HOME (WIDE)SCREENS. CINEMASCOPE AESTHETICS IN THE STREAMING AGE

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During a lecture, an American film professor is lamenting the demise of collective movie watching to a classroom filled with young students who, supposedly, are no longer familiar with the experience of going to the cinema. Surprisingly, one of them rebuts the professor's assumption: students do not sit alone at their laptop – in fact, they meet several times a week to watch movies together on the big screen. The film professor is happy, yet puzzled. Only 13% of all movie-watching in the U.S. in 2019 involved cinema screens, and the situation has only gotten worse with the pandemic. Are these students outliers? Are they lying to make the professor happy? As it turns out, both the professor and the students are correct. Movie theaters have nothing to do with the students' movie-watching habits: the big screen they refer to is a 4K 55-inch OLED television that one of their classmates just bought.

Jurij Meden tells this anecdote in his book *Scratches and Glitches: Observations on Preserving and Exhibiting Cinema in the Early 21st Century*, to prove how movie-watching habits, and even the vocabulary related to it, are contingent upon social, generational, and economic factors.[1] Meden avoids the cynical and uselessly nostalgic conclusion that the quasi-mystical experience of going to the movie theater, celebrated by Roland Barthes in a famous essay, is lost on younger generations.[2] Rather, he analyzes the commercial mechanisms regulating all forms of movie watching, whether they take place in a 1920s movie palace or on an iPhone.[3] For our purposes, though, Meden's argument is helpful for another reason – namely, because it goes beyond the analog/digital binary that has dominated cinema studies for the past two decades. A simple parallel between analog/movie theater versus digital/home is just untenable. If hardly anyone has an analog film projector in their living room, the overwhelming majority of movie theaters is now equipped exclusively with digital projectors. Digital technology is what makes streaming audiovisual content at home possible, but it is also at the core of the contemporary movie-going experience. Including experience in the discourse surrounding technology, as Tom Gunning advocates, complicates a simple dualistic opposition between analog and digital cinema and allows us to better understand not only the practice of movie-watching, but also the movies themselves.[4]

1 J. Meden, *Scratches and Glitches: Observations on Preserving and Exhibiting Cinema in the Early 21st Century*, Austrian Film Museum, Wien 2021, pp. 17-18.

2 R. Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theater", in *The Rustle of Language*, transl. Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York 1986, pp. 345–349.

3 Meden, *Scratches and Glitches,* cit., 19-20.

4 T. Gunning, *The Sum of Its Pixels*, "Film Comment", September-October, 2007, p.78.

Obviously, that of the «cinema experience» is a complex issue on which much has been written.[5] While this paper does not have the presumption to exhaust the topic, or to touch upon all the implications that such a complicated subject engages, my goal is that of tracing a hermeneutic circle touching technology, experience, and aesthetics by offering a retrospective look at the history and style of widescreen cinema and showing how it is affected by the move from the movie theater to home screens. Covid-related lockdowns and the forced retreat into our homes that they caused have stirred discussions over the place of cinema screens in the XXI century. However, it would be a mistake to think that these are exclusively post-pandemic issues. For instance, Ross Lipman has recently thought through what the Covid-related shift from theatrical exhibition to streaming means for film lovers, showing how the availability of digital formats for home viewing has been both a blessing and a curse.[6] Interestingly, Lipman states that his piece is the product of a decades-long reflection on the cinematic experience, thus demonstrating how the pandemic's effect on cinema, though unprecedented, precipitated lingering dynamics rather than creating radically new ones. Here, I want to build upon Lipman's argument to zoom in on an issue that he touches upon in his discussion, but that I believe is worth exploring further: that of the re-mediation of historical film formats, specifically those, like CinemaScope, with wide aspect ratios. In my discussion, the distinction between analog and digital technology or that between streaming a file and projecting a film strip becomes secondary: it is the context of the projection that makes all the difference.

To prove my point, I will offer an overview of the aesthetics of widescreen formats in order to show how wide aspect ratios cannot be properly experienced on a home screen. My goal is not to create an exhaustive taxonomy of widescreen styles – a task that others have already successfully tackled – but rather to discuss the positioning of the spectator in relation to the frame to show how some widescreen compositions lose meaning on a TV (or worse, laptop) screen.[7] To do so, I will provide some examples of how widescreen composition is heavily dependent on a spectator who sits in a movie theater rather than at home. This is of course consistent with the historical period in which widescreen formats were released on a large scale: one of the goals of the Studios was to fight the competition of television by offering an experience that was irreplicable at home. In the 2020s, it is worth going back to 1953, the year in which CinemaScope was released, to look at how it was advertised, used, received, and discussed. Even though CinemaScope proper was relatively short-lived, it was the first widescreen technology to be successful on a large scale and it paved the way for a large number of formats with similar aspect ratios and comparable

5 See, for instance, F. Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008; F. Casetti, *Filmic Experience*, "Screen", 50.1, Spring 2009, pp. 56-66.

6 R. Lipman, *The Archival Impermanence Project, or: Performing Cinema in the Age of the Death of Everything*, in "Caligari", 4, 2022, available at https://caligaripress.com/The-Archival-Impermanence-Project-or-Performing-Cinema-in-the-Age-of

7 For an exploration of widescreen styles, beginning in the silent era, see H. Cossar, *Letterboxed: The Evolution of Widescreen Cinema*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 2011.

composition dynamics.[8] Through the analysis of some key CinemaScope titles, we will see how the implied spectator of many widescreen films is caught in a tension between immersion and distance that is completely dependent on their position in the theater and that cannot be replicated at home, regardless of how carefully one designs their movie watching experience.

Immersion and Distance, Reality and Artifice: The Conflicting Aesthetics of Widescreen Films

Damien Chazelle's 2016 musical *La La Land* opens with a well-known image: a yellow logo, «Presented in CinemaScope», on a blue background. What is interesting is that *La La Land* is actually shot on Panavision, a more recent widescreen format with a similar aspect ratio: the last CinemaScope film, *In Like Flint* (Gordon Douglas), dates back to 1967, and the system had already been eclipsed by Panavision's anamorphic technology a few years earlier.[9] *La La Land*'s opening does not convey technical information, but is rather a declaration of belonging to a well-known cinematic tradition that audiences still identify with CinemaScope: that of cinema as entertainment and spectacle, associated with genres such as the musical, the historical epic, or the western.

Chazelle's homage is consistent with the discourse that surrounded the release of the new technology in marketing materials as well as in the press. As Ariel Rogers shows in her study on the reception of new moving image technologies, the release of CinemaScope was accompanied by the promise of an immersive experience.[10] Terms like «engulfing», «overwhelming», «intimate», were omnipresent in publicity posters, thus signaling a kind of experience that was immersive rather than contemplative. This relationship with the screen goes hand in hand with the film genres that Chazelle evokes, and that in fact were the ones that benefited the most from the launch of CinemaScope, at least in its early years. It is not by chance that the first film to be released in CinemaScope, *The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1953), is a historical epic that takes advantage of the new format by creating compositions that foster a sense of immersion in its landscapes and sets (Fig. 1).

8 For a detailed history of CinemaScope and the technology behind it, see J. Belton, *Widescreen Cinema*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1992. Another detailed account of the technology involved in widescreen cinema can be found in L. Lipton, *The Cinema in Flux: The Evolution of Motion Picture Technology from the Magic Lantern to the Digital Era*, Part 7, Springer, New York 2021.

9 Belton, *Widescreen Cinema*, cit., 155.

10 A. Rogers, *Cinematic Appeals: The Experience of Moving Image Technologies*, Columbia University Press, New York 2013.

Fig. 1. *The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1953). The pyramidal composition of the shot fosters a sense of immersion.

Similar dynamics are at place even in films that belong to less obviously spectacular genres, such as comedy: here, however, the construction of audience participation is based on different premises. The second film released in CinemaScope, *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Jean Negulesco, 1953), shows this mechanism very clearly. The film's main appeal is the presence of its female stars, especially Marilyn Monroe, who would appear in six CinemaScope films between 1953 and 1960 and would be one of the main draws of the new format. Some posters for *How to Marry a Millionaire* show the female stars trespassing the borders of the screen, conveying the feeling of excess and abundance through which some scholars link CinemaScope with contemporary consumerist culture.[11] Other publicity materials show the actresses inviting the spectator to join them inside the screen, thus erasing the boundaries separating the world of the theater from that of the film. But the main attraction of *How to Marry a Millionaire* is definitely its promise of intimacy with its female stars: «Only CinemaScope could so completely engulf you in thrilling intimacy», reads the description of the movie in a publicity page. Judging from the reactions of the press, the film delivered on its promise. As Rogers points out, the feeling of being so close to the gigantic body of Marilyn on a CinemaScope screen was described as similar to that of being smothered in baked Alaska.[12] Here, too, the film's style works towards this goal: Marilyn is often portrayed lying down, her body occupying the entire rectangular frame, in moments of relax or even sleep (fig. 2-3). We are therefore in a privileged position to not only experience the star's physical presence, but also partake in her more private moments, in which she is subject to the vulnerability of unconsciousness.

11 K. Glitre, *Conspicuous consumption: The Spectacle of Widescreen Comedy in the Populuxe Era*, in J. Belton, S. Hall, S. Neale (eds.), *Widescreen Worldwide*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN 2010, p. 133.

12 Rogers, *Cinematic Appeals*, cit., p. 19.

Fig. 2. *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Jean Negulesco, 1953). Marilyn is portrayed lying down, her body occupying the entire frame.

Fig. 3. *How to Marry a Millionaire*. The star's sleep fosters a sense of intimacy and even control over her unconscious body.

This type of cinematic experience is obviously impossible in a home setting. The main reason is of course the size of the screen: even though few movie theaters refurbished their venues to adjust to CinemaScope, which, ideally, would have required a curved screen, they would nonetheless offer a much bigger image than any home system. It would be impossible to feel as though we were «smothered in baked Alaska» just by watching Marilyn on TV. However, there is also another reason that does not have to do with the size of the screen, but rather with its shape. The aspect ratio of CinemaScope was originally 1:2.55, which means that its frame is an extremely wide rectangle: this forces the spectator in a movie theater to move their head to scan the entire screen, which cannot be seen in focus all at once. The portion of the frame that is in focus in the spectator's field of vision is reduced the closer one gets to the screen. This feature seems to work towards the feeling of immersion and has been discussed and advertised as approximating real-life vision and therefore a life-like experience.

In 1953, shortly after the release of *The Robe*, André Bazin wrote an article titled *Will CinemaScope Save the Film Industry?*.[13] Bazin's interest in the new format can be easily explained with his life-long theorization of cinematic realism: it would be easy to see CinemaScope as one of the steps leading towards Bazin's idea of total cinema – namely, a cinema that at every technological innovation gets closer and closer to a perfect reproduction of the physical world.[14]

Realism was in fact another selling point of CinemaScope. «Life-like realism» or «Life-like reality» were common expressions in the advertisement of CinemaScope titles, and contemporary reviewers and later commentators alike pointed to the inability to see the whole screen at once as an approximation of real-life vision, thus enhancing the feeling of reality.[15] Early critics, like Charles Barr, followed this thread by celebrating the new format's role in advancing cinematic realism and leading towards a «total illusion, with sound, color and depth».[16] Bazin himself, after discussing the economic and strategic reasons for the introduction of the new system, reiterates his conviction that «the essence of film from the very start […] has been a quest for the realism of the image», and sees CinemaScope as a step in that direction, however flawed.[17] Even though, as we will see shortly, Bazin's assessment of the new system is more subtle and complex than this, realism seems to be one of the pillars of widescreen aesthetics.

Critics from "Movie" and "Cahiers du Cinéma", for instance, adopted this stance, as David Bordwell shows in his essay *Widescreen Aesthetics and Mise en Scene Criticism*.[18] The director that was most often discussed as the main representative of this kind of realism is Otto Preminger, and the film that best exemplifies the relationship between realism and widescreen style is his western *River of No Return* (1955), starring Robert Mitchum and, again, Marilyn Monroe. In particular, lengthy discussions have been devoted to the famous raft scene, which Bordwell aptly calls «the *locus classicus* of widescreen aesthetics».[19] Matt (Mitchum) rescues Kay (Monroe) and her husband Harry from the river's strong currents: as Harry lifts Kay from the raft, her suitcase drifts to the right and lingers at the border of the frame before disappearing offscreen. The symbolic significance of this moment is clear: with the inadvertent loss of her bag, Kay is also beginning to get rid of her past. Nonetheless, as "Movie" critic V. F. Perkins points out, «Preminger is not over-impressed. […] The director presents the action clearly and leaves the interpretation to the spectator».[20] In other words,

13 A. Bazin, *Will CinemaScope Save the Film Industry?*, "Film-Philosophy" 6.1, available at https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/film.2002.0002

14 A. Bazin, *The Myth of Total Cinema*, in Hugh Gray (eds. and transl.), *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 2, University of California Press, Berkeley 1971, pp. 23-27.

15 Rogers, *Cinematic Appeals*, cit., p. 30; Belton, *Widescreen Cinema*, cit., pp. 201-203; M. Deutelbaum, *Basic Principles of Anamorphic Composition*, "Film History", 15.1, 2003, pp. 73–74.

16 C. Barr, *CinemaScope: Before and After*, "Film Quarterly", 16.4, Summer 1963, pp. 4-24.

17 Bazin, *Will CinemaScope Save the Film Industry?*, cit.

18 D. Bordwell, *Widescreen Aesthetics and Mise en Scene Criticism*, "The Velvet Light Trap", 21, Summer 1985, pp. 18–25.

19 Ibid., p. 20.

20 V. F. Perkins, *River of No Return*, "Movie", 2, September 1962, p. 18.

Preminger does not cut to a close-up of the suitcase but, thanks to the wide frame afforded by CinemaScope, keeps everything in the frame and leaves it to the spectator whether to pay attention to it (and its symbolic significance) or not (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. *River of No Return* (Otto Preminger, 1955). Both the characters and Kay's suitcase are in the frame, thus leaving it to the spectator whether to follow the action or the movement of the bag, with all its symbolic significance.

Roggen calls these «cinephiliac moments», borrowing the expression that Paul Willemen used to describe highly idiosyncratic experiences that are part of a specific cinephile viewing strategy.[21] For Roggen, cinephiliac moments are frequent in a widescreen film because of the compositional choices just described. Inspired by Barr and Perkins, he writes:

> Directors could also audaciously choose *not* to stress essential parts of the composition. Observant viewers could then discover these crucial, but only subtly incorporated, details autonomously. These unemphasised details are only visible for the active – and, in this sense, cinephile – viewer, who must employ a panoramic perception in order to discover them.[22]

For Roggen, mise-en-scene composition is therefore not only a matter of realism, but also a style particularly favored by cinephiles because of the challenge it poses to them: they can see the un-emphasized details or not. Interestingly, the cinephile spectator can discover more «cinephiliac moments» through repeated viewings: it would be very hard for any spectator to notice the significant detail before knowing how important it would be in the development of the story. Its importance can be fully understood only upon a second or third viewing. In this sense, the endless re-watchings afforded by home video can play an interesting role in deciphering subtler compositions like that of Preminger's. Nonetheless, the effort required for noticing such a small detail on a CinemaScope screen is lost, and so

21 P. Willemen, *Through the Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered*, in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1994, p. 234.

22 Roggen, *You See It or You Don't*, cit.

is the pleasure of laborious discovery: as we will see shortly, these are not the only or the most impactful elements missing from domestic screenings of widescreen films.

Roggen's intuition introduces yet another feature of widescreen aesthetics. In order to be able to notice details like Kay's suitcase, a spectator in a movie theater needs to sit fairly far from the screen: the closer they are to the image, the narrower their field of vision will be, thus preventing them from seeing what happens at the margins of the frame unless they turn their head. This compositional strategy has paradoxical consequences: despite CinemaScope being a format advertised as immersive, one needs to be distant from the screen to fully appreciate many shot compositions, and sometimes even in order to understand them. As mentioned earlier, it is in fact this tension between immersion and distance, between the desire to be part of the world of the film and the desire to be able to observe and understand it, that is at the core of widescreen aesthetics.

River of No Return features a sequence that is hardly ever discussed, and yet perfectly embodies this paradox. We are at the beginning of the film, and Kay and Matt have not yet met each other: she is a saloon singer, and he is in town looking for his son Mark. Shortly after the beginning of Kay's first musical number, Matt enters the saloon from the right side of the frame: as the song continues, he circles around the stage, looks around in search of his son, and finally exits the frame in the same direction from which he came (Fig. 5-6-7).

Preminger directs the scene masterfully: in a continuous shot, he gets closer or farther to Marilyn without ever letting Mitchum leave the frame. While this strategy might be considered as an example of realism, the dynamics at play are actually subtler. The spectator, because of their inability to see the entire screen at once, is torn between the desire to immerse themselves in Marilyn's performance and the need to follow the action – in this case, Mitchum walking around searching for his son. The suspense is augmented by the fact that we know that Mark is in fact backstage, and therefore we expect that the two might meet at any moment. This type of mise-en-scene would not be possible with the narrow Academy frame: Marilyn and Mitchum could not be on the screen at the same time, or at least could not be so distant from one another while sharing the same space. CinemaScope allows for both this type of composition and the complex spectatorial position that it creates.

Despite the way in which it was advertised and discussed at the time, therefore, CinemaScope was not exclusively an immersive and participatory format: on the contrary, it needed a certain amount of literal distance (of the spectator from the screen) in order to be fully appreciated. Bazin was probably the first to have an inkling of the format's contradictory nature. In his essay on CinemaScope, he makes a claim that at first might sound puzzling. He states that the new format (also in conjunction with the newly revived 3D) can be particularly suitable for musicals and detective films.[23] While CinemaScope's affinity with the musical is fairly intuitive, its suitability for detective films can only be explained with the possibility of hiding clues at the margins of the frame. It is important to point out that, for Bazin, the genuine contribution of CinemaScope does not lie in the size of its screen, but rather in the elongated format of its

23 Bazin, *Will CinemaScope Save the Film Industry?*, cit.

Fig. 5. *River of No Return*. Mitchum enters the frame from the right, while Marilyn is on the left of the frame.

Fig. 6. *River of No Return*. Preminger's camera gets closer to Marilyn while Mitchum circles the stage.

Fig. 7. *River of No Return*. Marilyn and Mitchum are again at the edges of the frame, their positions reversed.

frame.[24] Interestingly, despite the amount of westerns that use CinemaScope to make their landscape more spectacular and immersive, he lists *River of No Return* as the only film from the genre that benefited from the new format in a meaningful way: unsurprisingly, it is also the one that engages the lateral margins of the frame in a more active fashion.[25]

This peculiarity of widescreen aesthetics is most penalized on a tv screen: at home, we would be able to see Kay and Matt at the same time, and the feeling of immersion in her performance would not be nearly as intense, regardless of the elimination of potential domestic distractions. The tension between immersion and distance would be neutralized, and so would be the effort for making sure that no details are lost. In a movie theater, every spectator needs to assume the active role of the detective, regardless of the genre of the film projected; in order to do so, they need to resist the urge to be immersed in the world of the film to stay alert and detached and scan the frame for meaningful clues.[26]

Max Ophüls offers a masterful example of the tension between immersion and distance with his last film *Lola Montes* (1955), the only film in CinemaScope and Technicolor directed by the filmmaker, who accepted to work with the new (for him) technologies in exchange for complete creative freedom and an astronomic budget.[27] *Lola Montes* is the culmination of Ophüls's discourse on the relationship between life and fiction that had been at the core of his previous work: despite the director's initial aversion for CinemaScope, the format turned out to be perfect for such themes. Even though, as we have seen, CinemaScope was advertised as an immersive format and discussed as a realistic one, Ophüls emphasizes the artificiality of his shots by creating perfect symmetries and even showing their axis by using stage props: the main location of the film, a circus, and the words of the ringmaster, who falsely advertises the supposed authenticity of his show, create the narrative context for his stylistic decisions (Fig. 8).

Again, the best way to enjoy such shots is by keeping a distance, both from the screen and from the words pronounced in the world of the film: truth and lies, reality and artifice are intertwined in a way that is difficult to disentangle, and yet requires a certain level of alertness despite the desire to be immersed in the lavish images, made three-dimensional by Ophüls's trademark camera movements. The core of such strategy is the eponymous protagonist, Lola Montes, the show's main attraction who is both a woman and a work of fiction, and whose life, reconstructed in a series of flashbacks from her own perspective, is manipulated by the ringmaster in the re-telling of her story to the audience. Hers is the

24 Ibid.

25 A. Bazin, *The Evolution of the Western*, in Hugh Gray (eds. and transl.), *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 2, University of California Press, Berkeley 1971, p. 157.

26 Naturally, widescreen detective films are the most penalized in a domestic setting. For an example of widescreen aesthetics in detective films see, for instance, S. Negri, *Paintings, Mirrors, Memories: Epistemological Paths in Dario Argento's* Profondo Rosso, "La Valle dell'Eden", 32, 2018, pp. 55–60.

27 M. Muller, S. White, *The Making of Max Ophuls' Lola Montès/Lola Montez*, "Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory", 60.5, 2004, p 29. For a discussion of the restoration work done on *Lola Montes* to reconstruct its original version, see T. Burton, *The Digital Restoration of Max Ophüls'* Lola Montes, in "The Reel Thing XX", proceedings, 2008. Available at http://www.the-reel-thing.co/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/2008-Los-Angeles.pdf

Fig. 8. *Lola Montes* (Max Ophüls, 1955). Stage props are used to emphasize the artificiality of the symmetrical composition.

first close-up of the movie: however, its effect is very different from the close-ups of Marilyn Monroe that we have seen in *How to Marry a Millionaire*. Our desire for intimacy is frustrated by the way in which Ophüls portrays Lola: her expression is hieratical, and her face is flooded by a blue light that makes her distant and unapproachable (Fig. 9).

Fig 9. *Lola Montes*. Unlike Marilyn's close-ups in How to Marry a Millionaire, those of Lola foster a sense of distance rather than intimacy.

The CinemaScope screen is key for creating this mechanism of conflicting feelings and relationships to the image, and Ophüls is not afraid of bringing such potential to an extreme. He can take advantage of the size and shape of the frame for suggesting lack of intimacy even in the most supposedly intimate moments, such as the first kiss between Lola and her future husband (Fig. 10); or can reduce the width of the frame when, on the contrary, he wants to foster a sense of closeness between the audience and the protagonist; or can decide to black out three quarters of the frame to create a close-up, just to flaunt his mastery over the image and the technology of which he is in control.

Fig. 10. *Lola Montes*. By blacking out the margins of the frame, Ophüls keeps us at a distance from the action while focusing our attention to it.

The ending of the film ties up all these themes in a superb manner: Lola, whose life story has been hijacked by the showbusiness and the audience for profit and exploitation, is sitting in a wooden cage, her hands offered to the customers who can kiss them for one dollar. As she utters the last words of the film, «It will be alright», the camera tracks backwards, showing the immense crowd of people waiting for their turn to pay her their questionable homage. As spectators in a theater, we are both immersed in the flood and swallowed by it, thus assuming the twofold position of the crowd and of Lola herself (Fig. 11-12).

Fig. 11. *Lola Montes*. Lola offers her hands to the audience to kiss for a dollar.

This double role is again a function of the discourse that Ophüls has carried out for the whole film, placing the spectator in different relationships with the image and the story. The final image, that of a curtain closing and revealing a series of vignettes from Lola's life embroidered on it, marks the symbolic signature of an author who has investigated how artificiality and realism need not be opposed to one another, but rather can be used together to elicit different feelings and help coming to terms with the fact that human life remains

Fig. 12. *Lola Montes*. As Ophüls's camera tracks backwards, we are immersed in the crowd.

a mystery regardless of how many times and from how many perspectives it is told. After all, Bazin himself stated that «realism in art can only be achieved in one way – through artifice».[28]

The Shape of Future Screens

Lola Montes, similarly to the other films discussed, loses much of its power if seen in a domestic environment. The size of the screen, in allowing the spectator to see the whole frame at once, prevents them from properly experiencing the different widescreen aesthetics designed by filmmakers who, in making their movies, had in mind a spectator sitting in a movie theater. Nonetheless, despite the undeniable changes brought on by the Covid pandemic, the rise of home movie watching is hardly unprecedented. Writing in 1992, John Belton already denounced the sub-par quality of many home-video releases of widescreen films.[29] In the early days of television, widescreen films were panned and scanned – namely, the widescreen image was cropped to fit the narrower tv screen. Now, such a practice sounds barbarian. The practice of letterboxing, which preserves the original aspect ratio by reducing the height of the video image, was introduced in 1985 and over the years has become the norm. Concurrently, tv screens have become bigger and wider, thus improving home-movie watching practices significantly.

The better quality and wider availability of repertoire films for domestic enjoyment, however, comes with its own dangers. One of them has to do with the delusion of unlimited instant access to any movie through streaming services. For most film lovers, the feeling

28 A. Bazin, *An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism*, in Hugh Gray (eds. and transl.), *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 2, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1971, p. 26.

29 Belton, *Widescreen Cinema*, cit., pp. 216-224.

that the entirety of film history is only a few clicks away from their own screens is hard to fight. Yet, only a small portion of titles has been digitized, thus creating a digital bottleneck that risks dooming less popular titles to oblivion.[30] Another reason has to do with the issues discussed in this piece – that is, the re-mediation of historical film formats. As we have seen, CinemaScope and the discourse surrounding it create a spectator who needs the movie theater to fully enjoy the experience that was created for them, and in some cases to even understand the film that they are watching. This does not mean that widescreen films should not be watched on tv. However, one needs to be aware of the limitations that such a movie-watching environment entails.

Already in 1992, Belton declared that «the future, it seems, belongs not to cinema but to video».[31] History has proven him correct. The main difference between the 1990s and the current situation is that today the very existence of movie theaters is in peril, and the comparatively good quality of contemporary home videos, be they available for streaming or on optical carriers, ensures that many people would not lament the potential demise of theatrical exhibition. Nonetheless, as we have seen, films from the last century and beyond were made for theatrical projection, and in some cases, like that of widescreen formats, screening them on a small surface fundamentally betrays their aesthetics and sometimes even their narrative structure. This is one of the many reasons why film lovers should advocate for the survival of movie theaters, be they analog or digital, regardless of how convenient and pleasurable streaming movies at home is. The two experiences remain fundamentally different from one another. We do not know what shape and size the screens of the future will have, or which technology they will employ, but we can try to preserve the experience of past screens for the generations to come.

30 See J.-C. Horak, *The Gap Between 1 and 0: Digital Video and the Omissions of Film History*, "The Spectator", 27.1, Spring 2007, pp. 29-41.

31 Belton, *Widescreen Cinema*, cit., p. 228.