

Watching a movie is easier in the digital age, but is it better?

Gains in convenience can't put to rest questions about what has been lost

BY MANOHLA DARGIS

Last month, in response to an aside I made about Americans no longer being the avid moviegoers they once were — comparing the 90 million who went to the movies each week in 1948 with today's audience, which hovers around

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23 million — Matthew Sigman, a self-confessed “big-screen film fan” from New York, wrote in with a quibble. “I do beg to differ on the statistical basis of your statement suggesting Americans don't love movies as much as they used to because annual attendance has dropped,” Mr. Sigman wrote.

“Back in the '40s,” he added, “if a movie lover enjoyed a film, she went multiple times, ratcheting up those box office figures. Now all she has to do is stay home to find ‘Legally Blonde’ or ‘The Terminator’ and watch it time and again, just as those of us who love indies can watch ‘Fargo’ time and again.”

Well, yes and no, as I wrote Mr. Sigman, because much depends on how you see movies, which are both discrete works and a social experience. While many of us still go to movie theaters, the 24-hour movie now also comes to us, though sometimes us may be just one person sitting alone at a desk or on a train and staring at a glowing box. This new portable movie is convenient, and certainly wired-up companies like the new ways they can pump images to your devices. But it isn't moviegoing as we have understood it for most of history.

New digital technologies have transformed not only how movies are shot, processed, edited, distributed and exhibited, but also how they are watched. And this has altered our moving-image world in ways that, because we're in the midst of all this change, are difficult to comprehend. What we do know is that for much of the 20th century when we talked about movies, we meant glorious if sometimes scratched bigger-than-life

images flickering on theater screens that we watched with other people and, when the next attraction rolled in, were gone, maybe forever. Now we watch digital content on various machines, armed with the new consumer confidence that everything is a click away.

It may be hard to remember in the on-demand era, but once upon a time you might not see a film again after it left theaters, which made movies a sometimes evanescent object of obsession, adding to their mystique and power. If a film accrued cultural or social significance, it might reappear in a museum, classroom or repertory theater, and sometimes as a midnight movie.

After the 1940s it might also materialize, badly chopped and cropped, on television. Often, though, once it left theaters, it would either sit on a shelf or was destroyed (or tossed into the Pacific Ocean), as many American movies — including a staggering 80 percent or so from the silent era — were.

The introduction of home videocassette recorders in 1975 made it possible to rent a copy of a Hitchcock thriller (at least those transferred from film) any time you wanted, if only during store hours. Today you can stream movies — along with television shows, YouTube clips and videos of your cat — through your computer, phone and the quaintly old-fashioned television. “Take the control” demands an ad from AT&T, which offers a cable option called America's Everything (250 channels and 4 movie packages) for \$104.99 a month and, professing the faith of mass customization, vows to deliver quality to millions of subscribers “one customer at a time.”

This emphasis on viewers as sovereign individuals is crucial. Many factors play into the transformation of people into audiences, including commercial imperatives, personal identities, storytelling trends, laws and social mores and of course technological innovations. Historically, if you wanted to watch a movie, you went to a theater, bought a ticket and sat with other spectators. You also waited: I stood in line for two hours to see “Raging Bull” when it opened in 1980. Now you watch whatever you want, whenever you want, at the click of a mouse, the touch

of a finger. That's cool, though it can also come to feel pretty ordinary, even banal.

The idea that movies are something you experience with other people is no longer the truism it once was. This isn't only about bodies surrounding and sometimes harassing us in darkened theaters, and the communal laughter, tears, gasps and heckling that become part of our memories. Born at the end of the 19th century, cinema was more than a novelty (though it was that): it represented — and was a portal to — a fast-moving urbanized world that was at once expanding and shrinking through new technologies, types of travel and consumption habits. The train made the world bigger (you could go places) and smaller (people went everywhere), and so did movies.

The connections between modernity and movies can be recognized in a vivid passage from the German sociologist Georg Simmel included in a valuable 1995 anthology called “Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life.” Writing in

1903 about the experience of being in a modern city in his essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Simmel described how it offered “the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions.” The anthology's editors, Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, add that it's no accident this description evokes cinema (it made me think of Michael Bay), because “the experience of the city set the terms for the experience of the other elements of modernity.”

Ms. Schwartz expands on the links between modernity and movies in a perceptive essay on some cinemalike spectacles — including wax museums and panoramas — that were all the rage in Paris at the end of the 19th century as cinema was coming into being. By far the most bizarre of them was the morgue, a novel attraction right up there with the Eiffel Tower: upward of 40,000 daily visitors would troop into a room, where behind a large glass window framed by curtains, they would look at two rows of corpses on marble slabs (nominally for identification purposes).



One of the most popular displays was that of a girl whose clothed corpse was propped up in a red-velvet chair and refrigerated at night (chair included).

The morgue might have fed the crowd's interest in morbid visions (one we still share), but Ms. Schwartz argues that it also provided visitors with "sensationalized versions of reality." Spectacles like the morgue, wax museums and panoramas were cultural activities that blurred reality and illusion, and were seen by large groups who might have read about them in papers. One contemporary observer compared the morgue to a theater of crime and the newspaper as its program. "Spectacle and narrative," Ms. Schwartz writes, "were integrally linked in Paris's burgeoning mass culture" and the idlers, strollers and shoppers, who — with what the theorist Anne Friedberg termed the "mobilized gaze" — were encountering new visual experiences.

On the threshold of the 20th century these experiences represented and sensationalized reality, as did another novel attraction (born 1895), movies. Movies, in other words, were part of what it meant to be modern. Viewers learned to dress and smoke and romance from movies, but they also learned how to be an audience. They were constituents in a new cultural democracy, one in which you voted by buying a ticket. The movies showed people new worlds that they experienced in groups in the nickelodeons, lavish palaces and multiplexes. We still commune with others when we watch a movie alone at home — if only in later conversation, online or in our head. But watching that movie with other people is a discrete experi-

ence from watching a clip on YouTube and noticing it has 200,000 hits, each a ghostly trace of someone else.

There are moviegoers and probably critics who don't care about the kind of box that images come in, how those images were created and how they are consumed, though it seems important to mark these changes and how they are affecting our modern or postmodern selves. Television and home video shrank movies, turning them into more easily obtainable images that are perhaps no longer (as) sacred. The new 24-hour movie, meanwhile, has brought other changes, filling our eyes and sometimes flooding our heads with an unending stream of visions.

Digital technologies have sharpened the image and clouded the question of what is cinema. It's too early to know what has been lost and what has been gained along the way, other than a sense of consumer convenience. These days, at the very least, I try to not call a movie (as in moving picture) shot on digital a film because, well, it isn't one even if it looks like a close approximation. But as James Cameron's "Avatar" and other digital productions prove, you don't need film to create cinema — from the Greek word *kinema*, which suggests both motion and emotion.

In his live performances the avant-garde filmmaker Ken Jacobs, using a customized machine he calls a Nervous Magic Lantern — a box with a light and lenses — even shows that you don't need film or a digital camera to make cinema either. You just need shadow and light. But you — as in we — still need the audience, right?