for the platform to invest further in local content, some of which will find an audience in other markets (Stallkamp and Schotter, 2021: 70). This creates a virtuous cycle of growth and content expansion, with network effects operating across multiple regions and at scale (Stallkamp and Schotter, 2021: 72; Chalaby, 2025).

Empirical data supports this argument in Netflix's case. A study by Catalina Iordache and colleagues (2022: 248), which examined the number of original productions in Europe's five largest markets, found a strong correlation between subscriber numbers and original content. Specifically, they observed that 'the higher the number of subscribers and revenue generated in each market, the higher the number of Netflix Originals' (Iordache et al., 2022: 48). In essence, a growing subscriber base in one country enables Netflix to increase local investment, enhancing the viewing experience domestically and, when content is shared across borders, internationally as well. These network effects are central to Netflix's global leadership in the SVoD industry. The following sections explore how the platform's digital infrastructure and content strategy are deliberately designed to maximise these effects.

Netflix's digital infrastructure

A digital infrastructure is *the framework that guides the assemblage and interaction of digital components (hardware and software) and defines the key properties (features and affordances) of a platform*. A platform is a dynamic structure designed with forethought. In Netflix's case, the foundational elements of this architecture are designed to enable the service to operate *across* and *within* borders in order to perform locally and globally. With this overall objective in mind, the elements of Netflix's digital architecture are intended to maximise the probability that its shows travel far and wide.

The first relevant element is global access to the catalogue. In the pre-internet age, Hollywood studios staggered the release of their movies, starting with the USA and rolling them out around the world (Ulin, 2019: 167). Today, in a deliberate strategy, streaming giants release their titles globally and simultaneously (Neira et al., 2023: 10). It facilitates marketing and leverages social media platforms by capturing the buzz a new release inevitably generates. Among large streaming services, Netflix adapts its libraries the most and between 20 and 40% of content varies from one local catalogue to another (Lotz et al., 2022: 516). This percentage is even higher in Muslim-majority countries. In the United Arab Emirates for instance, only 28% of the US catalogue is available to local subscribers (Gjylbegaj and Mousa, 2025: 132).

To evaluate Netflix's distribution strategy, it must be considered within the broader historical context of global film distribution. Although Netflix clearly recognises the importance of local adaptation, its flagship content is launched simultaneously across markets and is globally accessible. Despite localisation efforts, a core library of thousands of titles and original productions is shared across countries. This explains why the platform's most popular shows routinely rank among the most-watched in over 90 territories.¹ While localisation practices do shape Netflix's approach (Lobato, 2019: 107–34), the defining feature of its distribution strategy remains global accessibility rather than local curation and geo-blocking.

The second feature of this architecture is the recommendation algorithm. Streaming technology involves a return path, allowing platforms to record every single users' interaction. The number and nature of platform searches, browsing and scrolling behaviour, viewing time and location, and viewing behaviour, are all recorded. Netflix's algorithm delves into this dataset to match up tagged content with recorded past preferences in order to deliver a customised experience to users (Hsiao et al., 2025).

Netflix has deliberately – albeit progressively – adopted a global approach to the recommendation system, and the behavioural segmentation occurs now irrespective of demographic and geographic data. Today, the online service aggregates taste communities across geographies (Neira et al., 2023: 7–8). As a Netflix engineer once explained: 'Rather than looking at audiences through the lens of a single country and catalogue, Netflix's global recommendation system finds the most relevant global communities based on a member's personal tastes and preferences, and uses those insights to serve up better titles for each member, regardless of where he or she may live' (Gomez-Uribe, 2016).

Third, Netflix has created a multilingual ecosystem. The platform was the first international streaming service to place emphasis on local adaptation and thus invested heavily into translation services (Lobato, 2019: 116–21). The number of languages on offer has steadily increased, to reach 33 subtitle options and 36 dubbing possibilities across the catalogue (Spangler, 2025). Since 2025, subscribers can choose a language independently of their location and language settings, vastly expanding their choice (Spangler, 2025). The service's multilingual capabilities facilitate the global reach of content (Neira et al., 2023: 10). As Netflix emphasises, 'more than 70% of global viewing [comes] from members watching a title from a country other than their own' (Blenkinsopp, 2023), and 45% of the viewing of English language titles occurs using dubbing or subtitles in foreign languages. In sum, while this architecture includes adaptation features, it remains as open as can be and is designed to encourage borderless discoverability and global engagement.

Content travelability: The local, the translocal and the global

Although Netflix derives the greatest value when its content transcends national boundaries, not all programmes achieve such transnational circulation. Among those that do, the trajectories from origin to destination vary considerably. The concept of *travelability* refers to a programme's capacity to circulate internationally, independent of its textual or narrative features. From such a perspective, three distinct categories of content emerge: local-to-local, local-to-global (translocal) and global.

Netflix began its international expansion ahead of the field, giving it a head start in its understanding of local markets (Cornelio-Mari, 2020). The return path enabled the platform to understand viewers' tastes and realise the importance of local content. This translated into melodrama for Mexican audiences and anime for Japanese viewers (Cornelio-Mari, 2020: 7; Parsons interview, 2025).

Netflix commissions or acquires content with the sole aim of serving specific national audiences, a category internally referred to as '*local-for-local*' programming (Netflix, 2025c: 8). Such content is not intended for international distribution and may be licensed, co-produced or shared with domestic broadcasters. In France – a market characterised by strong demand for national content – Netflix has entered into a partnership with TF1 to share selected programmes on its platform (Netflix, 2025c: 8). A similar arrangement exists in the UK, where ITVX and Disney+ have agreed to exchange curated content across their respective services.

For Netflix, local content functions as an entry point into its broader catalogue which comprises two types of programmes in terms of origins. *Global content* is of Anglo-American origin and adheres to Hollywood production standards. Such content typically commands budgets sufficient to attract at least one Hollywood star and production talent proficient in high-end television (Garvie interview, 2025). This category spans a wide range of genres, from scripted entertainment to documentary.

The sustained popularity of Anglo-American programming on streaming platforms has prompted scholars to revisit the concept of *cultural proximity*, originally developed to explain audience preferences for domestic or culturally adjacent media (Straubhaar, 1991). A recent large-scale audience study conducted across four European countries – Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy – found that US content was the most favoured among young viewers, outperforming both British and domestic programming (Esser et al., 2025: 6, 25). As Andrea Esser and Jeanette Steemers conclude, 'English language hegemony creates and maintains geo-political imbalances between non-Anglophone countries and the Anglo-American sphere' (Esser and Steemers, 2026: 33).²

Netflix was never in doubt about the popularity of these programmes. As an executive states: 'Hollywood content travels very well abroad with local content representing a minority of viewing in our markets. We make investments in local content (both second run and Netflix originals) as a way to onboard members and to introduce them to our global catalog' (in Albornoz and García Leiva, 2022: 64). Globally, US programmes captured 59% of total viewing hours on the service in the second half of 2024 (Ampere Analysis, 2025).

Local-to-global (translocal) content is non-English programming that travels far and wide. While the USA remains Netflix's favourite investment destination (below), there has been a progressive inflexion in the streamer's content strategy. Since the late 2010s, it has diversified the origin of its content and placed increasing emphasis on international originals. As Ted Sarandos, Netflix Chief Executive Officer, stated in 2018, 'we're not trying to make more Hollywood content for the world, we're trying to make content from anywhere in the world to the rest of the world' (Netflix, 2018: 2).

Netflix's first non-English production was *Club de Cuervos (Club of Crows)*, a Mexican drama series which premiered in 2015 (Cornelio-Mari, 2020: 12). Four years

later, *La casa de papel* (*Money Heist*) (2017-21) became the most-watched show across the platform's non-English language countries (Albornoz and García Leiva, 2022: 69; Edgerton, 2023: 140-2). This led Netflix to progressively increase its overseas content investment, to finally spend more on international shows than US programming in 2024 (US\$7.9 billion vs US\$7.5 billion) (Ampere Analysis, 2024). The online service is currently commissioning content from 50 territories across Europe, Latin America, South East Asia and Africa (Netflix, 2025b: 4).

Commissioning for travelability

Although local content is essential for entering national markets, it is an area where Netflix faces challenges compared to national broadcasters. In any given country, the share of Netflix originals that are domestically produced is minimal. For instance, in Spain, local originals accounted for just 1.7% of the platform's total original content in 2019 (Albornoz and García Leiva, 2022: 73). Instead, Netflix's main competitive edge lies in its international catalogue – programming that, by definition, finds audiences beyond its country of origin. While the global appeal of Hollywood content is long proven, the travelability of non-English content is far more uncertain, raising the following question: what does Netflix do to increase the probability that it reaches audiences beyond its country of origin?

The company's public stance suggests that it is not an objective that it actively pursues. Netflix executives consistently emphasise that their shows are created with local audiences in mind, and that producing content for a global market is nearly impossible. Speaking about *Adolescence* – Netflix's second most-watched show ever – Anna Mallet, Vice President of Production for Netflix UK, remarks: 'It's a great example of our strategy, which is to make local UK content for local UK audiences. It's fantastic that it's resonated globally, but our focus remains firmly on the domestic audience' (Mallett, 2025). Two well-informed TV executives, Wayne Garvie, President of international production at Sony Pictures Television, and John McVay, Pact Chief Executive, confirm that they have never heard Netflix commissioners telling British producers to make their stories more appealing to a transnational audience (Garvie, interview 2027; McVay, interview 2025). McVay explains that such claims are 'a bit of nonsense,' pointing out that all the UK-made British shows that performed well internationally played well to the domestic market (Garvie interview, 2027; McVay interview, 2025).³

The solution to the riddle lies in Netflix's investment behaviour. It is not about how the service commissions original content, but where it does so, and it is not about its behaviour towards film and TV producers, but those with which it chooses to engage. Netflix strategically allocates resources to countries and production companies whose content has proven international appeal. Guided by the principle that, in the creative industries, 'no one knows what works until it works', the company relies on historical data to inform its decisions.

Although Netflix's corporate discourse emphasises that great stories can come from anywhere – and it has indeed broadened its commissioning footprint – the bulk of its investments still go to a select group of countries with a strong track record of exporting content. Among non-English-speaking markets, Korea and Spain stand out. Netflix's level

of investment in Korea, which began in 2018, far exceeds what the size of its domestic market alone would justify (Ju, 2024: 5). After years of substantial spending, Netflix launched a 4-year, \$2.5 billion investment plan in 2024 (Liang and Hoskins, 2023).

In Europe, Netflix concentrates its funding in Spain and the UK, two countries whose content has historically travelled well. This approach is not unique to Netflix: in 2024, these two markets have attracted 58% of global streamer spending on European original content, amounting to €2.9 billion for the UK and €2.0 billion for Spain (Fontaine, 2025: 18).

Spain has become a significant production hub for Netflix where it has built a production centre featuring multiple stages and post-production facilities (Netflix, 2025a). The service produced its first movie, *7 años*, in 2016 and its first two series, *Las Chicas del Cable* (*Cable Girls*) (2017–21) and *La casa de papel* the following year. In 2024/25, the third season of *Machos Alfa* (*Alpha Males*) (2022–present), the final season of *Valeria* (2020–25) and *El jardinero* (*The Gardener*) (2025) have all reached the top 10 in more than 80 countries. The streamer is planning to spend a further US\$1.2 billion in Spain in the next 3 years (Netflix, 2025d).

In sum, Netflix remains selective in content sourcing, and programmes originating from five countries delivered 81% of the platform's total viewing hours in the second half of 2024: USA, 59%, Korea, eight per cent, UK, seven per cent, Japan, five per cent, and Spain, two per cent (Ampere Analysis, 2024).

Second, Netflix commissions most content from large film and TV production companies (Paterson, 2022: 172). It also primarily works with suppliers whom it trusts, either because they have an established relationship or a track record of making commercially successful shows. As Garvie explains, 'Netflix is not in the business of working with untried, untested producers' (Garvie, interview 2025). The service only produces four new dramas per year on average in the UK and cannot afford to take too many risks. For instance, *Dept. Q* (2025 – present) brought together Left Bank (a Sony subsidiary) and Scott Frank as showrunner. Netflix knew them both, as Left Bank delivered *The Crown* (2016–23) and *Who is Erin Carter?* (2023) while Scott Frank was the showrunner for *The Queen's Gambit* (2020) (Garvie, interview 2025). *Dept. Q* was in good hands and duly delivered the ratings. In other genres, Netflix seeks best-in-class content and commissions shows to award-winning specialists who excel in their field, whether it is documentaries (e.g. 72 Films, *World War II: From the Frontlines*, 2023), natural history (e.g. Silverback Films, *Life on Our Planet*, 2023),⁴ animation (e.g. Aardman Animations, *Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget*, 2023), or reality TV (e.g. Studio Lambert, *Squid Game: The Challenge*, 2023–present).

The same pattern emerges in Spain. Netflix has collaborated with 60 Spanish film and TV producers since 2016 (Netflix, 2025a: 7), but it does not prevent the streamer from having a privileged relationship with a selected few. Since *Las Chicas del Cable*. Bambú Producciones has completed numerous projects for Netflix, including *Alta Mar* (*High Seas*), *A pesa de todo* (*Despite Everything*, 2019), *Jaguar* (2021), *El caso Asunta* (*The Asunta Case*, 2024), *El caso Alcàsser* (*The Alcàsser Murders*, 2019), *La viuda negra* (*A Widow's Game*, 2025), and *Manual para señoritas* (*The Lady's Companion*, 2025). As for the Spanish production company behind *La casa de papel*, they have since produced several series for the online service, including *White Lines* (with Left Bank Pictures,

2020), *Berlin* (2023–present) and *El refugio atómico* (*Billionaire's Bunker*, 2025). In fact, since the opening of its production hub near Madrid, Netflix has marginalised small production companies and those located outside the capital, to the extent of ‘threaten[ing] the sustainability of the Spanish screen production ecosystem’ (Lopera-Mármol et al., 2023: 173).

This safety-first commissioning strategy is not unique to Netflix and is reflected in overall commissioning figures from streamers. Out of 83 producers that have developed content for streamers between 2016 and 2021, ‘39 (47%) produced more than three titles during the period’ (Hidalgo-Marí and García-Escrivá, 2024: 41). Four companies, among them Bambú Producciones, have produced 26 series between them (Hidalgo-Marí and García-Escrivá, 2024: 41).

Towards algorithmic cosmopolitanism

Scholars have observed that transnational texts display discursive characteristics designed to facilitate their transport. On one hand, as Mareike Jenner writes, Netflix texts have adopted the ‘grammar of transnationalism’, being ‘produced with a desired transnational appeal in mind [and] thought of as transnational from the outset’ (Jenner, 2023: 245). Transnational textuality revolves around a certain set of genres, themes and values. Genres with global appeal include thrillers, fantasy (e.g. *Stranger Things*, 2016–25, *Wednesday*, 2022–present), and costume drama (*Bridgerton*, 2020–present; Jenner, 2023: 236–8). Transnational texts display strong ‘visual signifiers’ (e.g. *Squid Game*, 2021–25) and articulate liberal values that appeal to young audiences (Jenner, 2023: 238). According to Garvie, those shows that travel best have high production values and a ‘universality of theme and tone’ (Garvie interview, 2025). Outside the USA, Netflix picks genres with an international track record, whether it is anime from Japan, narconovelas from Mexico or drama from Korea (Cornelio-Marí, 2020; Parsons interview, 2025). Some transnational texts use narrative strategies which tone down or entirely remove local references. Teen dramas such as *Stranger Things* and *Wednesday* provide archetypical examples of de-localising and decontextualising strategies (Asmar et al., 2025; Boisvert and Lavallée, 2026).

On the other hand, Netflix’s library is diverse and includes many culturally specific titles (Dunleavy and Weissmann, 2023). Currently producing or co-producing shows in more than 50 territories, the cosmopolitanism of Netflix’s commissioning must be acknowledged. It is the first US-based media conglomerate in history to spend more abroad than in its domestic market (above). Further, Netflix’s catalogue is far less US-centric than those of other global streamers. While all major streamers are currently shifting away from US content (Kupczyk, 2025), Netflix is well ahead of the curve and its catalogue contains far more non-US titles than its rivals (Lotz et al., 2022). Its commissioning sounds like a perpetual search for ‘authentic local storytelling’ (Mallett, 2025).

The local plays a role within the Netflix ecosystem, but its status warrants closer examination. As Michael Wayne and Deborah Castro observe, the notion of ‘authenticity’ features prominently in Netflix’s corporate discourse (Wayne and Castro, 2025). Executives consistently emphasise the importance of reflecting local culture in the content commissioned for national markets. This emphasis, however, is not solely driven by a

commitment to cultural diversity. Rather, Netflix's pursuit of local specificity is strategically aligned with its objective of enhancing content travelability. This is evident in several corporate statements: 'The more authentically local the show is, the better it travels'; 'We ... have found that the best way to make global stories is to make them incredibly, authentically local'; 'Television, film starts with being very culturally specific and very authentic. If you try to make a show for everyone, you make a show for no one'; and 'we believe that people have always wanted authentic storytelling that is rooted in local culture and that locality actually illuminates the transnational themes of the story' (in [Wayne and Castro, 2025](#): 5, 7, 8). The appeal of locally grounded realism is underpinned by sociological factors. As Esser argues, 'globalisation – and with it the television sector's advancing transnationalisation – goes hand in hand with the quest for authenticity and the appeal of local specificity' ([Esser, 2020](#): 41).

Netflix has long recognised that content genuinely produced for domestic audiences can achieve significant international success. This is exemplified by series such as *Borgen* (2010-22, DR and Netflix), *El Ministerio del Tiempo* (*The Ministry of Time*, 2015-20, TVE), *La casa de papel* (Antenna 3 and Netflix), and *Dix pour cent* (*Call My Agent!*, 2015-20, France Télévisions) – all originally commissioned by national broadcasters and subsequently licenced and, in two instances, further developed, by Netflix ([Arriaza Ibarra and Navarro, 2022](#); [Edgerton, 2023](#); [Nielsen, 2023](#)).

However, Netflix's engagement with cultural specificity is shaped by its commercial imperatives and the broader economic environment in which it operates. In an earlier media landscape characterised by relatively autonomous national systems, films and television programmes functioned primarily as cultural artefacts rooted in local contexts. Some of these artefacts achieved international circulation, while others remained inaccessible to audiences unfamiliar with the cultural codes required for interpretation ([Crane, 2014](#): 376). The auteurist tradition in French cinema exemplifies this dynamic, a tradition now increasingly challenged by the globalising influence of streaming platforms ([Vanderschelden, 2007](#); [Higbee and Vernon, 2024](#)).

Within the Netflix ecosystem, however, the local no longer retains its autonomy, it is framed within a global system of meanings and references. As local cultures are digitally mediated and detached from their territorial origins, they become commodified and re-constructed for transnational consumption. This phenomenon is particularly evident in series that adopt a 'tourist gaze' in their representation of culture, with *Emily in Paris* (2020-present) serving as a paradigmatic example ([Brown, 2024](#)). The show's fifth season, released in December 2025, sees the protagonist relocate to Rome, further underscoring the disjunction between physical geography and its digital reimaging.

As seen in the previous section, Netflix – together with other global streaming services – has poured billions of US dollars in the Spanish market. Yet, 'neither Netflix nor any other SVoD has produced shows in any of the minority languages in Spain (Catalan, Basque, or Galician)' ([Lopera-Mármol et al., 2023](#): 181). This suggests that Netflix's commitment to cultural specificity remains contingent on its perceived intelligibility and marketability to a global audience.

Such treatment of the local is concomitant to transnational modes of production, of which there exist multiple examples in the Netflix universe. The crime drama *Dept. Q* is based on the Department Q book series written by Danish author Jussi Adler-Olsen, the

first season adapting the novel *The Keeper of Lost Cause*. The books, featuring detective Carl Mørck, focus on cold cases investigated by the titular Department Q in Copenhagen. In a national media system setting, the Danish capital would have been the natural setting for the adaptation. Feeling that Nordic Noir had been overdone, Scott Frank, the series writer and director, transposed the drama from Copenhagen to Edinburgh. Several locations, including London and Boston, were discussed with Adler-Olsen before settling for Scotland. The series feels authentic and includes the Scottish capital as a character in its own right, and Scottish actors speaking their own slang (Opening Credits, 2025). But this specificity has been reconstructed for transnational consumption. One may speculate that Edinburgh was chosen as a way of creating just the right amount of cultural distance for an international audience: Scotland gives the drama a feeling of authenticity while retaining elements of familiarity, not least linguistic.

Another example is given by the record-shattering global sensation *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025). Made by Sony Pictures Animation, *K-Pop Demon Hunters* is a Hollywood movie that was produced to look and feel Korean. The production team conducted extensive fieldwork and research into all aspects of Korean culture (Lee, 2025). As a producer explains: ‘We went to folk villages, we looked at what the bricks look like and how the streets are designed in Myeongdong... We tried to make the movie feel as Korean as possible. And one way to do that was to, in every scene and every design aspect, add in Korean elements’ (in Lee, 2025).

The concern is not cultural representation or appropriation, but the reconstruction of cultural specificity in the digital realm for the purpose of transnational consumption. Music, a key feature of *K-Pop Demon Hunters*, provides a case in point. Western listeners would find it difficult to appreciate traditional Korean folk music, whose tonal structures, melodies and instruments would sound entirely unfamiliar. K-pop, by way of contrast, is more accessible and resonates easily with them. Both genres are inherently Korean – the argument is not about essentialising cultures.

This said, authenticity is not intrinsic to a cultural artefact, it is a label assigned by the foreign gaze. K-Pop becomes authentic when it is recognised as Korean by international audiences. This dynamic illustrates Netflix’s brand of cosmopolitanism, where cultural difference exists but is mediated by an algorithmic infrastructure and shaped by global consumption.

Between cosmopolitanism and its commercial version lies the distinction between cultural difference and Derrida’s *différance*. Ferdinand de Saussure was first to conceptualise language as a *system of differences*, positing that the meaning of linguistic signs is not intrinsic but determined by their relation to other signs within the system. ‘Two signs *a* and *b*’, writes de Saussure, ‘are never grasped as such by our linguistic consciousness, but only the difference between *a* and *b*’ (De Saussure, 1983: 138). Signs, continues de Saussure, are ‘*arbitrary* and *differential*’, and ‘no linguistic item can ever be based, ultimately, upon anything other than its non-coincidence with the rest’ (De Saussure, 1983: 138). In language, ‘all that matters is the difference between the signs’ (De Saussure, 1983: 138).

Building on the Swiss linguist, Jacques Derrida defines *différance* as ‘the movement according to which language, or any code, any system of reference in general, is constituted ‘historically’ as a weave of differences’ (Derrida, 2024: 12). While for de Saussure

signs gain meaning through their difference from others, Derrida adds a diachronic element, arguing that meaning is never fixed and complete but always *deferred* in time. Not only does the ‘identity [of a sign] necessarily refer to other elements that exist alongside it in the system’ (Bradley, 2008: 70), but its meaning is deferred, ‘postponed in time in the sense that its identity always refers to the elements that exist before or after it in the linguistic system’ (Bradley, 2008: 71).

My hypothesis is that Netflix’s catalogue increasingly resembles a Derridean universe in which cultural difference is reconfigured as algorithmic *différance*. The transformation occurs because cultural specificity is no longer self-contained but performed as authenticity for a transnational audience. Authenticity is cultural specificity formatted for a global audience and made recognisable for an algorithm. Meaning is deferred and possibly lost in the system. Consequently, cultural specificity risks being reduced to a mere aesthetic. Much like ice cream in a parlour, cultures are aligned in display, yet ultimately constitute variations of the same commodified product.

Conclusion: Neither here nor there

Local adaptation alone cannot account for Netflix’s global reach. The platform’s international dominance stems from the strategic alignment between hardware and software: its digital architecture is designed to optimise global discoverability and accessibility, while its commissioning strategy prioritises the transnational circulation of content. This synergy amplifies network effects and leverages scale.

Netflix stands out for its innovative approach to operating across markets. Legacy Hollywood distribution was export-oriented, aiming to sell the same content in as many territories as possible (Ulin, 2019: 195–9). Netflix’s commissioning model is more cosmopolitan than that of any Hollywood studio, and its catalogue far more diverse. The online service has a proven track record in local storytelling (Dunleavy, 2023).

However, cultural difference is disassembled and reconstituted by an algorithmic system that formats authenticity for global consumption. Specificity is (re)constructed for a transnational audience, as in the case of *Dept. Q* or *K-Pop Demon Hunters*, thereby altering its ontological status. Further, a culture is not authentic in itself, but performed to be perceived as such by others. Algorithmic *différance* occurs when difference is formatted for an algorithmic infrastructure that defers meaning to a global consumption system. As the meaning of cultural values is deferred in time and space, the value of cultural meaning becomes fleeting and uncertain.

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Notes

1. See <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/top10>.
2. For similar observations about Latin America, see [Straubhaar et al. \(2021: 87\)](#).
3. The shows include *Baby Reindeer*, *Fool Me Once* and *The Gentlemen* in 2024; *Adolescence*, *Black Mirror* (Season 7), *The Crown: Final Season* and *Dept. Q*. in 2025.
4. A co-production with Amblin television.

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