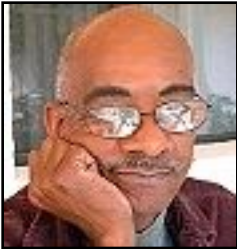


“Super Formats: The Next Generation”

By Stanley Robinson



“From my many years of working in the motion picture industry, my biggest lesson learned is that the only constant in the industry, is change!”
Stanley Robinson

Since Thomas Edison invented the motion picture projector, known as Kinetoscopes in 1895, the motion picture industry took on a life of it's own and evolves, exponentially, just as mankind and science on planet Earth moves forward. As the equipment used to present moving pictures advances, so does the primary items used for image acquisition grows, namely motion picture film stocks (unexposed film types) and motion picture cameras. The film stock advanced from glass slides, to a silver nitrate film base. From there it kept advancing; 8mm to Super 8mm, 16mm to Super 16mm, to 35mm, and 70mm.

It's 2005; the next generation of super format is here and has taken hold. It's called IMAX. An IMAX theater, with curved screens 3 stories tall, a multitude of speakers not only around the theater but also behind the perforated screen, stadium seating with virtually no view being blocked, is the next step in theatrical movie viewing. The movies I've seen in IMAX are quite impressive.

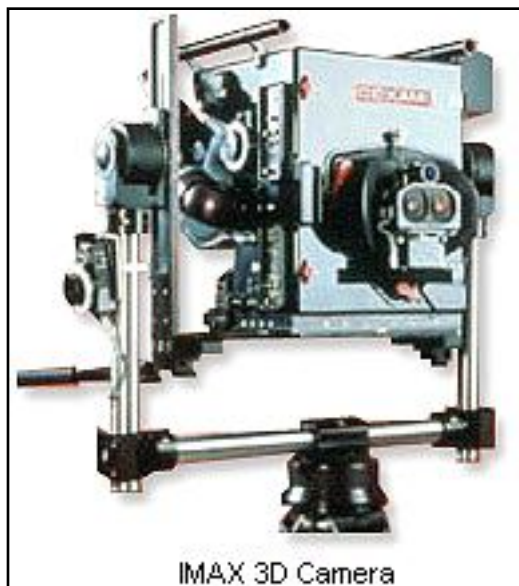


Previously movies were shot specifically for IMAX. Shooting in the IMAX film stock is quite an expensive undertaking with the big, bulky, and cumbersome IMAX camera and the film size. IMAX uses the 70mm film stock. Traditionally, 70mm film is photographed and projected vertically (top to bottom), the same as all the other film stocks. IMAX cameras and projectors expose the film as well as project it horizontally. In 2002, the digital re-mastering process for converting to the IMAX format was

greatly enhanced. The IMAX Company developed a process to adapt any regular formatted 35mm movie to the IMAX format, and also retrofit theaters for showing movies in the IMAX format. Retrofitting a theater for IMAX has an average cost of 1.5 million per screen and takes about 4 to 6 weeks to complete. Building an IMAX theater from scratch cost around 8 million dollars.

The first film to be released with the new re-mastering process was *Apollo 13*. The IMAX big screen presentation took hold and the movies *Spider-Man 2*, *The Lion King*, *Star Wars: Episode II*, and *The Polar Express* all had IMAX versions released the same time as the 35mm general releases, and, the IMAX presentations were highly profitable for the studios and exhibitors (theaters).

While the IMAX remastering format was being fine tuned, the 3-D process also took advantage of the advances of science and developed a seamless, greatly enhanced 3-D viewing experience. Many of us remember the old fashion 3-D horror films like William Castle's *13 Ghosts* (1960). The process of creating the 3 dimensional look used a color separation process of wearing glasses, with one red lens and one blue lens. For its time, the process was appealing although disconcerting depending on where one sat and head movement. Some movies are presented in big screen IMAX, while some are shown in IMAX with the added 3-D feature, and are called IMAX 3-D movies.



On a recent visit to the Harkins IMAX Theater at the Arizona Mills Shopping Center in Tempe, AZ. I had the opportunity to talk with the projectionist Jason, and see the IMAX 3-D equipment for picture and sound used in an IMAX 3-D presentation. Simply stated, 2 pictures are simultaneously projected onto a screen. Special glasses, just as with the old 3-D process, are worn except that the modern 3-D glasses are polarized (with gray lens) so that the left eyeglass lens only lets the wearer see the picture projected on the screen for the left eye, and the right lens only lets the images through for the right

eye. Sound for the movie is on CD/DVD disc. All three: the film for the right eye, the film for the left eye, and the sound disc are synchronized for simultaneous projection. After seeing *Magnificent Desolation: Walk on the Moon* (September) in IMAX 3-D, I can say the process is a seamless presentation that is very, very impressive.

Warner Bros. Pictures is the lead studio in presenting IMAX movies. The movies *Charley and the Chocolate Factory* and *Batman Begins* were released in the IMAX format as well as in the normal theatrical release and turned a nice profit for the studio. The latest Harry Potter movie *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* for a November 18th release will have an IMAX release as well as the normal theatrical release, and *The Polar Express*, last holiday seasons' hit, will re-release an IMAX 3-D version for this holiday season called *The Polar Express: An IMAX 3-D Experience*, both are Warner Bros. movies.

Currently there are about 260 IMAX screens worldwide, with about 130 in the US. And, other companies are moving into the main stream in 3-D presentations. The 3-D process Real D has plans to have about 100 theaters in the US show Disney's *Chicken Little* in the 3-D process in November, which can be shown on normal theater screens. The president of Real D, Michael V. Lewis plans on at least 1,000 US screens within the next 24 months using this process and believes that 3-D is the next future of cinema with at least four movies already set for release in 2006 in the Real D format.

What's the next step the motion picture industry will take toward the advancement of visual presentation? Science doubles exponentially every 18 months. From what I've experienced in the industry, my bet is a "virtual reality" movie theatre is just around the corner...

*Stanley Robinson,
An assistant director in the motion picture industry,
Is based in Phoenix, AZ*