


# THE FUTURE OF CINEMA?

*Is cinema's cultural force declining? **Mark Trompeteler** looks back on issues that arose in his series on the subject, to focus on the threats, not least television, that cinema must tackle.*

## THE THREATS OF TELEVISION

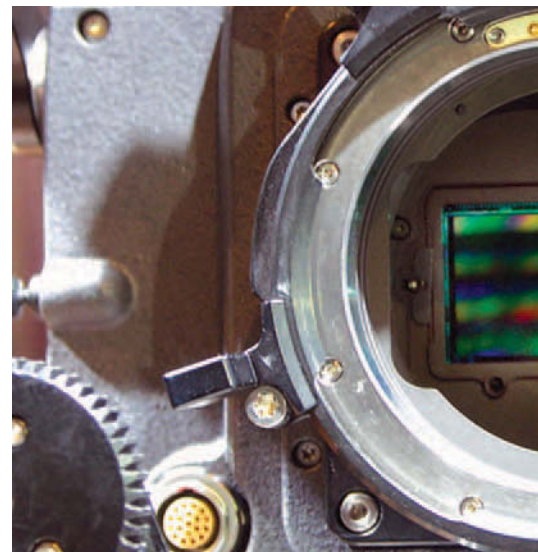
Any discussion on the future of cinema first has to take into account the strengths that television has developed: the long narrative form and its exploitation through the use of a new concept of TV series boxed sets.

### LONG NARRATIVE FORMS & BOXED SETS

 Over the past 15 years, TV has been developing the extended narrative. This has taken the classic elements of

cinema content — narrative, character, motivation, moral dilemma, action and social contexts and honed them to new levels of audio-visual story-telling. Series like the original Danish version of *The Killing* have proved to be critically and culturally significant. *Game of Thrones*, *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, *House of Cards* and a myriad of others have gone on to make this format phenomenally successful and profitable. →

▼ A basic virtual reality camera, *below* — the means to transport a cinema audience. The luxurious foyer of the Everyman, Belsize Park, *bottom and right*, puts the audience in different surroundings. The big sensor of the Arri Alexa 65 harks back to the golden age of widescreen. Automated server bays in a typical cinema, *far right*, illustrate how “robotic” some cinemas have become. *Facing page, bottom*, the Eye — a futuristic destination cinema in Amsterdam.



### DEVELOPING A PSYCHOLOGICAL NARRATIVE IMMERSION STRATEGY

Whilst cinema has concentrated on developing production and exhibition technologies that focus on increased realism and immersion within the viewing experience — such as immersive sound, 4K and 3D — an equally and arguably more pervasive powerful immersion form has been developed by television. The immersion in a long, compelling and developing story that has you hooked to follow it, and consume it, over a long period of time could be argued is a more inexpensive technique but just as, if not more, satisfying than cinematic technologically based immersion.

### BIGGER AND BETTER FLAT SCREEN TELEVISIONS AND HOME AUDIO

We are all familiar with the incredibly vivid pictures that are produced by modern flat screen TVs and how increased size, resolution and dynamic range of the screen in our home can give a more cinema-style viewing experience.

It will never be as good as cinema, but at what moment, if ever, is a point reached at which what is on offer at the cinema — at a very considerable increased price — no longer justifies the effort to make the trip? The viewer has an experience at home that is technically excellent, and by selection of his or her own taste in content and control of their own environment, will consumers no longer think it worth the effort and expense to see a film on the big screen?

This spring, LG unveiled a prototype organic light-emitting diode (OLED) TV at a technology show in South Korea. The 55in prototype screen demonstrated is so thin (1mm) and so flexible that it is hung like wallpaper magnetically on a thin metal plate fixed to the wall of a room. The company announced it was working

towards selling a 60in model by 2017 and that it would be a quarter of the thickness of its current 55in flagship OLED model. There is the prospect that, by 2020, people will begin to regard, whether by wallpaper flat screens or increasingly better home video projectors, the entire wall of a room as a viewing screen. Coupled to a home audio system, at what point might the viewer question the effort and expense involved in going to the cinema?

### INTELLIGENT, COMPLEX TV SCRIPTS AND THE ATTRACTION OF CINEMATIC TALENT

That cinema is a medium in which the director is the creative centre of a film, whilst this has more often rested more on the producer and the writers in television, is an old folklore that has now become disassembled. Directors, producers, writers as well as well-known actors have migrated to television as that medium has increasingly offered them more creative and “intelligent” work than is on offer to them in mainstream feature films.



### HIGHER “CINEMATIC STYLE” PRODUCTION VALUES AND BUDGETS

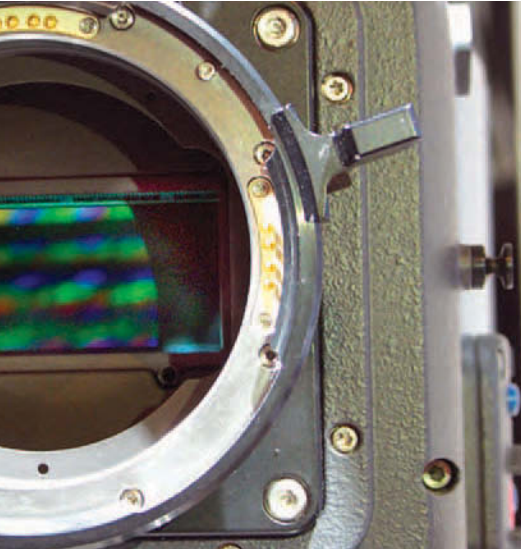
Again it's old news that to fight back at its rival cinema, to satisfy more discerning audiences, and to cope with the increased definition of cameras and display devices, television has encompassed a tremendous increase in production values in the making of television content. Many television programmes are now beautiful to look at and have a real cinematic visual style, with production teams having now long established the adoption film production practices in making television.

Budgets are following and facilitating this trend. *Game of Thrones* reportedly costs an average of \$6million per episode. Working on that cost per episode, that means that five seasons must have cost something in the region of \$300million. All three *Lord of the Rings* films cost \$297 million. The most expensive British TV drama to date is Sky's *Fortitude* which cost a massive £30million, costing more than the \$40million it took to make the 10-Oscar-nominated *American Hustle*.

### THE VIDEO ON DEMAND REVOLUTION AND THE SEARCH FOR TOTAL VIEWERS

The Video on Demand (VOD) revolution has meant that the total number of viewers watching a programme on its broadcast — its ratings — has begun to matter less. What is more important is the total viewership, the total viewings of a particular programme across all platforms, and the number of subscribers to a service.

The number of Netflix subscribers worldwide has grown from 10 million in 2009 to just over 60 million in 2015. The increase in the ownership of smart devices and the increasing use of “catch up” services is all leading to increases in total television audiences and viewership.



The collapse both of traditional viewing habits and the importance of ratings has meant more shows are being commissioned straight to series, avoiding actors having to commit to the sometimes lengthy and difficult pilot process of before. Equally, with an abundance of increasingly interesting work on television, and the availability of short-term contracts, and sometimes the commissioning of just single series, actors have found this smaller time commitment more attractive. This has further increased the migration of cinema talent to television.

## THE DRIVERS OF CINEMA BANALITY

Some commentators have argued that the terrific strengths of television have been amplified by the increasing banality of many films at the box office. Even the UK's national flagship radio news and current affairs radio programme, Radio 4's *Today*, earlier this year featured a prime-time discussion in the studio on, "Why is the quality of films in the cinema 'bombing'?" That begs the question that, in its short- to medium-term future, is cinema threatening itself from within? Could there currently be any inherent drivers that are exacerbating the banality of cinema or the poor experience of cinemagoing?

### CHANGES IN THE OWNERSHIP OF THE MAJOR STUDIOS

Again it's old news that in the Seventies and Eighties, we saw the beginning of the acquisition of major studios by multi-national media, publishing and entertainment conglomerates and then also by multi-national companies. There is a general acknowledgement within the



cinema and cultural industries that chief executives and senior managers behind the production side of the movie industry no longer necessarily have a background in cinema.

The imperative that drives so much of the significant proportion of movie-making that we see in the cinema today is driven by the imperatives of the shareholders, the accountants and "the bottom line" in ways that were not so

of the whole. The English-speaking territories are now a much smaller fraction of the box office take. In the design, formulation, and execution of a film for worldwide release, the attraction of a movie that has less dialogue, fewer local cultural and translation issues, and more action, chases, explosions and spectacle, that have no language issues, might be becoming more evident in cinema's output.

### BLOCKBUSTERISATION & THE ECONOMICS OF THE BLOCKBUSTER

Unbelievable amounts of money can be made quickly on the launch of a "tent pole" movie and it seems massive budgets are required to produce them and the elements that will draw the crowds globally. The "tent pole" strategy is a simple one — you exploit material that has presold itself through your audience knowing some of the background and premise of the material from previous contact with it,

## "THE STRENGTHS OF TELEVISION HAVE BEEN AMPLIFIED BY THE INCREASING BANALITY OF MANY FILMS AT THE BOX OFFICE"

apparent in preceding eras.

The current global commoditisation of films, the rise of overseas audiences and the strength of overseas markets is changing the industry. In former times, mainstream Hollywood films at the cinema made the majority of their money from the total combined box office receipts in English-speaking territories like the USA, UK, Canada, Australia etc. Today, the situation is reversing, with the addition of huge overseas audiences that have developed in countries such as India and China, the overseas box office income of a major film is now a significant proportion

even if it is from other media forms. You then underline that pre-sale even more through massive advertising budgets and marketing. You then open the film simultaneously in thousands of screens across a country, a continent or worldwide. It inspires people to go to the cinema because everyone gets caught up in the hype. And the figures just get bigger.

Costing \$150million to make, *Jurassic World* recently inched past Marvel's *The Avengers* to become the top US opening weekend income earner with a US debut of \$208.8 million. The superhero blockbuster was the previous record holder with a →



\$207.4 million opening weekend. Later this month, we will learn how many millions will be earned in the opening weekend of the next *Star Wars* movie.

*Jurassic World* also beat the previous record holder for an overseas weekend launch, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 2*, by earning \$315.6 million at its launch as opposed to Potter's \$314 million. The amounts of money at stake with these movies must make the formulation of them to appeal to the widest possible common audience an important ingredient. One can argue that it was ever thus. But the huge budgets swallowed up by these movies mean that the "slow burn" movies and releases, and the medium budgets that might allow some experimentation and chances to be taken, have been squeezed out considerably.

### AUTOMATED CINEMA AND THE LACK OF SHOWMANSHIP

I recently met up with film industry production and exhibition legend Douglas Trumbull at Bradford's Widescreen Weekend and he re-iterated to me many peoples' criticism of how cold, automated and lacking in quality and showmanship a lot of film exhibition has become. Mark Kermode and many others have written about this. Trumbull pointed back to a time when not only was there a connection between the production, distribution and exhibition sides of the industry via studios and companies, but such a connection was even propagated by the film-makers themselves. Directors such as David Lean, Stanley Kubrick and George Lucas took a



▲ The film-maker Douglas Trumbull, above left, with the author Mark Trompeteler. The Arri Alexa 65 meets the needs of today's "tent pole" movies

landscape has been totally transformed, and exhibitors are turning to ever-fancier bells and whistles to help lure audiences back to theatres."

The plethora of contemporary cinema's "bells and whistles" is growing. America's CinemaCon exhibition and conference earlier this year showcased all kinds of innovations to lure patrons to the cinema. These included not only an increasing interest in offering dinners and drinks for audiences, as an option, but also ever-increasing developments in seating, screens, sound systems and the rise of small boutique cinemas exhibiting films alongside big multiplexes.

Cinemark, was at the forefront of the move to incorporate stadium-style seating, and over the past few years it has expanded its NextGen concept (providing guests with "a cutting-edge entertainment experience") and Cinemark XD, which the company now claims as the "No. 1, private label, premium large format in the world,"

## "MANY PREDICTED VOD WOULD BECOME MORE INTERESTING THAN CINEMA. SOME SAY THAT IT'S HAPPENED ALREADY"

passionate interest in the quality of the prints and sound and how their films would be exhibited. One can wonder if, at a subconscious level, audiences might be increasingly aware that their function is more than ever to be consumers of a mass commercial entertainment product rather than to be engaged or even a little inspired by something that is both creative as well as entertainment, as once was the case?

### DIVERSITY AND FRAGMENTATION OF CINEMA

Earlier this year in *Variety* magazine Iain Blair wrote, "Way back in the olden days, 15-20 years ago, exhibitors and their cinema chains faced competition from a well-known enemy: TV and VCRs. Today, thanks to the digital revolution and the ever-increasing proliferation of handheld devices and giant TV screens, the viewing

Every cinema brand across the world is promoting its own Premium Large Format cinema. Many exhibitors are also offering restaurant-style meals complete with a range of alcoholic drinks. The US Silverspot Cinema chain, with 87 screens under development, has opened an 11-screen theatre with a restaurant and bar offering "a boutique destination theatre" equipped with the latest sound and projection technology, reserved stadium seating, and extra-large hand-stitched leather seats. Likewise, the Texas-based Alamo Drafthouse Cinema chain is the equivalent of a cinema attached to a micro-brewery or artisanal bakery, serving up tasty treats.

Also on offer to cinema audiences will be "augmented presentation" (moving seats, and even perhaps scents and wind effects). This is possibly a great



development for an action film like *Fast and Furious Furious 7* but perhaps less so for *Marigold Hotel 2*? It is as if, very shortly, the situation is developing whereby a potential cinema patron will have to decide on the size of cinema she or he wants to visit — big or small? What kind of seat, hand-stitched leather or other, static or motion controlled? What refreshments might they want — artisan bakery or a cinema attached to a micro-brewery? A snack, or a full restaurant meal, and wine? They might even ask themselves — what on earth are cinemas for?

### BURSTING BUBBLES?

The bursting of an economic bubble is one concern for the future of cinema that Steven Spielberg has alluded to in an address to students. PLF cinema building or PLF retrofitting requires a lot of money. "Tent Pole" movies are commanding massive budgets. Cinema ticket prices are rising and in some venues are seen as increasingly expensive. Is this sustainable indefinitely, particularly given some commentators' concerns at the quality of the content of the movies. Should we be worried or not about the attraction of cinema becoming defined more in terms of the visceral and sensory sensation while the opposite occurs as television becomes



defined increasingly in terms of the interesting and the intellectual? Again, even the phrase “tent pole” has resonances of fairgrounds, circuses and amusements.

Despite movies smashing opening weekend records, in many countries, cinema attendances have fallen in the past two consecutive years. China is a major exception where there has been a huge increase in cinema attendance.

Steven Spielberg warned of a possible implosion in cinema exhibition back in 2013. Speaking at a panel at the University of Southern California with George Lucas, he said: “There’s going to be an implosion where three or four or maybe even half a dozen of these mega-budgeted movies are going to go crashing into the ground and that’s going to change the paradigm.”

Like many, he predicted VOD and TV would become even more interesting than cinema. Some say this has already happened. Netflix is fighting alongside the major networks for Emmys. Amazon has now entered the realms of producer and commissioner of content. Spielberg continued: “What you’re going to end up with is fewer theatres. Bigger theaters, with a lot of nice things. Going to the movies is going to cost you 50 bucks, maybe \$100. Maybe \$150. That’s going to be what we call ‘the movie business.’”

In recent conversations with Douglas Trumbull, he told me that he believes cinema is taking a whole set of wrong turns with its modern “bells and whistles” and the move towards bigger, brighter and louder PLF auditoria. Clearly he believes that TV has now developed into the superior story-telling medium. “If you want to tell a story, do it on television!”

He believes cinema should distinguish itself from television with a far greater concentration on using the most basic elements of cinema technology more effectively to break down that fourth wall of the cinema — the screen — to ensure the audience is transported through it. He believes that cinema is capable of, and should be, delivering a venue where a group can jointly share a truly convincing immersive communal virtual reality experience. He believes that such experiences can develop an alternative story-telling grammar. That experience can be so incredible that it simply cannot be replicated, even in part, at home using a DVD, giant flat-screen TV, or an image on a living room wall. He knows this can be done using current available cinema technology, but it has to be used in a different way than is being used at present. Well that interview with him is another article. So the story continues! **CT**

## PLF: THE BIG GUNS

➤ If one of the major things that world audiences are enjoying at home on their much-improved TV screens is movies, then cinema is all over again trying to re-market itself as the superior place to see films. You cannot avoid a feeling of déjà vu at this stage. It’s like a digital re-run of the arrival of widescreen and large format celluloid film formats in the analogue era.

➤ As regular readers will know, the development of Premium Large Format (PLF) cinema is taking hold in cinema exhibition. It is a blend of increasingly larger screens, superb high definition powerful projection, immersive sound, stadium seating with a steep rake so close to the screen that it fills the viewers’ area of vision. Motion controlled seating may soon become an increasingly regular part of the premium mix. “The way that cinema is evolving now, and the way it’s positioning itself within the digital environment, is as a premium film-watching venue.” says David Hancock, from IHS Technology. “Staying on the cutting edge is really important to keep cinema as the premier place to watch movies,” argues John Fithian, of the National Association of Theatre Owners. It is significant to note how the above two statements acknowledge the amount of film viewing that takes place beyond the cinema.

➤ Imax was the first of the proprietary brand of Premium Large Format brands of the modern era and its 15 perf. 70 mm film format morphed into Digital Imax as cinema went digital. Now we have a myriad of brands linked to different exhibitors and companies. The September 2014 *Film Journal International* reported that there were a total of 32 exhibitor PLF brands in the USA out of a total of 72 brands being marketed globally. These auditoria are the perfect exhibition match to the massive “tent pole” movies suited to them. The immediate and medium-term strategy of cinema is all about distinguishing itself from television via the PLF approach. All of this has to be matched by digital motion picture cameras that are capable of producing data files that will stand the viewing of greatly enlarged images on bigger screens with the audience raked closer to them. The Arri Alexa 65 Camera already markets itself as “the return of 65mm.”