

Review: Everybody's streaming Netflix, but what?

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In this July 20, 2010 file photo, a Netflix subscriber turns on Netflix in Palo Alto, Calif. Netflix's streaming-video audience of more than 20 million subscribers has led many to label it a kind of digital TV network, and one that may grow into an HBO rival _ if it's not already. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma, file)

Netflix's streaming-video audience of more than 20 million subscribers has led many to label it a kind of digital TV network, and one that may grow into an HBO rival - if it's not already.

But unlike television programming, which comes with viewing guides, DVR reminders and weekly picks from all manner of media, the Netflix instant universe is a largely uncharted, Byzantine library prone to aimless clicking and haphazard double features.

Navigating Netflix remains a challenge. While its DVD library is extensive, its streaming offerings are a mishmash patchwork of high-

profile new additions, familiar favorites and stray oddities.

To be sure, it's easily one of the best such catalogs available, but it remains a sliver of the possibility. Netflix obviously knows this, and has worked to expand its streaming library, signing deals with movie studios and television networks. It's also pursuing original programming that it hopes will be an appetizing carrot to viewers, like it has been for HBO.

In the works, among other shows, is an anticipated remake of the political thriller series "House of Cards," produced by David Fincher, and an episodic return for the cult comedy "Arrested Development" to air ahead of a planned theatrical movie.

Since introducing its streaming option in 2007, Netflix hasn't significantly changed its Internet functionality, (though its tablet apps were recently redesigned). Finding out what's available is generally limited to specified searches ("What Clint Eastwood movies could I watch right now?") or an awkward sifting through DVD-size photos, six or so at a time.

Certainly, many viewers are immediately drawn to the flashiest offerings: the first three seasons of "Breaking Bad," the first season of "Downton Abby," all five seasons of "Friday Night Lights" and the first four seasons of "Mad Men." As quality television has increased, few of us have been able to keep up with everything: Netflix is a place to catch up on some of the shows we've been meaning to get around to.

But what else? This week, Netflix said subscribers watched more than 2 billion hours of movies and TV shows in the last three months of 2011. Surely, there is much more out there, but it takes some hunting.

Early winter is, for many, a time to catch up on the Oscar favorites. While most of that movie watching will need to take place in the theater,

many of 2011's best documentaries can be streamed on Netflix. The exceptional doc on Brazilian Formula One racing driver Ayrton Senna, "Senna," is now available, as is the utterly charming "Bill Cunningham New York," about the New York Times fashion photographer.

Documentaries - which need all the distribution they can get - are generally plentiful on Netflix. There are loads of PBS docs, classics like "The Thin Blue Line" and the more recent "Man on Wire," and other high points of last year like Werner Herzog's Chauvet Cave exploration "Cave of Forgotten Dreams" and the eco-terrorist film "If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front."

Netflix has also been a breeding ground for cult comedy, particularly the short-lived "Party Down" which few watched when it was on the Starz network in 2009 and 2010. But the series, about a Los Angeles catering team of out-of-work actors, is better than most comedies currently on television. You'll recognize many of its stars: Adam Scott, Jane Lynch, Ken Marino and others. (If you want to go further into the past, there's also the first six seasons of the still pitch-perfect "The Larry Sanders Show.")

There's also a hefty load of British comedies, including older staples like the series "A Bit of Fry and Laurie" (which will show "House" fans why Brits know Hugh Laurie better as a comic actor) and "Blackadder" with Rowan Atkinson. One of 2011's funnier films, "The Trip," with Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon, is also available, as is one of 2009's best, the bitter political satire "In the Loop." Even better, there's 1987's depraved cult classic "Witnail and I," too.

Many would say the top stand-up comedian right now is Louis C.K., and Netflix has made it easy to familiarize yourself with his deeply personal, honest act. There's the first season of his critically acclaimed FX series "Louie," as well as two stand-up specials: "Hilarious" and "Chewed Up."

(You don't need Netflix to stream C.K., though: He recently released a new stand-up special himself, for \$5 on his website.)

Turning to more serious fare, the most treasured film noir classics aren't here, but there are many good ones: the New York portrait "Naked City," the crime noir "Kansas City Confidential," Fritz Lang's "Scarlet Street," the John Alton-photographed "The Big Combo" and the famously frantically made "Detour." Also worth mentioning is Samuel Fuller's recently rereleased "House of Bamboo" with Robert Ryan as an undercover investigator in Tokyo.

Though most filmmakers have only one or two films available to stream on [Netflix](#), one notable exception is the great British director Michael Powell, who formed a famed partnership with Emeric Pressburger. Nearly all of their work together can be streamed, including the masterworks "The Red Shoes," "Black Narcissus" and "The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp." But don't miss the terribly overlooked 1945 romance "I Know Where I'm Going!" which astounded Martin Scorsese and renewed his hope that there are masterpieces still left for him to discover.

There are, of course, many other gems, too: Old Buster Keaton silents, Whit Stillman's "Metropolitan," the stop-motion animated kids show "Shaun the Sheep" from the makers of "Wallace and Gromit," Steve Buscemi's fine directorial debut "Tree's Lounge," the Brooklyn drama "Smoke," the excellent "Carlos" miniseries, etc., etc.

Netflix's success will ultimately hinge on the appeal of its catalog. For now, it remains an intriguing hodgepodge. There's something fun about a hodgepodge, so long as you don't mind rummaging.

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