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Movie Yearbook
2007

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Roger
Ebert's
Movie
Yearbook
2007

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This book is dedicated to my Aunt Martha, who
took me to the movies.

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Introduction

In six decades there have been three revolutions in the way movies are distributed. The first was in 1948, when the Supreme Court found the big studios in violation of antitrust laws and ordered them to sell their theater chains. Until then, the majors owned theaters and booked their own movies into them; afterward, the playing field was more level for independent producers.

The second came when “platforming” was replaced by mass national bookings of major new films. For decades, a new film would open in a few big markets, typically New York and Los Angeles, and then trickle through to the rest of the country. This provided a way for audience word-of-mouth to spread and was a godsend for smaller films that needed time to win a reputation. Three films that especially benefited

from platforming were *Bonnie and Clyde*, *My Dinner with Andre*, and *Chariots of Fire*.

That model changed when studios started using national TV ad campaigns for their movies. At about the same time, more movie stars became willing to appear on television; for years, many of them had refused. Now the pieces were in place for the modern system in which a big movie will open in thousands of theaters on the same day, backed by an advertising and publicity blitz.

A drawback of this model is that it is best suited to blockbuster films. The opening-night audience for a mass-market action picture is made up mostly of teenagers, who have free time; adults need more warning to gear up for a visit to the movies, and often the movie closes before they can get to it. This has created a loop in which more and more Hollywood movies are aimed at young action and comedy audiences. To some degree, the pattern has been offset by the rise of independent films and the theaters that show them, including the Landmark chain.

The third revolution is happening right now.

It involves a fundamental shift in the medium chosen by moviegoers. The studios get more of their revenue from DVDs than from ticket sales, and if you consider that much of that revenue comes from rentals, it's apparent that most people see more movies on DVD than in theaters. Sure, these movies would look better in a theater, but if they are getting to audiences that want to see them, that's a good thing. There are precedents. When Allen Lane introduced Penguin paperbacks, he was told he would destroy the book publishing industry. When the first Betamax home video machines came onto the market, the studios sued to block home videos, which would eventually earn them billions. If I were a director, I would prefer for my work to be seen in a theater but would be happy for it to find an audience anywhere. And the extras on DVDs now mean moviegoers can learn more about the making of a film than any one filmmaking professional used to know.

Movies also have a big presence on television,

and the studios are correctly experimenting with technology that will allow viewers to rent “movies on demand” via cable, satellite, or the Internet. The danger of such digital distribution, from the studios’ point of view, is that movies in digital form are easier to pirate than those on 35 mm film. That’s one reason that digital projection, which was supposed to replace film in theaters, seems stalled (another is that no one wants to foot the \$100,000 per booth price tag).

I believe that the best way to see a movie is in a theater with an audience, and that light-through-celluloid is still better than any digital projection system I have seen. But this is not the way most people now see movies, and there is a bright side to the digital revolution. Home video itself meant that for the first time viewers could program their own viewing; they were no longer at the mercy of theaters and TV stations. There has been a big jump in the quality of home entertainment systems (and a rapid fall in their prices), and it is no longer unusual for a consumer to have a big flat-screen or front-projection screen and a

surround sound system. Movies shown on these systems look impressive when seen on high-quality DVDs and will look even better when HD-DVD comes in, although that switch has been stalled by a war between two formats.

Last year Steven Soderbergh, who makes both big commercial movies (*Ocean's Eleven*) and small indie films (*Sex, Lies, and Videotape*) did some lateral thinking about the problem of distribution, especially for smaller films. It costs a fortune to open any first-run movie in New York City and, in a sense, if it hasn't made it there, it can't make it anywhere. But what's the point of producing a \$100,000 movie when it costs more than that for an ad campaign in the *New York Times*?

What Soderbergh tried with his film *Bubble* was revolutionary: He would release it more or less simultaneously in theaters, on DVD, and on pay cable. This strategy was not welcomed by theater owners, needless to say, but it had the advantage of concentrating all of the publicity

and advertising efforts at one time. The heat generated in each medium would in theory help the film in the others.

At Cannes 2006 I ran into Jonathan Sehring the inventive and risk-taking producer of nearly fifty independent pictures, many of them for IFC Films and its digital spin-off, InDiGent. He said the Soderbergh model seemed to hold hope for his kind of film, and he cited one title whose box office take went up 15 percent in New York in its second week, apparently because of word-of-mouth inspired by cable.

My guess is that theaters are wrong to oppose this form of distribution, which will apply mostly to smaller films. Although the window between theater and DVD has been growing smaller for all releases, it is probably true that for many more years big Hollywood movies like *Superman Returns* will open exclusively in theaters. But smaller indie films like *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, *The Proposition*, *L'Enfant*, and *Water* could benefit from cross-platform openings.

Moviegoers know that all movies will eventually be on DVD; they choose to go to theaters because they like that experience, but they can't see every film that way. Imagine a scenario in which Landmark, say, sells DVDs in its lobby. A hypothetical customer buys a ticket to *Lonesome Jim*, and on the way out runs into friends who have just liked *The Notorious Bettie Page*. On an impulse, he might buy the *Bettie Page* DVD. If theaters limited themselves to movies currently in release, it wouldn't involve a lot of inventory and sales space; it would be more like the CDs displayed at Starbucks.

Another major distribution channel is Netflix and its clones, which have a large customer base seriously interested in a *lot* of movies. How do I know this? Because Netflix has a stock of about 60,000 films, and two-thirds of them are rented on a given day (if only by one person). That contradicts the Blockbuster model, in which new releases are piled in big displays but the backlist is limited. This is called the phenomenon of the

Long Tail, and it benefits Web sites like Amazon, which does more business selling a few copies of countless books than a lot of copies of a few.

There may be only one person in a city who wants to see a film or read a review, but because of Netflix and the Internet, that person can do it. We observe that pattern at www.rogerebert.com, where there are more than ten thousand reviews and our Web traffic statistics show that even the most popular film represents less than 1 percent of our business. As of June 15, 2006, *The Da Vinci Code* and *Brokeback Mountain* were tied at 0.8 percent of our page views; the next most requested reviews in 2006 have been for *V for Vendetta* (0.7), *X-Men: The Last Stand* (0.6), and *An Inconvenient Truth* (0.5). The lesson: People are curious about a lot of different movies. (Of course, all of these titles will pick up hits as the year advances; in 2005, the most-requested review was *Wolf Creek*, followed by *Munich* and *Brokeback*.)

Twenty years ago when we reviewed a new art, indie, foreign, or documentary film on the

TV show, we would hear from viewers complaining, “That movie will never open in my state.” Now they thank us: “I’ve put it in my Netflix queue.” Some analysts think that the Netflix model will eventually be replaced by video-on-demand, but I don’t think that will happen until you can demand just about any movie you’ve ever heard of. The current pay-for-view titles on cable and satellite are sadly limited to recent wide commercial releases. Look at those Netflix “shared lists” and you see people renting the damnedest and most obscure titles.

Eventually HDTV and HD-DVD will become so affordable and so good that its quality will rival theatrical projection. If the theaters have switched to digital projection, consumers will rightly notice that they get the same quality at home that they get in a theater. That’s why American theater chains desperately need to upgrade the quality of their projection, not settle for a questionable sideways move.

For years and years I have stubbornly been

writing about MaxiVision 48, a system that provides a 400 percent improvement in picture quality over current 35 mm projection and involves a per-booth cost of only about \$12,000 (only the front end of the projector changes; the housing remains the same). MV48 shoots at forty-eight frames a second but doesn't require twice as much film; because of the way it uses the real estate on a frame of film, it needs only 50 percent more, and it has an economy mode that slows to the standard 24 fps. It can switch seamlessly between frame rates, because it doesn't use sprockets to pull the film through but a nonvibrating electric motor and compressed air (that means no scratches). In March 2006 I visited Eastman House in Rochester, New York, and had a talk with their best film people. They all knew about MaxiVision, they all knew Kodak could sell more film if it were introduced, and not a single person in the room thought they had seen digital projection comparable even to ordinary 35 mm. But they said Kodak was being "repositioned" as a digital company and would

not be investing in new film projection systems.

That may work in the short run and be suicidal in the long run.

In the past, theaters have responded to competition from other media by upgrading their projection. Radio brought the talkies. TV brought wide screen. Stereo brought surround sound. All of these revolutions required visionaries in Hollywood boardrooms. The time is here for someone to step up to the plate with MV48. The obvious candidate is the IMAX chain, which could use MV48 to project a picture at much higher quality than current IMAX offerings and at smaller cost, because the big 70 mm IMAX format is costlier and more cumbersome than MaxiVision. That there is an eager market for high-quality sound and picture is shown by the success IMAX has had with ordinary 35 mm films like *Batman Begins* and *King Kong*, not to mention the enormous success of its 3-D version of *Polar Express*. If *Polar Express* could be released in 3-D and flat versions, why not in

MV48 and standard versions? The IMAX box office alone makes it plausible.

What I foresee happening in American exhibition is the more or less simultaneous release of smaller films in theaters, on video, on cable/satellite, and on the Internet. I see big films continuing to showcase in standard theaters, but only if the theaters offer a clear improvement over home video standards.

* * *

This is the twenty-first annual edition of this Yearbook and its predecessors. My thoughts go back to the original *Movie Home Companion* and to Donna Martin, the editor who conceived it and later persuaded me to switch to the *Yearbook* format. My sincere thanks to her, and to Dorothy O'Brien, who has been the book's valued editor at Andrews McMeel Publishing in recent years. Also to Sue Roush, my editor at Universal Press Syndicate, and to Laura Emerick, Miriam Dinunzio, Teresa Budasi, Thomas Conner, and all the other heroes at the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and

Jim Emerson and Cathy Williams at
www.rogerebert.com. Many others are thanked in
the acknowledgments.

In autumn 2006, the University of Chicago Press published *Awake in the Dark*, a survey of my forty years of writing about the movies. As for the Great Movies books, as I write this I've written the first fifty-seven of one hundred reviews for *The Great Movies III*, which should be published in 2008.

ROGER EBERT

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