

BOXOFFICE

FILM IS DEAD?

*Not So, Say Kodak and
Other Companies That
Continue to Invest in Film*

by Annlee Ellingson

In mid-November 2002, Kodak invited industry players to the Director's Guild in Los Angeles for the unveiling of its new Vision2 line of color motion picture film stock. The technology has been redesigned from the ground up, resulting in a high-speed film that "sees deeper into the shadows with less apparent grain than other low-light sensitive emulsions, as well as captures more natural skin tones and colors," according to Kodak Entertainment Imaging Division president Eric Rodli. "It records shades and details in shadow areas while retaining pure black tones."

Given its production-side nature, the Kodak announcement is not typical of BOXOFFICE's technology coverage, but its timing, and the company's new assertiveness, speak to an opinion held by many in the industry that, until recently, has been drowned out by enthusiasm for the transition to digital cinema: that film is still a robust medium worthy of research and development investment. Technicolor Digital Cinema's nearly simultaneous announcement that it is shuttering its business development and exhibitor relations departments has further given this view some teeth.

"We have maintained our commitments and our investments in the film side of our business because we recognize, and our customers in the industry recognize, that film's going to be here for quite a long time," Kodak Entertainment Imaging Division VP and general manager Michael Morelli tells BOXOFFICE. Concurrently, Kodak continues to develop its D-ILA-based digital cinema system.

Meanwhile, two emerging companies, MaxiVision Cinema Technology and Super Vista Corp., have introduced innovative film formats that vastly improve the viewing experience offered by either 35mm or digital cinema.

MaxiVision48, which BOXOFFICE first discussed in the February 2001 issue, coalesces several different technologies to achieve a picture with sharper images and more fluid motion. First, MaxiVision eliminates wasted space on the 35mm film strip by eschewing the analog soundtrack and the blank space between frames. The result is a picture that is 31 percent larger in 25 percent of the space.

This opens the door to practical 48 frames-per-second (fps) cinematography and projection—whereas conventional 35mm shot at 48 fps would require twice the amount of film, MaxiVision increases the amount of film used by only half. At 48 fps, each frame is exposed for 1/100th of a second rather than 1/50th, enhancing single-frame clarity. Today's 35mm already is projected at 48 fps, with each frame getting two pulses of light.

Thirdly, MaxiVision's Active Crystal Registration recaptures the precise image placement of the original camera negative. Current film reproduction and mechanical film projection inherently cause microscopic misregistration of the film's image in relation to the perforations, resulting in a blurry picture onscreen. MaxiVision's system inserts registration reference points onto the film strip so that, while the relationship of the image to the perforation changes, the relationship of the image to the registration reference points does not. For each image, the projector assesses the position of these reference points in relation to the previous set and shifts the gate accordingly.

And finally, in a move to avoid the pitfalls of alternate film formats of the past, MaxiVision's Switchable Format Projector is fully compatible with all film formats and can automatically accommodate any 35mm format.

It's this latter feature that, MaxiVision chairman and president Dean Goodhill says, will allow it to become the industry standard. The Switchable Format Projector is a modular device that can be retrofitted into existing projection systems for an affordable \$11,000. Goodhill's plan is to install the first 1,000 projectors at no cost to theatre owners, instead making money on format licensing, and thereafter charging exhibitors around \$300 per month installed.

Super Vista Corp.'s Super Dimension-70 (SDS-70) technology starts with a 70mm film frame that has almost six

**ALTERNATIVE
FILM FORMATS:**

MAXIVISION48 AND SDS-70

MaxiVision48 offers 32 percent more picture in 25 percent less space.

SDS-70's technology starts with a 70mm film frame, here compared with conventional 35mm.

times the image area of standard 35mm widescreen frames, increasing the resulting picture's resolution and brightness.

In addition, SDS-70, like MaxiVision, is photographed and projected at 48 fps, limiting the blur associated with longer exposures and essentially doubling the amount of image information that is presented to the viewer. And then each SDS-70 frame is projected with two pulses of light, resulting in an exhibition display of 96 images per second, greatly limiting the projection flicker at any illumination level.

The incorporation of the SDS-70 system into a movie theatre requires the installation of the SDS-70 projector. "But I don't think there's a practical way as exhibitors to buy more equipment," says Robert Weisgerber, CEO and president of Super Vista Corp. Instead, the company will ink a contract with the exhibitor whereby, in exchange for a nominal fee, Super Vista will install and maintain the equipment as well as train employees to operate it and earn a profit from a value-added ticket price that will be split with the exhibitor and distributor.

Unlike MaxiVision, Super Vista envisions SDS-70 as a destination format akin to IMAX on one or two screens in commercial multiplexes. "We want to make going to the movies seen and shot on SDS-70 differently special," Weisgerber says. "Differently special means it's not a commodity item. It's selective. It's special.... People will be willing to travel a greater distance to see it."

But SDS-70 also will be essentially backwards compatible, as conventional 35mm, 24 fps prints can be extracted from the SDS-70 laboratory master, making wide distribution possible, and stan-

THE RETURN OF "RYAN'S DAUGHTER": Warner Bros. Seeks Redemption With a New 70mm Print

That film is still a viable medium is punctuated by the enthusiastic response to a historic 70mm screening of David Lean's "Ryan's Daughter" late last year. It was, by all accounts, the first time a 70mm print of the much-maligned picture had been shown in any form since the early '80s, and quite possibly the first time a freshly struck answer print had been seen since the film's release in 1970.

The introduction was handled by Warner Bros. VP of film preservation Dick May, a long-time admirer of the epic romance and chief architect of its restoration. "Get out your umbrellas," he warned in reference to the legendary storm sequence—shot during a series of real-life storms that collided with the Irish coast over the course of the arduous, year-long shoot.

May, who came to Warner Bros. along with "Ryan's Daughter" as part of the Turner merger and MGM library acquisition, spoke candidly with **BOXOFFICE** about the lashing the film originally received from critics. "The critics jumped all over him. It was like they were trying to find something wrong, even if it wasn't there."

To appreciate the history of "Ryan's Daughter," consider the social climate of the late '60s and early '70s. In 1965 Lean's career was peaking. He had made three consecutive classics—"The Bridge on the River Kwai," "Lawrence of Arabia" and "Doctor Zhivago"—in fewer than 10 years, the first two capturing Best Picture Oscar honors. But by 1970 civil unrest, war in Vietnam and a greater cinematic permissiveness due to the establishment of the MPAA's ratings system in 1968 had contributed to a growing cynicism on the part of critics and

audiences. In the wake of "The Graduate," "Midnight Cowboy" and "Easy Rider," Lean's film suddenly seemed out-of-step.

The recent Academy screening, however, is but one indicator that "Ryan's Daughter" may finally be enjoying a long-overdue reappraisal. Set in a small Irish village against the backdrop of World War I and the burgeoning Irish struggle for independence, the film stars Sarah Miles, in an Oscar-nominated turn as the lovelorn Rosie Ryan, with Robert Mitchum as her gentle schoolteacher husband and newcomer Christopher Jones as the angst-ridden British soldier who becomes her lover.

The decision to shoot in 65mm negative (70mm release prints add 5mm for magnetic audio) was made by both Lean and longtime cinematographer Freddie Young after a less-than-satisfying experience with 35mm on "Zhivago." The result would earn the picture two Oscars, including a stunning third consecutive cinematography award for Young.

Sadly, "Ryan's Daughter" would also be the beginning of the end for the once-popular 70mm format. Enabled by smaller, more agile 35mm cameras and increasingly flexible 35mm film stocks, filmmakers of the '70s saw no reason to embrace anything else. Subsequent years have seen only Ron Howard's 1992 "Far and Away" and Kenneth Branagh's 1996 "Hamlet" return to the larger format, neither one able to earn a cinematography Oscar for the effort. Given the prohibitive costs associated with shooting anything but specialty films in 65mm, along with the added investment for exhibitors and

the accelerating push toward digital projection, it seems a safe assumption that "Ryan's Daughter" will be the last 70mm film to capture an Oscar for cinematography.

Though most of the credit for increased interest in restoration and preservation falls in the lap of DVD and high-definition television, which have given studios a financial incentive to keep their libraries in pristine condition, May maintains that films like "Ryan's Daughter" are still best appreciated in a theatre. "When cinematography is done with great care," he says, "the image envelopes you. The audience deserves to see the best they can see." Even the highest-grade 35mm stocks still can't compare, he says. "If they can't tell the difference here, they need glasses."

Whether all this can translate into momentum for a theatrical re-release, May won't speculate. "It depends on the pictures and how much promotion can be put into it. I don't think that just because it's 70mm, people will flock to it. You still have to have something people want to see." —Wade Major



and 70mm, 24 fps films can be repurposed for SDS-70 projection. In addition, previously released feature films can be converted to SDS-70, renewing their theatrical exhibition life.

The bottom line for Kodak's, MaxiVision's and Super Vista's continued R&D investment in film, especially as the industry faces a possible transition to digital cinema, is to offer more choices to the creative and exhibition communities.

"If I were to speak to the creatives—cinematographers, directors, producers—they see digital or electronic as another tool to use and to consider as far as a choice versus a replacement," Kodak's Morelli says. "And I think a lot of what you see in the general press speaks to the subject as if it's a one-for-one replacement, and it really isn't. And I think that's the important thing as far as what [Kodak is] starting to do a little bit more of and maybe becoming a little bit more assertive to get that message out to at least make people informed of what the reality is versus the myth."

"If everyone has a mid-range car, it drives and feels like a mid-range car," Super Vista's Weisgerber analogizes. "When you get into the higher level of cars, they drive and feel differently. It's two different experiences. It's a car, but it's two different experiences. When you're seeing 35mm, it's one experience. You see IMAX, it's another experience. You see SDS, it's a different experience. They all have their looks. It doesn't necessarily mean that there's something wrong with either one, but they have a look."

"Attract more people to the theatre—that's the beginning and the end of it," MaxiVision's Goodhill says. "In show business there's a principle that's as old as the first guy telling a story in a cave. The principle is showmanship—always has been. And exhibitors understand showmanship better than anyone. That's why they have such glorious presentation in their concession stands. And what have they spent in the way of money on beautiful new stadium seating? That's showmanship, and it paid."

"But what's on the screen? The same thing. There's no compelling reason to go to the theatre, but what if you could put an image on the screen at your movie theatre that is absolutely unlike the experience you can have at home?"



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