

"In the Splendor of 70mm": Part 1

"In the Splendor of 70mm": For some, that phrase conjures up childhood memories of standing in a line that stretched around the downtown block. When the theatre doors opened, hundreds filed in, politely rushing for their favorite seat. As the curtains on the huge 60-foot screen opened, the screen filled with clouds and you heard the whistle of the wind around you as you flew through the passes of the Austrian Alps. Finally you came toward Maria, and the hills and the theatre are alive with *The Sound of Music*. Then as the family sang "Do-Re-Mi" in the car during the ride home, you wonder why that movie looked and sounded so much better than the films you usually saw at your neighborhood theatre. Somehow, "In the Splendor of 70mm" on the marquee usually meant something special, even if the movie was more to your mother's taste.

As you grew older, you sought out that special experience again and again, with movies like *2001-A Space Odyssey* and *Patton*, then *Star Wars* and *Apocalypse Now*. You took your kids to *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, even if it meant driving across town to see the movie in 70mm.

The Dawn of Digital

A few years ago, paradoxical things began to happen. All movies started having wonderful stereo sound that rivaled, and even surpassed, the best you heard with 70mm, even if it was too loud at times. Magnificent new theatre complexes were built close to home, with dozens of screens and comfortable stadium seating that put you close to the huge wall-to-wall screen. Sure, you missed the curtains, but who watches the curtains during the movie?

Small Film on a Huge Screen

Then you take the family to see *Titanic*, the epic hit of the year. Surely the new megaplex is the best place to see it. When the film starts, you notice the trailers look a little worn, and some even seem to have been damaged by the projector's heat. When the feature hits the 60-foot screen, the picture is fuzzy and dim, with dull colors that almost look faded. It must be some sort of special effect. You really enjoy the story and the sound, but something's missing, as you say to yourself "I must have accidentally worn my old glasses." The closing credits are almost unreadable, seeming to breathe in and out of focus, as they weave side-to-side. As you leave the theatre, you ask the

young manager whether the print was 70mm. He politely says that all of their projectors are 35mm, and that even the two theatres in town that still had a 70mm projector couldn't get a 70mm print. "Anyway," he adds confidently, "70mm is obsolete since 35mm now has digital sound." When you complain about the picture quality, he agrees and admits that there have been a few complaints, but notes that the print in the smaller auditorium looks better. "Would you like some passes to see it again on the 30-foot screen?"

Epic Film on a Huge Screen

A few weeks later, you're on a business trip to Los Angeles. Checking out the footprints at the Chinese theatre, you notice that *Titanic* is starting in 15 minutes. Since you have a few hours to kill, you buy a ticket. As you take your seat, you take small pleasure at the anachronisms of the old movie palace. Then, *Titanic* fills the huge screen, and blows you away! As you fly over the deck, you can see fine detail you didn't see before. Rose and Jack are surround-ed by a vibrant sunset. The clear night sky is filled with pinpoints of starlight. The terror of the sinking ship is intensified by the shadowy details you missed before. The closing credits are sharp and steady. As you leave the theatre and walk past the projection booth, you notice the last strand of wide film going through the projector, and you smile, as you again realize "The Splendor of 70mm."

[See Part 2 of "The Splendor of 70mm."](#)

For more information, contact me at john.pytlak@kodak.com