

A change of scenery

Replacement of cinematography eminent with technological progressions

Editor's note: Each Tuesday this semester, the Daily Nebraskan will print an opinion column from a guest columnist. Each works at the University of Nebraska or is involved with an issue that affects our campus or our students.

The following is an excerpt from Dixon's forthcoming book, The New Century of Cinema: Looking Forward, Looking Back, State University of New York Press.

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As we approach the 21st century, the filmic medium itself is about to undergo a complete transformation.

Video imagery is becoming cheaper and more pervasive, increasing the ease of both production and exhibition. At the same time, the portability and flexibility of low-cost video production gives new voice to those ignored by the mainstream cinema, yet, paradoxically, the increased costs of distribution make it ever more difficult for alternative cinema/video works to reach an international audience. 16mm film is dead as a production medium; 35 mm may well follow, within the next 10 to 15 years, signaling a significant shift in the production and reception process of that which we call the cinema.

Editing of film is no longer done on film itself; that vanished in the 1970s. For ease, for cost, for its multiple capabilities, the AVID system, among others, has become the new standard for film editing. Indeed, many new films are being shot entirely on digital video, such as Thomas Vinterberg's brilliant film "Celebration" and Bennett Miller's "The Cruise" (both 1998), and then blown up to 35mm for theatrical distribution. Soon 35mm projection may well become obsolete, leading to an entire new digital video era of image production and exhibition, almost precisely 100 years after the birth of cinema.

In the early years of the 21st century, we will finally do away with film altogether, replacing it with a high-definition matrix of dots and pixels laser-projected onto a conventional theater screen, and audiences will overwhelmingly accept this transformation without comment. The cinematograph, after all, is essentially an extension of the Magic Lantern apparatus — light thrown on a screen — and it has had dominion over the entire 20th century.

Now, in the new millennium, different systems of image storage and retrieval will replace the allure of film as surely as magnetic tape replaced optical soundtracks as a vehicle of cinema production. We will be witnessing a silent revolution of images, in which the digital creations of a new breed of "directors" will be as real and substantial to us as Humphrey Bogart, Leonardo DiCaprio, Bela Lugosi and Jean Harlow are to 20th-century audiences and archivists.

The future of the cinematograph itself is not in doubt, although what form the cinematographic apparatus itself will take in the coming century is another matter altogether. There already exist a number of video-imaging systems where resolution and image quality genuinely rival that of 35mm film, and with the general introduction of video imaging instead of photographic image capture, the motion picture industry will be taking a giant leap forward into the future. Since nearly all films are now subjected to a digital "clean-up" process on their route to final distribution, in which the original photographic images are transformed into a series of dots and pixels, manipulated in a variety of methods, and then re-transferred onto 35mm, the total digitization of the moving image cannot be that far off, nor will it be an apocalyptic event that utterly changes the face of image storage and reproduction in a noticeable

fashion.

Rather, as video imaging increases in ease, portability and image quality, the already blurred line between cinema and video will vanish altogether, just as digital compositing has replaced traditional "mattes" in motion picture special effects. With more films, videos, television programs and Internet films being produced now than ever before, and with international image boundaries crumbling thanks to the pervasive influence of the World Wide Web (a technology still in its infancy), we will see in the coming years an explosion of voices from around the globe, in a new and more democratic process which allows a voice to even the most marginalized factions of society.

As the cinema ends its first century of active development and gestation, we can see that it has always been in a process of becoming something new, changing and adapting with each new circumstance and shift in society. From silent flickering images thrown on a screen, the cinema formed a voice through the efforts of Alice Guy, Thomas Edison, Lee de Forest, Vitaphone and other allied processes that have brought us into the Dolby stereo age of digital sound and image processing.

From black and white paper negatives, the cinema has moved swiftly through silver nitrate film, safety film, 3-strip Technicolor, Eastman monopack color film, moveable mattes, split-screen "doubling," until it now stands on the threshold of the final video transformation, where the film camera ceases to exist and is replaced by an entirely digital imaging system that will soon replace conventional 35mm production and exhibition processes.

The moving image, while still controlled as a commercial medium by a few conglomerate organizations, has become with the use of inexpensive Camcorders and the like a truly democratic medium, as has been proven by the Rodney King tape, footage of the events at Tiananmen Square, and other documentary videotapes that have altered the public perception of the formerly illimitable dominion of authoritarian regimes. It is impossible to hold back the flood of images created by these new technologies, and in the coming century, these images will both inform and enlighten our social discourse.

The surveillance cameras now used in New York night clubs to provide low-cost entertainment for Web browsers can only proliferate; there is no surcease from the domain of images which shape and transform our lives. While the big-screen spectacle will continue to flourish, a

plethora of new image constructs now compete for our attention, often with a significant measure of success.

The monopoly of the television networks is a thing of the past; who is to say that theatrical distribution as we know it will not also collapse, to be replaced by a different sort of experience altogether?

IMAX films and other large-format image storage and retrieval systems mimic reality, but in the future, holographic laser displays, in which seemingly three-dimensional characters hold forth from a phantom staging area, may well become the preferred medium of presentation, signaling a return to the proscenium arch, but in this case, a staging space with infinite possibilities for transformation. Powered by high-intensity lasers, this technology could present performances by artists who would no longer have to physically tour to present their faces and voices to the public.

The future of the moving image is both infinite and paradoxical, removing us further and further from our corporeal reality, even as it becomes ever more tangible and seductive. The films, videotapes and production systems discussed here represent only a small fraction of contemporary moving image practice, but they point the direction to work that will be accomplished in the next century. Far from dying, the cinema is constantly being

reborn, in new configurations, capture system, and modes of display. While the need to be entertained, enlightened and/or lulled into momentary escape will always remain a human constant, the cinema as we know it today will continue to undergo unceasing growth and change.

Always the same, yet constantly revising itself, the moving image in the 21st century promises to fulfill both our most deeply held dreams, while simultaneously submitting us to a zone of hypersurveillance that will make monitoring devices of the present-day seem naive and remote. Yet no matter what new genres may arise as a result of these new technologies, and no matter what audiences the moving images of the next century address, we will continue to be enthralled by the mesmerizing embrace of the phantom zone of absent signification, in which the copy increasingly approaches the verisimilitude of the original.

Although Hollywood will seek to retain its dominance over the global presentation of fictive entertainment constructs, a new vision of international access, a democracy of images, will finally inform the

future structure of cinematographic camera in the 21st century.

Many of the stories told will remain familiar; genres are most comfortable when they are repeated with minor variations. But as the production and exhibition of the moving image moves resolutely into the digital age, audiences will have even greater access to a plethora of visual constructs from every corner of the earth. We are now in the digital age where we were one hundred years ago in the era of the cinematograph; at the beginning. What happens next will be wondrous to see.

The Film Studies Program office is located in Andrews Hall, Room 105.

Office hours for spring 1999 are Mondays through Fridays, 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.

The Film Studies major takes effect in the fall of 1999. Students are urged to drop by during office hours to obtain the necessary forms to register for the new major.

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