In a series of three articles, our regular contributor Mark Trompeteler looks at the debates taking place around the idea that movies today are not as important to popular culture and society as they once were. He also discusses how the digital domain has grown rapidly, both within the type of movies that have become popular and in the content of those movies, and also how they are consumed in all kinds of other ways outside of cinemas.

Cinema Now! - Cinema Future?

Part 2:
"Blockbusterisation"
In this second of his three articles, Mark meets with Professor Sir Christopher Frayling, probably the UK's leading commentator, author, broadcaster, educator and curator on popular culture. He has broadcasted, lectured and written extensively on cinema.
They discuss some of the cultural aspects of the digitisation of cinema and the cinema scene today.

I was looking forward to the opportunity of chatting with Christopher Frayling about a number of issues concerning cinema in contemporary popular culture and society. Obviously I thought it best to clarify my thoughts on some of the issues in advance, and some of them, which we covered in the first part of this series, published in the March 2015 issue, go back right back to the very beginning of cinema and some of the most fundamental debates about the nature of cinema, distribution and exhibition. Having clarified these thoughts I felt better prepared to chat with Christopher Frayling about them.

"That multiplex claim was a fallacy"
Mark Trompeteler *(MT)*:
Christopher – What is your view on Steven Soderbergh's saying "I just don't think movies matter as much any more, culturally" ?

Christopher Frayling *(CF)*:
If he means how Hollywood tends to produce popular films I think he has got a point. It has really become polarised between expensive blockbusters that are pre-sold as comics / blockbusters in other media – so that they are not taking a risk – or their sequels - at one end of the spectrum, or at the other end, there are these tiny little independent films. The whole middle ground, that I grew up with, which are popular films that are neither blockbusters or those tiny little "indie" films that went through all the cinema distribution channels, has almost completely disappeared. Of course there is television which has kind of a little bit taken this ground over with small budgets. I miss the intelligent medium budget movie with a studio behind it and promoting it – which is something that doesn't seem to happen very often these days.

One of the sadnesses is, I was a governor of the BFI when the multiplexes started, and I remember one of the claims that was being made by the cinema industry. Isn't it going to be marvellous at the diversity of films that we will be able to have – with say Speilberg in screen one and Bulgarian cartoons in screen seven and a really interesting Polish film but no – what has happened is seven of the eight screens are Spielberg and if you are lucky you might get one interesting film on one of the screens for a day or so. There is a cinema in Galway I remember visiting one summer where the soundproofing was not great. I was in one screen watching a quiet film I had chosen to see with an earthquake type movie showing in the adjacent screen. In our screen we were still getting the blockbuster whether we wanted it or not. Yes, that multiplex claim was a fallacy – that that form of distribution would lead to diversity.

The Point, Milton Keynes was the UK's first multiplex when it opened in 1985. Originally owned by AMC, it eventually became an Odeon, and closed in 2015

But of course it is the same in other walks of life. If you take popular music - at one end it is manufactured commercial pop, and at the other end, the students' union band – the middle ground has almost completely gone. It is all a corporate sort of thing. So much money is at stake, and there are so many interests and investors, and production values are so high that it pushes this huge "blockbusterisation" on the one hand or the use of an acoustic guitar in the students' union bar on the other hand. It's a similar phenomenon.

Some of the films that get a theatrical release like "Little Miss Sunshine" are to some extent part of what is being missed. The great thing about when I was growing up was that films would first be distributed in north London and then south London and half the films being distributed at any one time might be films like "Doctor in the House" or "Genevieve" which were part of the middle ground and seemed to do very well. In those days you could get away with an English audience seeing an English film to cover your costs. You didn't have to depend so much on the American market and to some extent these were parochial films. As costs became more expensive you had to start hedging your bets and pitch your films at the American market as well.

I think the comic thing is interesting, or graphic novels as they are called now. They are now the crucible of Hollywood whereas in the nineteen thirties and forties the crucible was the plays, the novels and best sellers in other media. The crucible now is very strongly comics and comic books. Now that I think Disney has bought Marvel there is going to be a lot more of that and of course Disney has bought Lucasfilm and there will even be much much more.

I remember years and years ago they were going to do a Barry Norman type programme on BBC2 and I was auditioned to be the presenter and I got the job but they decided not to do it in the end. I did my party piece at the audition and my presentation was that comic books would become the dominant aesthetic in Hollywood and of course we often think that comics are for children.

But it has happened! They are all presold – we all know who Superman is – we all know who Batman is – we almost don't have to see the movie. The interest in the movie is in the detail of how they are going to tell the old stories.

"blockbusterisation"

MT: I fully understand the point but isn't this all limiting the demographic of the cinema audience? Isn't this divisive in terms of attracting a wide demographic to the cinema?

CF: I agree – I suggest the audience for this is 16 - 23. Everyone tells us that Hollywood surveys identify that demographic as the backbone of the holiday film audience. If you appeal to that demographic then you are going to have a good opening. In my day there of course were not so many prints and you had slow burn films. This is a distribution point – you could have films where word of mouth could become very important. For instance "Bonnie & Clyde" - it was a disaster on first release in the States, but very successful in Europe, and then it was released in the States again on the back of that and it became a hit. "The Magnificent Seven" did not do very well in the States, did fantastically well in Europe, and on the rebound became successful. Today, if it doesn't work on the opening weekend then the studio will not necessarily get behind it, and that is a very different marketing technique. This leads to "blockbusterisation" in the sense that now it can open at thousands of cinemas simultaneously with a huge advertising campaign. Slow burn at one time was possible. I do not want to sound "Last of the Summer Wine" about all this but it was possible for sleepers to happen much more easily. I believe they didn't use to panic as much as they do now. You get the sense that after four days of opening, studios begin to panic – if it is not working on opening well then the whole marketing campaign changes.

MT: What is your view on cultural and film academics like Jean Baudril-

lard who say this whole move to fantasy cinema with all its use of CGI and so much "rendered imagery" is anti-cinematic and taking cinema away from what it should be?

CF: Gosh - Jean Baudrillard – you have my sympathies. I do not agree with that at all. Look at the origins of cinema. Two aesthetics emerged quite quickly. Look at the Lumières and look at Méliès. Right from its very origins there has always been cinema as special effects and cinema as trains coming into a station. The two aesthetics have always co–existed. It is a matter of balance. Yes there are many more fantasy films than there used to be. Yes anything is possible with CGI. So yes you can have a million Orcs storming a fortress. I do not think Baudrillard is right to see that as a decline. It is just an aesthetic moment.

Look I come from a background in the history of art. Fashion happens, the pendulum swings, one moment realism is in, then next fantasy is in, then expressionism is in, than after photography hyper-realism is out, and then it is back in – all of these things co-exist as part of the history of the medium. I never buy those philosophies that say there was a golden age and we are in a decline from it. It is all part of the history of the medium. With luck these things survive and that's another issue – of course the issue of conservation – with luck these things survive and you get a whole kind of heritage of cinema as well today - these are all just different options. Look – things come and go. Look at 3D in the 50s – it lasted ten minutes – "a lion in your lap", "House of Wax", and all those things and we got bored with it and then we moved on up to "smellies" which never even caught on. These things come and go.

Blockbusterisation means that we all know who Superman is – we all know who Batman is – we almost don't have to see the movie!

3D certainly hasn't settled I think. Digital does seem to have settled now because that is the way in which cinemas are kitted out. I don't see it as the end of cinema.

"suspension of disbelief"

MT: Is there much point do you think in the technology, and the manufacturers of cinema technology, pursuing more and more hyper-realism in the production and exhibition of movies? Going from 2K to 4K, and possibly from 4K to 8K one day, from 7.1 surround sound to Atmos etc? Some of these cinema commentators almost seem to bemoan the lack of good character and narrative driven films and seem to worry about an aesthetic of banality creeping in as there is such a concentration on raising technical quality all the time.

CF: It is more to do with what I would call a suspension of disbelief. It isn't trying to persuade you it is realistic. It is trying to persuade you to believe it. So you get all these fantasy films with all this phenomenal realistic technology and this is not so that we all believe in Orcs, but that at that moment, you are immersed in it enough, to suspend your disbelief. But in a way the whole history of theatre is like that. In Victorian times with gas light and then with electric light, there was an increased "spectacularisation" and an increase in realism. This was not because you were meant to think you were watching a documentary, but for that two and a half hours you would be believing what you are seeing.

Baudrillard did interestingly comment that we now live in age of facsimile. It is as if movies have colonised everyones minds. We have this B movie running inside our head as we walk down the street and we want life to resemble a movie. I find that quite interesting but I think I draw the opposite conclusion. It suggests that movies are more important than ever, they are in fact so much part of our culture, and so much part of the drinking water that it is how we see the world. I once did a lecture at The British Museum on The British Museum in the movies – once they closed the reading room and moved it to St. Pancras. It was really interesting as I had interviewed lots of people about what their image of The British Museum was. They all said mummies and the occult and secret books kept in the basement – and that is all from the movies. So as you walk around the city things are triggered for instance not by what you have seen in real

There is a huge difference between watching on a big screen and seeing a movie on a tablet or smartphone

life but what you have seen in the movies. The movies have colonised our unconscious. There is no question about that.

" it is "collaging" life - so it is almost turning cinema into still graphic images"

MT: As we take these walks around our cities Christopher, are we not increasingly struck but the number of people who are glued to the screens of their mobile devices? Are we not noticing more and more watching tv programmes and parts of movies while they are on trains, buses and escalators? Isn't this increasingly trivialising and casualising the viewing experience? How can this be part of anything we know as cinema?

CF: Yes I grew up when going to the cinema was an event. You went out and you sat down. If it was a 70mm movie show you had separate performances and you had curtains and a programme. It was almost like going to the theatre. There was an intermission when you bought ice creams or in the case of "Lawrence of Arabia", a lot of ice creams because the desert made you thirsty. That has certainly gone, that sense of occasion, except for perhaps premières and at Imax I suppose. Even the claims that are made for these technologies - I remember I was very much involved in the decision to put lottery money into the Imax at Waterloo and I remember the pitch being made when they said we are going to make great feature films. It is still at the level of flowers, racing cars and dinosaurs and doing down to the bottom of the sea to see the Titanic – it never quite materialised, because it all so expensive to get into the kind of drama films we have been talking about.

What I always think about mobile devices and so on is that it is a wonderful example of

unintended consequences. All the plusses of communication, being able to keep in touch with everyone, and having everything on demand – no one spotted the minuses. That people are now in a situation where they have an altered sense of space around them – so when you are "wired" in this way you are in an absolute bubble and you are oblivious to what is going on around you. Your concentration is on that tiny screen or what you are listening to and it has completely altered the relationship between people and the space around them. They bump into you, they walk with their heads down, and they never look around, and the whole visual experience of the real world is being diminished over time. That is an unintended consequence. Also without wishing to sound like a grumpy old man, the decline of civility where all this is concerned, with people shouting into their phones on the train and behaving as if their private conversation is of interest to everyone else. That can alter from country to country. In some countries there is less of a decline in civility. But in Britain in particular it has led to this extraordinary decline in the public realm and everyone is privatised in their space and they do not give a damn about the people around them. So that was an unintended consequence.

In terms of the distribution of images I personally like a big screen. I like total immersion. I like going into complete darkness. I prefer going to the cinema than watching DVDs where you can see the cup of tea and the switch on the light. If I watch a horror movie in the cinema it tends to hit me between the eyes because of the total immersion because I cannot get away from it in any way. If I watch it on DVD you press freeze frame and go and make a cup of tea. **MT:** But watching a movie in the public
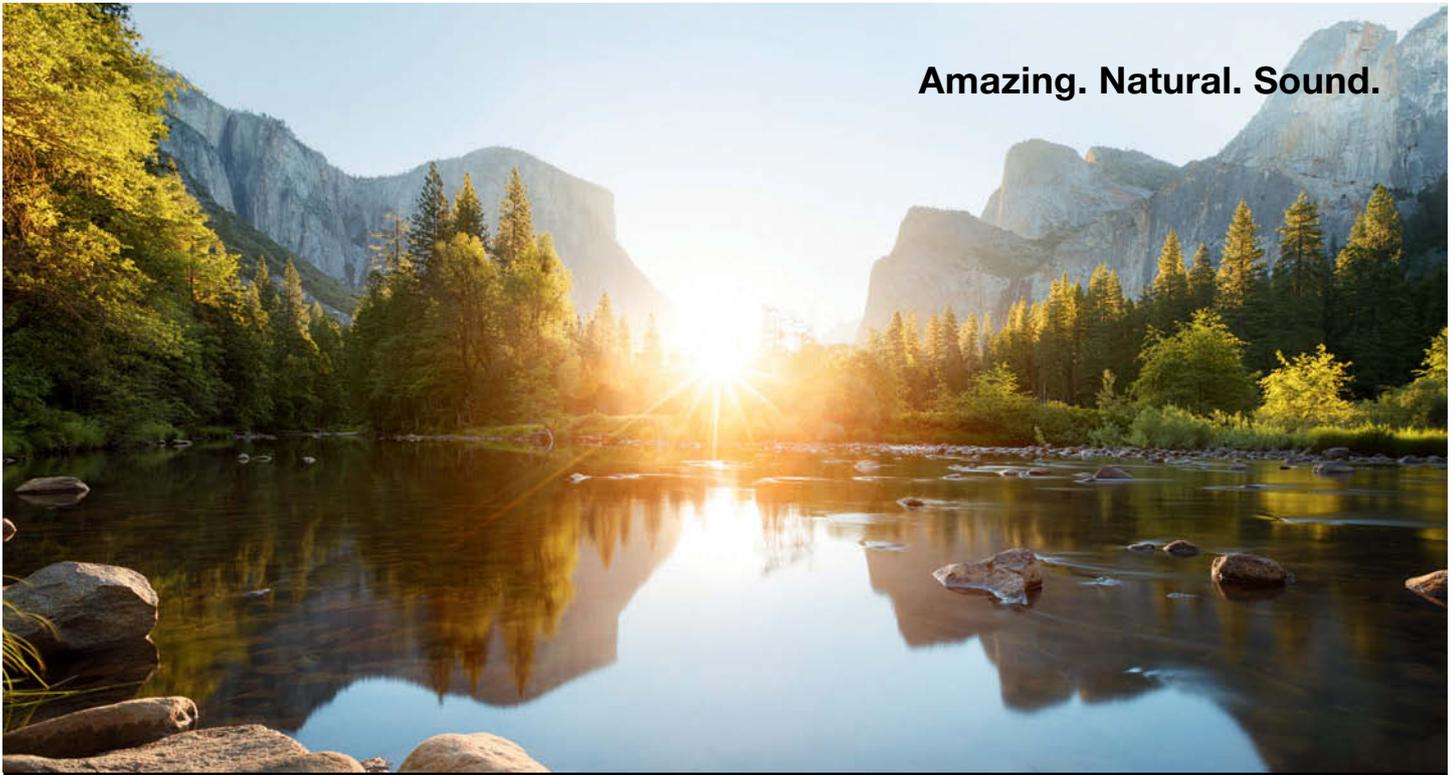
realm, on an 11inch screen, standing up in a crowded train carriage?

CF: I know it is extraordinary, I do not know how the suspension of disbelief can occur. Surely if you turn things into little sized mobile images instead of it engaging you and establishing an emotional connection – it is changing things with respect to that series of images – it is collaging life - so it is almost turning cinema into still graphic images. I used to watch TV with someone. There was a sculptor called Eduardo Paolozzi who was a very close friend of mine and he used to come and stay every Christmas and he was a collagist and he used to watch television as a collagist – it was absolutely maddening. You used to be watching television with him bedside you and he had the remote control.

You were just getting into something then click and he changed channel and I would say, "Hey! Eduardo what are you doing? I want to know what happened to that bloke

!" Then he would say whilst on his new channel - "Oh - look at that! That is a strong image!" I think that it does turn movies into stills and impressions. Fast cutting and the effect it has, alters people's aesthetic.

I showed "The Searchers" at The Royal College of Art a few years ago to the students and if you remember the opening shot – it is one of the few westerns that opens indoors. The camera goes through the door into Monument Valley. There is a long shot of a horseman in the distance with all the dust, and a woman standing in the foreground.
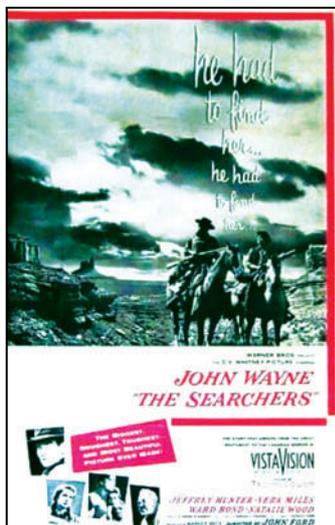
Within five minutes someone began chanting "fast forward", "fast forward", they could not cope with the pace of it. The problem is you can't speed up horses – you can speed up spaceships, you can speed up Orcs, but you can't speed up horses because they look silly.

There is a certain rhythm – if you are used to images coming to you in ten second bites or even in a few frames at a time –

they couldn't cope with the aesthetic – they were bored rigid. I think that is sad. I think that is sad and it is a real challenge. It is a real challenge to theatre – theatre is working out how it can be more appealing and become more cinematic – more elaborate sets, more use of the moving image with coups de théâtre and collapsing buildings and this kind of stuff. To keep people's attention you have to do that.

CGI is supposed to capture people's attention – it doesn't work. When I go to the cinema it is full of people who are staring down at little screens. They are constantly texting. It as if there lives are so busy they must think it is worth their while spending eight pounds or so, so they can go into the dark, have some time on their own and text their friends. It annoys me intensely. In my day if we wanted some quiet time on our own we went and sat in the park.

Mark Trompeteler

In the concluding part of this series, to be published in the next issue, Sir Christopher expresses some views on the future of cinema within the UK, as well as being an expert on the place of cinema within popular culture.