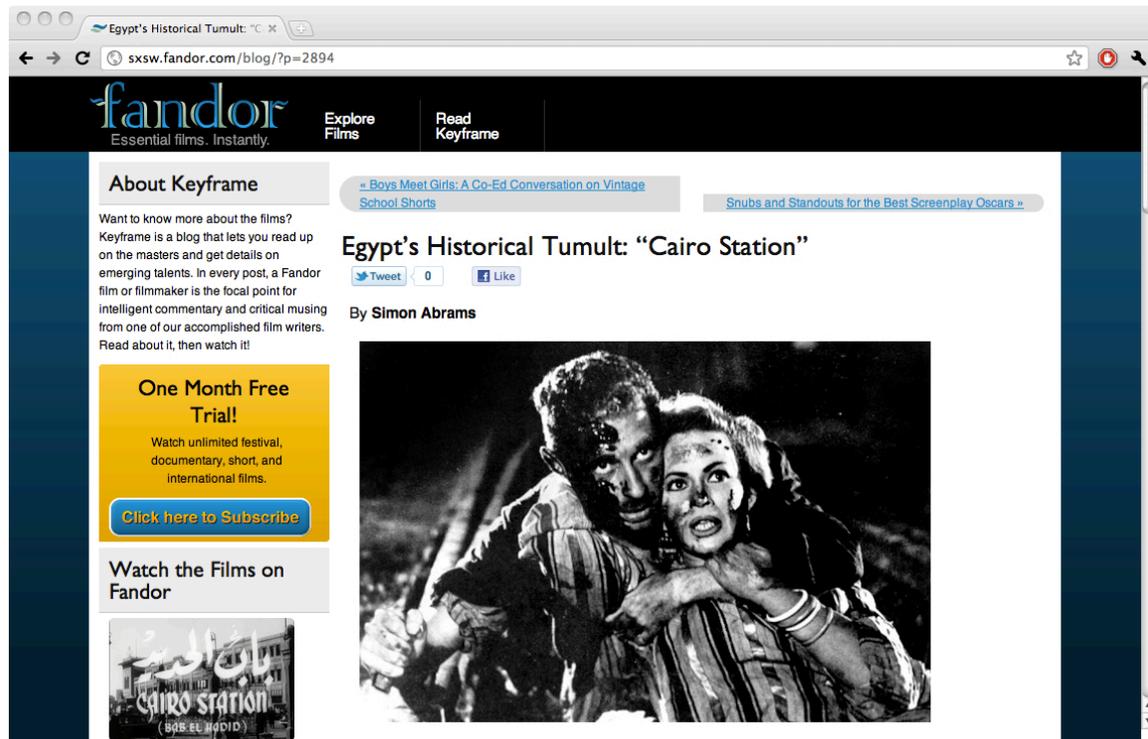


Indie-Focused Film Streaming Service Fandor Launches Today

By Jonathan Kiefer

March 9, 2011

A film buff and a serial entrepreneur try to fulfill a hunger for hard-to-find films



The name of the latest effort to showcase film online, Fandor, does not in fact derive from accepted shorthand for the 1975 Blue Oyster Cult LP *Fantasy Distillation of Reality*, although that isn't an unreasonable assumption.

Actually, as Fandor Vice President Jonathan Marlow explained recently, it's from the serial fiction of French writers Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre.

"Jerôme Fandor is a character in a pulp novel," Marlow said, "the one person who always seemed to know the truth behind the secret identity."

His colleague, CEO Dan Aronson, had another explanation: "It had the right number of syllables."

Even if the origin of the company's name is obscure, Fandor's purpose is clear: to give film buffs a way to stream work that may not be in your Netflix queue. The service launched officially on Wednesday, but has been in the works since the spring of 2009. It currently has 2,500 films in its library.

The new subscription-based online exhibitor of historic, independent and international films resides in a nondescript Market Street office in downtown San Francisco, whose only salient decor seemed to be its occupants' personalities.

Aronson, a self-described serial entrepreneur with the requisite tech-startup spunk in spades, sat on the floor; the nonchalantly debonair Marlow, a longtime fixture in Bay Area cinema-curation circles, found more elegant seating.

Fandor, they explained, exists to fill the gap between mainstream multiplex films and the raw heap of everything else that might be called moving pictures.

"I'm a technologist by trade," Aronson said, "but I think technology should be a tool for solving problems."

In this case, the problem was that Aronson is a film buff with a film-buff spouse (Aronson's wife is a former member of San Francisco's Red Vic Movie House collective), but he couldn't seem to catch new films.

"Each year we'd get the San Francisco International Film Festival catalog, look through more than a hundred films, find the six we were interested in, and then not be able to get a babysitter for when they were playing," Aronson said.

Inevitably Aronson ventured into what those in the trade refer to as "the digital delivery space," an increasingly crowded place. As he recalled, "There were a lot of people who were saying 'There are all these inaccessible movies that we'd love to have access to.' So I'm thinking, hey, there's a need here."

Netflix, Amazon, Google, Vudu, Hulu and AppleTV are all competitors in the mad-dash race from DVD to VOD, but Fandor seems not to be sweating it. They're defying the presumption that victory in movie streaming means having the coziest relationship with the most Hollywood studios. To Aronson and Marlow (and likely the more than 3,000 Facebook fans they've managed to amass even before this week's official launch) the appeal is not commercial. Fandor's films are largely willful non-commodities.

"I don't really see Netflix as a competitor," Marlow said. "My perception of the future was that Netflix would become a place that would be great for things you already knew about, and not particularly good for things you didn't already know about. I also felt that Hulu in particular really owned the TV space. And we knew from the beginning that it was cost-prohibitive to work with the studios. Which isn't

to say that we won't eventually go there. But there was plenty of rich essential cinema out there that was not owned by the studios. So we went after that."

Essentialness, of course, is in the eye of the curator, but that's why there are curators. To receptive viewers, the eclecticism of Fandor's library is its own reward: at last Maya Deren, Michael Haneke and dogs doing silent slapstick are instantly available in one place.

Probably the site's closest kin and competitor is Mubi, a similarly independent-film-minded domain with offices in Palo Alto and Europe. But Aronson and Marlow see Mubi's bent toward the European market as a threat reduction, and its social-networking component as a miscalculation, fated to suffer in hopeless competition with Facebook's dominance.

With Fandor, they opted instead for what Aronson calls "deep integration," which includes (for starters) a way to share movie clips on Facebook with the video tagging service BlipSnips. "Look what it did for Zynga," Aronson said. "I don't see anyone on the film side doing what Zynga did on the gaming side."

Not even this week's announcement of Facebook's official first move in the digital rental game, offering "The Dark Night" for \$3, seems troubling to Fandor, which just added former Facebook chief privacy officer Chris Kelly to its board.

Aronson and Marlow also seemed undaunted by recent multimillion-dollar infusions of funding for Mubi and SnagFilms, an online distribution site specializing in independent documentaries. If anything, they said, these developments only affirm the good timing and good business sense of streaming indie film.

"We both are attracted to the challenge of doing something that we know someone will figure out how to do," Marlow said. "It might as well be us."