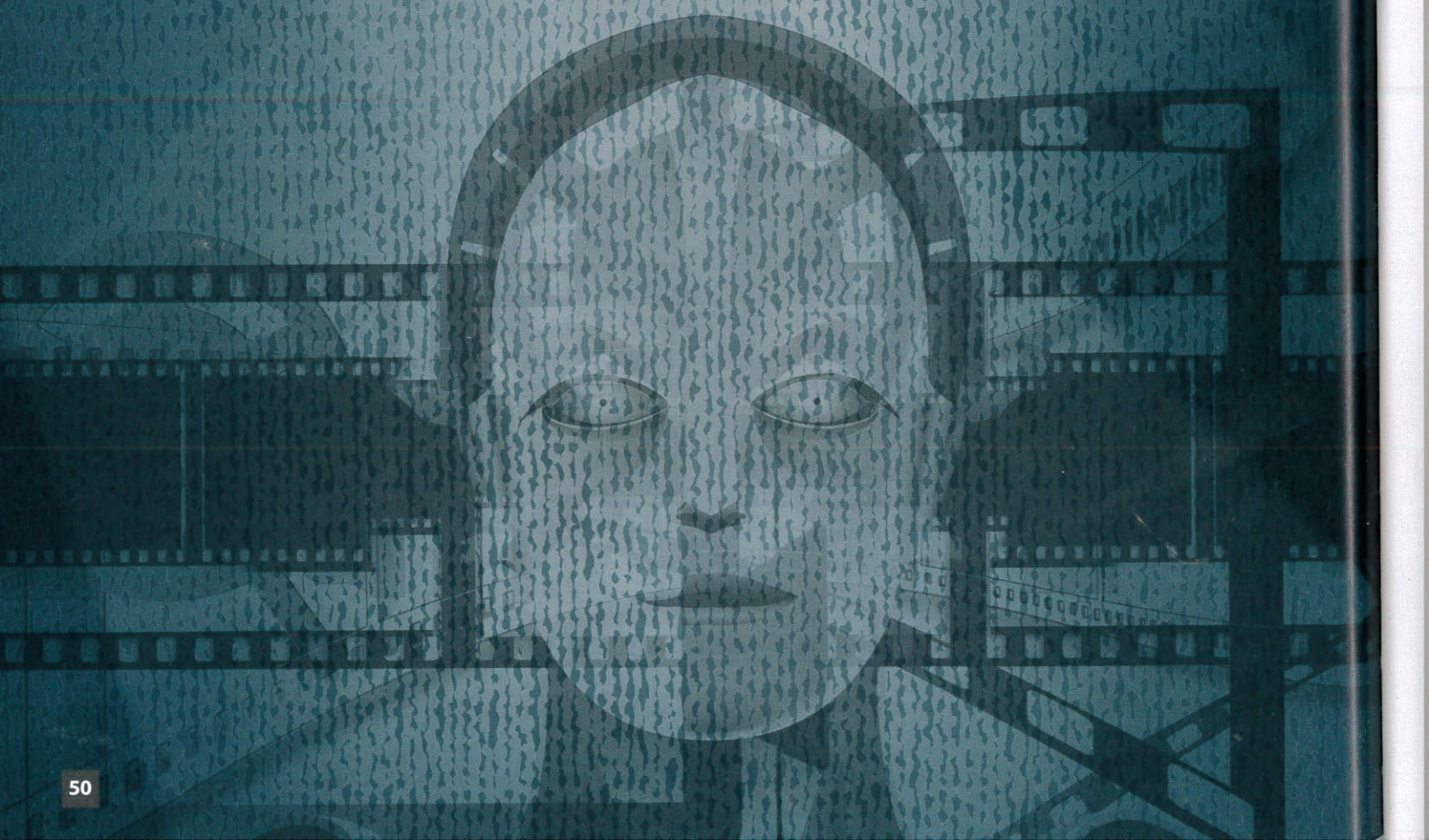
THE DARK CAVE OF THE SILVER SCREEN



Mark Ramey considers the experience of cinema-going, and the history of the cinema itself – essential background reading for Film students.

Did you know...

- The term 'silver screen' comes from the silver or aluminium used to coat many cinema screens. Such coating is very reflective, thus increasing the clarity of images projected. The return of 3D has led to its resurgence.
- The word 'cinematographe' was coined by the Lumière Brothers and comes from the Greek 'kinema' meaning 'movement' and 'graph' meaning 'to write'.
- The UK's first multiplex was AMC Cinemas in Milton Keynes; it had 10 screens and was built in 1985.
- 74% of all UK screens are owned by the five largest exhibitors – Cineworld, Odeon and Vue are by far the biggest.

We all remember those childhood days when we first cautiously entered the dark cave of the silver screen. Revisit your early memories of going to the cinema. My own first memory was back in the early 1970s when I saw *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) on a Christmas re-release with my grandmother; and even now, that howling, giant whirlwind that blew Dorothy to Oz fills me with terror. But who cares what the film was like? It was the experience that mattered: the pitch-black, the booming sound, the dazzling lightshow; and then that feeling of returning bleary-eyed to a familiar but uncanny world, having been transported, however briefly, to other lands and times. During Hollywood's golden age of the 1930s and 40s the studios were called 'dream factories' precisely because film triggers deep emotions and fantasies, and this is partly facilitated by the way we watch films – in the mysterious, exciting dark.

Even now, long after the peak year of UK cinema attendance in 1946, when over 1.6 billion tickets were sold, cinema going remains an emotionally powerful and popular experience: in 2015, 172 million tickets were sold at the UK box office, equalling figures last reached in the early 1970s. Audiences clearly still enjoy the experience of being immersed in a cinematic world and disconnected from the everyday – if they didn't, then cinemas would have disappeared long ago.

The mid-1970s saw UK exhibition circuits in apparent terminal decline as colour TV transformed the nation's living rooms into modest domestic cinemas (a process still continuing today with the availability of 50-inch high-definition widescreens and surround-sound audio systems). By the mid-

1980s, in the midst of the video boom, UK cinema attendance reached its nadir, and the future of cinema looked bleak. Indeed even today we are much more likely to see a film on TV than at the cinema: there were 2.9 billion viewings of feature films across all television formats except pay-per-view in 2015 – which is over 17 times the number of cinema admissions. In 1946 UK cinemas were the only home for film; in 2016 TV is the dominant form.

Flashback: the Growth of Early Cinema

But our love affair with cinema hasn't died. To see why, we need to go further back in time, to Paris in late 1895, where, in a rented room in the Grand Café, thirty people were the first mass audience to pay for a 20-minute film show. They had come to see the 'moving photographs' shot by two amateur filmmakers and professional photographers, the Lumière brothers. Having constructed their own camera (the cinematographe), they made ten films, each lasting approximately fifty seconds – effectively home movies – with titles such as *Feeding the Baby*. Such was the impressive realism of these films that within a few years they were being shown around the world. At a screening in Russia, the writer Maxim Gorky noted he had entered, 'the kingdom of the shadows'. The projected moving image for a mass audience had arrived; and just as today it transfixed spectators.

These first shows were novelties, included, like any other act, in Music Hall performances or fairgrounds. Indeed the early film exhibitor was likely to be a travelling showman, moving about the country, much like circus performers today. Alternatively vacant shops were hastily converted in a model that borrowed from the concept of nickelodeons in the States. The films shown at these rough-and-ready venues were not regarded as art but just further examples of the visual trickery and illusion that characterised many mid-to late Victorian parlour games. However as the first decade of the new 20th century wore on, appetites for film changed and these cheaply-made working-class 'amusements' gave way to longer filmed narratives aimed at middle-class sensibilities, and reflecting not just bigger budgets but bigger artistic ambition. And so, by the early 1910s, purpose built cinemas were being constructed with a more sophisticated client base in mind. These first cinemas were often beautifully designed, richly furnished, and deserving of the nickname that reflected their aspirations – 'picture palaces'.

With World War One (1914-18) decimating European film industries, in particular in France, Hollywood soon established itself as the main global player and the industry started to look like it does today. Not even the Great Depression of the late 1920s and early 30s, nor the calamity of World War Two (1939-45) could halt the popular acclaim and box-office triumphs of Hollywood's escapist fantasies. The cinema was now a refuge as well as a venue.

The Post-war Decline

But post-war, Hollywood's beautiful bubble popped.

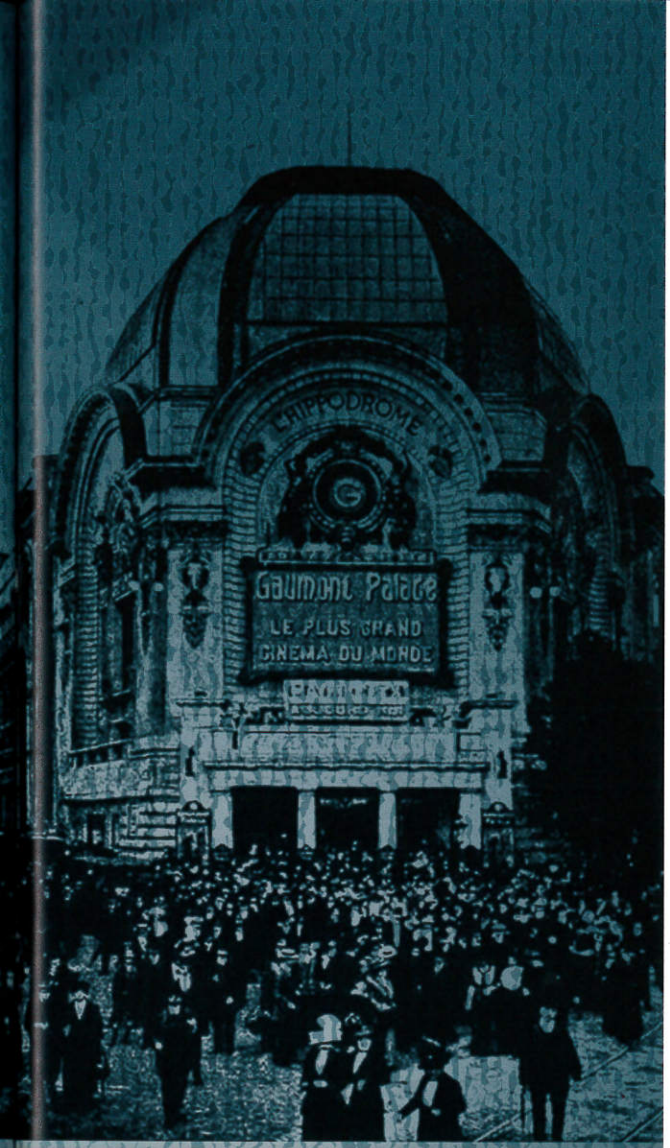
Firstly, the new medium of TV hit box office figures hard; and secondly, the demographic shift towards suburban life meant that the old centrally-located cinemas became less of a focal point. The decline in the splendour and social prominence of cinemas in the 1950s and 60s occurred precisely because the studio system, and the mainstream audience on which it relied, had collapsed. Unloved and lacking investment, many picturehouses were converted into shops, or knocked down to create car parking.

The Rise of the Multiplex

But rescue was at hand in the guise of *Jaws* (1975) and then *Star Wars* (1977). These 70s blockbuster films showed that there was still an appetite for the cinematic 'event', something with which TV could not compete. Exhibitors realised their venues had to complement this new breed of youth-orientated filmmaking; and so the multiplex boom began. Old cinemas were sometimes saved by conversion to more screens; new cinemas were built on the edge of town in reconfigured entertainment complexes: either way the blockbuster-focussed, multi-screen cinema experience, aimed at what is still the dominant market of 15 to 24 year-olds (29% of current market share), had arrived.

Today's multiplexes are the main provider of cinematic entertainment in the UK: by the end of 2015, the UK had 4,046 screens in 751 cinemas, 316 of which were multiplexes. Netflix and other online subscription models of exhibition may be growing fast, but the multiplexes are still holding their own in a very volatile market. Some clever programming is partly helping bolster sales through 'live-streaming' of theatre shows, musical performances and sporting events. And in terms of formats 3D, D-BOX and IMAX continue to offer spectacle and sensation to audiences in much the same way that the Lumière brothers did 130 years ago.

Viewing trends are notoriously hard to predict



but the success of a recent phenomenon like 'Secret Cinema', whereby old cult films are given a one-off exhibition in a curated and staged space suggests there is appetite for premium-priced film events that don't fit the mainstream model. However, it is this model that the world's second biggest film market, China (USA is the first) is committed to: it is building 15 movie screens daily in both new and existing cinemas and is expected to have 53,000 screens by 2017; compare this with the USA, which currently has 39,000 screens. Clearly, in China too, the multiplex has a future along with the mainstream blockbuster experience it delivers.

But for films and exhibition spaces that fall outside the norm like Repertory and Art House, the future looks less positive. Indeed online distribution or even multi-platform release strategies as pioneered by *A Field in England* (2013) remain the most likely option for low budget, experimental and foreign filmmakers.

It seems that today's cinemas remain places where Dorothy's whirlwind can still transport you to fantastic worlds. So turn off the tablet and TV, and go and see a movie on the silver screen: it's the dark cave where the spellbinding magic of film was born and still sparkles.

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from the MM vaults

The Decline of Repertory Cinema, Roy Stafford *MediaMag* 57

A Field in England, Mark Ramey, *MediaMag* 47