



CINEMA AT THE MARGINS

Wheeler Winston Dixon



Cinema at the Margins

New Perspectives on World Cinema

The New Perspectives on World Cinema series publishes engagingly written, highly accessible, and extremely useful books for the educated reader and the student as well as the scholar. Volumes in this series will fall under one of the following categories: monographs on neglected films and filmmakers; classic as well as contemporary film scripts; collections of the best previously published criticism (including substantial reviews and interviews) on single films or filmmakers; translations into English of the best classic and contemporary film theory; reference works on relatively neglected areas in film studies, such as production design (including sets, costumes, and make-up), music, editing and cinematography; and reference works on the relationship between film and the other performing arts (including theatre, dance, opera, etc.). Many of our titles will be suitable for use as primary or supplementary course texts at undergraduate and graduate levels. The goal of the series is thus not only to address subject areas in which adequate classroom texts are lacking, but also to open

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For Gwendolyn Audrey Foster

It's the movies that have really been running things in America ever since they were invented. They show you what to do, how to do it, when to do it, how to feel about it, and how to look how you feel about it.

—Andy Warhol

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This collection of essays has never been published before in book form; in addition, when they have appeared in smaller journals or on the web, they were cut for reasons of space which, in many cases, severely diluted the impact of the pieces and made their arguments incomplete. Thus, I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to bring these essays together in one volume, available for easy reference, so that these texts – like many of the films they examine – do not become phantoms themselves.

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INTRODUCTION

There can be no doubt that we are in an age in which the cinema as we know it has been transformed. The era of film is ending and the era of digital cinema is already hard upon us. While some movies are still shot on actual film, the vast majority of “movies” are created with digital cameras and hard drives, so much so that one of the industry’s largest equipment suppliers, Birns and Sawyer, recently sold off their entire collection of cameras simply because no one was renting them. There are a few holdouts in the area of actual film production: Steven Spielberg remains a traditionalist, in more ways than one, and no less a figure than Christopher Nolan, who also embraces film over digital media and whose reboot of the Batman series proved incredibly influential. As Nolan noted in a recent interview with Jeffrey Ressler in the DGA Quarterly,

For the last 10 years, I’ve felt increasing pressure to stop shooting film and start shooting video, but I’ve never understood why. It’s cheaper to work on film, it’s far better looking, it’s the technology that’s been known and understood for a hundred years, and it’s extremely reliable. I think, truthfully, it boils down to the economic interest of manufacturers and [a production] industry that makes more money through change rather than through maintaining the status quo. We save a lot of money shooting on film and projecting film and not doing digital intermediates. In fact, I’ve never done a digital intermediate. Photochemically, you can time film with a good timer in three or four passes, which

takes about 12 to 14 hours as opposed to seven or eight weeks in a DI suite. That's the way everyone was doing it 10 years ago, and I've just carried on making films in the way that works best and waiting until there's a good reason to change. But I haven't seen that reason yet. (Ressner 2012)

And yet, as Nolan himself acknowledges, he's playing a losing game. Digital is taking over; it's cheaper to shoot, can be viewed instantly, edited with the touch of a button and cuts cost on every level – from production to final delivery – to the bone. It's a shift that's been one hundred years in the making, even since film evolved from paper roll film to cellulose nitrate film and then safety film. Digital is simply the next platform. But make no mistake: 35mm is gone. I predicted this in a lecture at the University of Stockholm, Sweden on 3 December 2000, after the first movie theater in New York had just made the shift to digital and Hollywood studio executives attending the inaugural screening were ceremonially photographed gleefully throwing 35mm film canisters into a large trash barrel. Digital had arrived and there was no looking back.

The members of the Stockholm audience – distinguished academics from around the world – were aghast at this and couldn't accept the fact that 35mm was heading for its final spin. But, as I pointed out, Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* opened in Manhattan in precisely one theater in 1927 and revolutionized the industry with the advent of "talkies"; this was just the same sort of platform shift playing out yet again. The industry is constantly changing and adapting, relentlessly driven by the bottom line, at once an industry and an art form, but one which, in recent years, seems eager to forget its past

and exist exclusively in the present – except, of course, for those few cinephiles who still order DVDs of their favorite titles.

As for the 35mm prints of existing films, they're being aggressively junked by the studios in favor of DCPs (Digital Cinema Packages) that are unlocked by computer codes called KDMs (Key Delivery Messages) for each individual screening, giving studios an unprecedented control over their product and taking a great deal of discretionary leeway out of the hands of theater owners. Want to run an extra midnight screening? You'll have to clear it first. Want to screen a film for a local critic? Again, you'll have to log in to the studio's website, get a clearance, pay a fee and then screen it. With 35mm prints, you could just thread them up and go. Now, that freedom is gone – and, along with it, the ability to shift a film from one screen to another within a multiplex for maximum profitability. The studios are firmly in charge. If you want to screen a classic film – say Blake Edwards' *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) – you can no longer get a 35mm print; it's either a DVD, a DCP or nothing at all. Then, too, as the prints become scarcer, so also do replacement parts for conventional 35mm projectors; in an all-digital world, the filmic image has been relegated to museums and archives.

This is the last wave of film, the last chance to capture images with dyes and plastics, the last chance to embrace grain and other filmic characteristics, before the brave new world of digital, perfect cinema takes over. There are all sorts of issues involved here; in particular, archiving digital cinema – a task that this volume will discuss in the essay "Vanishing Point" – since the new image capture systems reduce everything to pixels, ones and zeros, and have to be constantly upgraded to

new platforms to make sure that they continue to exist in an uncorrupted form. It should come as no surprise that the major studios are still creating 35mm fine grain negatives of all their films as a backup in case something happens to the digital masters and often use them when digital files become corrupt. This in itself says something about the ephemerality of the digital image. If everything is converted to digital in the future, what happens to the past of cinema? What happens to the more than one hundred years of cinema that lies in the studio vaults, most of which isn't inherently "commercial" and so will never see the light of day?

For example, one studio in particular – Republic Pictures, which operated from the mid-1930s until the late 1950s and produced literally hundreds of films – has all of its films stored in long-term cold vaults, but almost none of them are available in screening copies for the contemporary viewer. When VHS was first introduced, Republic put out much of its back catalogue on tape, but modern audiences weren't interested in the vast majority of their films, simply because they weren't aware of either the studio or the films' existence. William Witney – one of Republic's most prolific directors and one of Quentin Tarantino's acknowledged influences – created a vast amount of material for Republic, but when the jump to DVD came, almost none of Republic's films were introduced in the new format. Thus, much of Witney's work became invisible; it wasn't profitable enough to warrant a DVD release and so it was consigned to oblivion. Some titles, including many by Republic – and rather eccentric choices at that – have been picked up by Olive Films, a small DVD distribution outlet, but who knows how long that will last? For most films, if they don't make money, the studio will put

them in a vault and forget about them. Everything must go. As critic Dave Kehr noted,

It's bad enough, to cite a common estimate, that 90 percent of all American silent films and 50 percent of American sound films made before 1950 appear to have vanished forever. But even the films we have often live on in diminished states. An astonishing number of famous titles – like [Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper's 1933 film] King Kong and [Howard Hawks' 1940 film] His Girl Friday – no longer exist as original camera negatives, but survive only as degraded duplicates and damaged release prints. A great deal of important material – not just features but shorts, newsreels, experimental work, industrial films, home movies and so on – remains on unstable nitrate stock, and must be transferred to a more permanent base before the films turn to goo. And once the endangered material has been stabilized (the preservation step), it often must undergo an even more expensive process of restoration to recover its original luster: the removal of dirt and scratches, the replacement of lost footage or missing intertitles, the cleaning up of degraded soundtracks. (Kehr 2010, emphasis added)

The other thing that's surprising is that all of this happened in plain sight, so to speak, through neglect and or willful destruction of films that were no longer deemed commercially viable. Also, that the complete digitization of the industry came as such a surprise to everyone – even professionals within the field. As Jan-Christopher Horak, director of the