

THREE STEPS TO HEAVEN

Escape, Cinerama & The Triptych

Mark Trompeteler reports on the evolving Widescreen Weekend festival of big screen technology at the National Science & Media Museum



Just as cinema changes and evolves, so the festivals and institutions around it change too. A more diverse demographic of delegates than usual descended on the newly renamed National Science and Media Museum in Bradford to attend the 21st Widescreen Weekend for four days in mid-October. It billed itself as “the unique festival of big screen technology, past, present and future”. Incorporating its IMAX auditorium alongside the analogue, digital and three-strip projection facilities in its Pictureville cinema, and programming recent releases alongside classic big screen films, efforts were clearly being made to deliver on the promise of presenting past, present and future of cinema technology.

THE BEST THINGS COME IN THREES

Nothing demonstrated the uniqueness of this festival more than the programming: a presentation on the Barco Escape system alongside the exhibition of a digital restoration of a Cinerama/Cinemira film. These accompanied the presentation of an original three-strip Cinerama film, as well as the legendary triptych from Abel Gance’s *Napoleon* (1927) — a three-strip cinema

heaven almost no other venue can emulate.

Barco’s Stefan Vandemaele and Frederick Lanoy referred to the company’s development and launch of the three-wall Escape system as almost part of another repeat of cinema history. They asserted that recently, whilst box office takings were remaining steady, due to the utilisation of higher prices for PLF and an improved and wider range of offer and other sales factors, there will always be a concern about falling attendances in auditoria. As in previous eras, there is always that imperative that cinema must offer exceptional experiences that cannot be replicated at home. With large 4K TVs, surround sound systems, 2K and 4K movie streaming services all available, the imperative on cinema to offer an experience that cannot be imitated at home is as great, if not greater, than before. Barco’s Escape utilises a three-screen system as Cinerama and “The Triptych” did before it. No-one will be utilising three walls of their living rooms any time soon.

Stefan and Frederick maintain that Escape is a compelling experience that can only ever be enjoyed at the cinema. It can be retro-fitted by Barco to existing cinemas whilst retaining the integrity of the existing

central screen. An additional pair of acoustically transparent, and retractable screens, with additional curtaining, are added to the two sides of the existing screen. It is DCI-compliant and versions of movies will be available with DCPs encoded so that either the movie can be run with just one central screen, or in a version that has the two added screens available to project. They argue that, due to digital projection, Escape is deliverable far more easily and reliably than was Cinerama. There is no need for three projections boxes — “hushboxes” can be fitted round the additional two projectors in the auditorium. Synchronisation of sound and picture is far more reliable and easily achieved than it was with Cinerama.

The aspect ratio can be as wide as 7:1 (3x2.39:1), with today’s shooting of three-panel movies not having to be restricted to the three-camera rigs of times gone by. High resolution digital motion picture cameras making movies for large-size PLF screens are capable of achieving the required 858 x 6144 pixel image size via their large sensors: e.g. the Arri 65 (6560x3100), Red Weapon (8192x4320), Red Epic (6144x3160) and the Sony F65 (6144x2160). Obviously the making of movies or sequences in “Escape”



has significant pre-production, production, post-production and workflow issues. Even a movie been shot with just one central screen in mind could have sequences added that are in *Escape*, or could be entirely *Escape*, enhanced by CGI fabricating the two additional panels to add immersion.

One Cinerama expert mentioned to me in conversation that, in his view, *Escape* had the danger of just producing “visual eyewash” to either side of the central screen. His fear was that whilst “eyewash” on either side might give a feeling of immersion it might not be used narratively. His point was that in Cinerama and its predecessor, “The Triptych”, side panels were used to depict action and characters essential to the scene, and hence story development.

Cinerama screenings this year included

fans, and was the opening night film, projected in 70mm, of course. The closing night film *Lawrence of Arabia* featured a glorious pristine new 70mm print without a mark on it, and it looked and sounded magnificent. Its visual and dramatic power, and thoughtful and layered unfolding of an epic story reminds us just how good classic films can be. Classics are not reliant on the transitory nature of sensation and spectacle alone, or on the latest technologies to deliver them — the ingredients and craft of good storytelling are just as important, if not more so. Gregory Orr, grandson of Jack L. Warner, and a filmmaker in his own right, attended the whole event and introduced a beautiful 4K DCP of “*My Fair Lady*” on the flat screen and in 2.2:1.

As well as the films mentioned, the

▲ **Three Panel Experts:** Left to right: Stefan Vandemaele, Frederick Lanoy, David Strohmaier, Randy Gitsch, Patrick Stanbury, Kevin Brownlow.

and the brilliant idea of a celluloid Saturday when every film shown was on celluloid so that people who had never experienced celluloid projection could buy a day pass and experience analogue cinema without having to subscribe to the whole four days.

Programming suggestions from a number of delegates had clearly been taken on board by the festival director and been amalgamated into this year’s event. Programme consultants Rebecca Nicole Williams and David Strohmaier and guest curator Sir Christopher Frayling had contributed to the work of the triumvirate behind the organisation of the weekend: Kathryn Penny (festival director), Rebecca Hill (festival co-ordinator) and Tom Perkin (technical manager). Double the number of student day passes had been sold this year and there was an overall 15% increase in attendance for the whole event. IMIS was pleased to sponsor the weekend once more.

“BARCO ESCAPE USES A THREE-SCREEN SYSTEM. NO-ONE WILL BE USING THREE WALLS OF THEIR LIVING ROOM ANY TIME SOON.”

a screening of the museum’s rare and fragile three-strip print of *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm*. The Cinerama restoration team of David Strohmaier and Randy Gitsch presented their improved restoration of the three-strip nautical feature length travelogue *Windjammer*. In today’s climate of PLF formats and discussions on how VR may impact mainstream cinema, Cinerama screenings at Bradford demonstrate just how much resolution and detail is presented across a deeply curved Cinerama screen and how immersive and like VR it can seem.

Still on the three panel theme, the release of the silent masterpiece *Napoleon* in 2017 on both DCP and BluRay has made the viewing of the legendary *Napoleon* triptych far easier to arrange. Kevin Brownlow gave an illustrated account of his epic lifelong journey to restore the film, and his partner at their company, Photoplay, Patrick Stanbury, told us about the restoration of the triptych for digital release and presentation.

A MODERN WIDESCREEN CLASSIC

Even in the year of its release, Christopher Nolan’s *Dunkirk* has already reached classic status among widescreen and 70mm film

weekend featured a broad mix: *The Fortune Cookie* (35mm B&W 2.35:1); *Jailhouse Rock* (35mm B&W 2.35:1); *Apocalypse Now Redux* (35mm 2.35:1); *Moon* (35mm 2.35:1); *The Untouchables* (70mm “blow-up” 2.2:1); *Suspiria* (35mm 2.35:1); *La La Land* (DCP 2.55:1); and *Sleeping Beauty* (DCP 2.55:1). Interspersed with the films were a number of “in conversations with” discussions on stage relating to the films.

Now in its fourth year, the IMIS International Student Widescreen Film of the Year Competition” featured the screening of a shortlist of student films from around the world. The competition, which only features films in aspect ratios of 2.2:1 and wider, showed some which had outstanding commercial production values.

Within the overall programming mix, there was an opportunity to choose between two different films on two separate occasions and programming strands within the evolving weekend were becoming evident: the traditional fare of 70mm, three-strip and widescreen classics; a whole day dedicated to students and a younger age demographic; celebrating monochrome widescreen; a family film for Sunday afternoon; the inclusion of a cult film or two;

A THREE-PANEL FINALE

To end on the three-panel cinema theme, I asked Stefan Vandemaele of Barco to comment on what he thought of it. He said “Cinerama was the first format to expand the theatrical experience beyond the traditional rectangle, offering an immersive new format to moviegoers for the first time ever. I enjoyed seeing it in its full glory during the *Brothers Grimm* screening, using three original analogue projectors. A challenging job for the projectionists, but one very well done! I was excited to join the Widescreen Festival at Bradford to bridge formats like Cinerama with new formats such as Barco Escape, our own three-screen, panoramic cinema experience. It’s good to reflect, look into movie history and learn from it. Today, we’ve overcome projection challenges of the 1960s and have the luxury of working with advance digital projectors that allow easier synchronisation and modern post production equipment.” **CT**

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