

Moving Pictures, Moving Forward: the Future of Enjoying Cinema

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Abstract

The advancement of technology and platforms is fundamentally reshaping cinema. How we consume movies has changed drastically: people have progressed from watching movies at theaters to using phones. There is a threat to the old form of cinema, which is the growing number of streaming services. Alternative platforms such as VR, interactive story-based games, and specialized theaters like Superplex are forcing filmmakers to adapt to these new shifts. Are movies evolving? Do these changes in technology directly influence filmmaking techniques, such as the use of framing, editing, and narrative structures? We define evolution as the gradual development of something into a more complex form, and we hope to prove that movies are indeed evolving. Rather than simply reacting to new platforms, cinema is transforming and adapting its storytelling, visuals, and formats to fit the changing ways audiences consume and experience film.

Keywords

Cinema evolution; Streaming platforms; filmmaking techniques ; Media and technology; Audience experience

Introduction

Cinema began with audiences watching silent black-and-white films solely in movie theaters. Over the first half of the 20th century, technological innovations gradually enhanced the medium. Synchronized sound was introduced in 1927, color film in 1939, and widescreen formats by the mid-1950s. Broadcast television introduced a second outlet, but theater attendance remained high. Thus, watching movies was a special event that people had to plan for, as it required time and money.

“The introduction of the consumer video cassette recorder (VCR) in the mid-1970s revolutionized home entertainment by enabling viewers to record and playback television broadcasts at their convenience” (Dawson, 2007). The advances of DVDs and Blu-rays accelerated this change by improving picture quality and offering expansive film libraries. Allowing viewers to pause, rewind, and fast-forward offered consumers a tailored, flexible media experience. By the 2000s, a new transformation took hold: streaming services like Netflix and YouTube allowed the personalization of content and portability. Algorithms on video platforms now make content suggestions based on the user’s recent activities, allowing people to watch movies anywhere. Due to all this technology, traditional cinema attendance has declined.

This shift in technology has not diminished the complexity of filmmaking. It has rather increased complexity and caused films to evolve. Filmmakers today are forced to adapt to a growing number of mediums and formats, from vertical screens on smartphones to immersive megatheaters. Visual compositions, such as how the shot is framed, have evolved from a proscenium perspective to multiple camera angles and perspectives. Old Hollywood movies used unmoving angles, only facing forward, while contemporary films utilize drones, close-up shots, and point of

view. Larger screens have also allowed filmmakers a larger canvas. Science fiction films like *Avatar*, for instance, utilize extremely detailed computer graphics, and superhero movies include complicated blocking and action. Another rising force in this change is social media. With vertically cropped edits of movie scenes prevalent in such media, even the possibility of vertical films are signs of transition in cinematic experience due to technology. The emergence of Virtual Reality (VR) has opened possibilities for more immersive, interactive films. In short, while films may be losing their traditional sense of occasion, they are undeniably evolving, becoming more complex as they adapt to diverse platforms and shortening attention spans.

Discussion

Mega-theaters: a Larger Canvas for Films

Action in films have evolved since the introduction of mega-theaters or Premium Large Format (PLF) theaters. Such theaters are characterized by advanced audio and visual systems, and most importantly, an expansive screen. The average screen size of an Imax theater is 22m x 16m, which is significantly larger than the size of screens in ordinary theaters. These larger screens offer a larger canvas for directors to conceive more elaborate cinematic compositions. “In 1990, the chairman of IMAX has explained this technology...When you see our movie about mountain gorillas you are not a human being watching a gorilla. You are a gorilla” (Demir, 2015). Films have become more immersive through this technology compared to smaller screens of the past.

The opening scene of *The Dark Knight* is an interesting example. In this sequence, Director Christopher Nolan uses IMAX cameras to its fullest in capturing cityscapes and small details. The scene's intricate choreography, combined with the large-format visuals, provides viewers with a broader perspective. IMAX has created an opportunity for filmmakers to experiment with even more extravagant visual compositions that specifically target larger screens.

Blocking, or the placement of actors, lies at the heart of cinematic storytelling, especially in action genres. Traditional films, constrained by smaller formats and less mobile cameras, often relied on simpler setups. For instance, classic Hollywood action scenes in films like *The Maltese Falcon* of 1941 or even early James Bond entries typically featured static or modestly mobile cameras, with action unfolding in a relatively flat plane (Esler, 2021). In contrast, “The Dark Knight” leveraged IMAX technology to orchestrate elaborate set pieces that would have been unthinkable in earlier eras. The opening bank robbery sequence, shot using IMAX cameras, exemplifies this evolution. The vastness of the frame allows Nolan to stage multiple layers of action—foreground, middle ground, and background—simultaneously. Characters move through a three-dimensional space, with the camera capturing intricate details of their interactions and physical environments.

Such complexity in blocking and action would have been technologically prohibitive in previous decades. Filmmakers in the pre-IMAX era experienced “earlier technical restrictions that imposed tighter framing and simpler cuts” (Hellerman, 2024). IMAX’s high resolution and expansive aspect ratio offered a solution, enabling filmmakers to maintain visual coherence even amidst chaos and rapid movement. This, in turn, allowed for more ambitious and visually captivating action sequences. The differences between the action sequences of “The Dark Knight” and those of earlier films show the impact of technological advancement on cinematic complexity. Classic action films often relied on editing and implication rather than direct visualization of complex stunts. For example, Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* of 1959 features suspenseful chases and confrontations, but these are executed with a “technique of ‘building suspense through minimal on-screen chaos and deliberate pacing,’ reflecting practical and technological constraints of 1950s filmmaking” (Biswas, 2024). The rise of computer-

generated imagery (CGI) in the late 20th century, as seen in films like *Jurassic Park* of 1993, began to expand the scope of on-screen action, but it was the advent of large-format exhibition that truly enabled directors to fully exploit the physicality and “spatial depth of real-world action” (Weinberg et al., 2020). Science fiction epics such as *Avatar* of 2009 pushed visual detail to new heights using CGI, yet Nolan’s approach in “The Dark Knight” remained grounded in practical effects, enhanced by the immersive quality of IMAX. This combination fostered a visceral realism and complexity that set a new standard for blockbuster cinema.

Technological advancements in exhibition and media have not only transformed how films are made but also reshaped audience expectations. As viewers become accustomed to the spectacle and immersion offered by IMAX and similarly advanced formats, there is a growing demand for visually captivating, complex films (Weinberg et al., 2020). This phenomenon creates a feedback loop: technological progress enables more ambitious filmmaking, which in turn raises the bar for what audiences anticipate from the cinematic experience.

From Proscenium to Drones

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Surround Sound and Complex Sound design

While early films presented stories through silent, black-and-white images, the introduction of synchronized sound in 1927 transformed the industry, laying the groundwork for sound design as an important component of filmmaking (Esler et al. 2021). Over the decades, the sophistication of film sound has evolved with technological progress, even into immersive formats like Dolby Atmos.

One recent example of advanced sound design is Denis Villeneuve’s “Dune” (2021). Dolby Atmos, unlike traditional surround sound formats, allows sound designers to position audio elements as “objects” in a three-dimensional space, including above the audience, thereby enveloping viewers in a dynamic soundscape. This technology supports up to 128 audio tracks and 64 unique speaker feeds, offering precision. In “Dune,” sound designers Mark Mangini and Theo Green used Dolby Atmos to construct an intricate auditory environment that reflects the film’s vast desert landscapes, alien cultures, and layered storytelling. For instance, the deep, thunderous movements of the sandworms are felt as much as heard, utilizing low-frequency effects that vibrate through the theater, while the voice of the Bene Gesserit seems to shift from above to behind the audience depending on the moment. The complexity of these layers not only enhances immersion but also conveys narrative and emotion.

There is an interesting contrast between “Dune” and a landmark film from an earlier era: Alan Crosland’s “The Jazz Singer” (1927). Widely recognized as the first feature-length motion picture with synchronized dialogue sequences, “The Jazz Singer” opened the sound era in cinema. However, the technology of the time, Vitaphone, was rudimentary by today’s standards. Sound was recorded on separate discs that played in sync with the film projector, and the soundtrack consisted primarily of dialogue and musical numbers, with minimal ambient sound or sound effects.

“The Jazz Singer”’s few spoken lines and musical performances were groundbreaking for audiences in 1927, but by contemporary standards, the auditory environment is quite sparse. There is little sense of space or depth; the sound is monaural and fixed, lacking the spatial dimension that modern sound systems have. Environmental sounds, such as footsteps or background noise, are largely absent until the 60s, and there is no attempt to create a layered, immersive soundscape. Instead, the focus is on the novelty of synchronized speech and music, which was itself a technological marvel at the time (Esler et al. 2021). The primary objective was to demonstrate the possibility of sound synchronization, rather than to explore the creative potential of sound layering or immersive audio environments.

The progression from monaural, single-channel audio to multi-dimensional, object-based sound systems like Dolby Atmos parallels the shift from static, proscenium-style visuals to dynamic, multi-angle cinematography. Just as modern filmmakers utilize drones, close-ups, and point-of-view shots to create visually engaging narratives, advanced audio technologies construct layered, spatially complex sound.

Moreover, the evolution of sound design reflects changes in how films are experienced. While early cinema was characterized by communal viewing in theaters where sound was a shared, collective experience, contemporary audiences watch films across a variety of platforms, from megatheaters with sophisticated sound systems to

smartphones with limited audio capabilities. This diversification has challenged sound designers to create mixes that are effective across multiple formats, further increasing the complexity of their work (Weinberg et al. 2020).

The integration of complex sound design into the very fabric of filmmaking has also transformed the role of sound in storytelling. In modern films like “Dune,” sound is not merely an accompaniment to the visuals; it is an active participant in the narrative, shaping audience perception, emotion, and understanding. The ability to layer sounds with precision—placing them above, behind, or around the audience—enables filmmakers to guide attention, build tension, and convey information that would be difficult to achieve through visuals alone.

VR and the Future of Film

Virtual Reality (VR) is the latest and perhaps most interactive tool for future filmmakers. Unlike conventional film, which places the viewer outside the frame, VR invites them inside it. The viewer becomes a participant, surrounded by the world of the story. This shift is not just visual; it is spatial, emotional, and psychological. According to the University of Washington Pressbooks, “VR filmmaking is probably the closest way” to evoke empathy through media (University of Washington Pressbooks, n.d.). Farahzadi adds that VR offers “limitless visuals, lifelike audio, and haptic feedback,” creating a sensory immersion that traditional film cannot replicate (Farahzadi, 2018).

However, VR is not the final form of cinema. It is a transitional phase, much like the VCR once redefined how audiences consumed film. Li et al. argue that “advanced VR technology cannot replace the role and influence of traditional filmmaking culture,” suggesting that we are not witnessing the end of cinema but its expansion (Li, Zhang, & Zhang, 2022). Filmmakers now face the challenge of crafting stories that unfold in 360 degrees, where the viewer’s gaze is unpredictable and the narrative must adapt to their movement. Editing, pacing, and framing—foundational elements of film—must be reimaged for this new medium.

At the same time, VR is part of a broader shift toward immersive media. Immersive technologies “should not be considered solely as a passing trend,” but as the beginning of a new kind of literacy: one that requires audiences to feel stories with their bodies, not just their eyes (Kaplan-Rakowski & Meseberg, 2019). Indeed, “the future looks promising with the development of new communication technologies, formats and hardware” (ITU Journal, 2020). What lies ahead may be media experiences that are even more intuitive and integrated, perhaps embedded in filmmakers’ environments.

In this sense, VR is not the destination but the doorway. It is a stepping stone toward something more immersive, more responsive, and more deeply connected to human perception. Just as silent films gave way to sound, and black-and-white to color, VR may one day seem quaint compared to what comes next. But for now, it represents a bold reimagining of what film can be and a reminder that cinema has never stood still.

Conclusion

Film has always been a living art form, shaped by the tools and environments around it. From silent black-and-white reels to immersive virtual reality experiences, its evolution has never followed a straight path but has consistently responded to the changing ways people engage with stories. What defines cinema is not the format or the screen size but its ability to adapt and remain relevant. Each new technology—whether it is the introduction of synchronized sound, the rise of widescreen formats, or the use of drones and spatial audio—has expanded the possibilities of storytelling rather than replacing what came before.

Today, filmmakers are working across a wide range of platforms, from smartphones to mega-theaters, and are experimenting with formats that challenge traditional ideas of narrative and perspective. These changes do not signal the end of cinema but its continued growth. The essence of film lies in its flexibility, its willingness to absorb new tools and reshape itself to fit the moment. As audiences shift their habits and expectations, cinema responds by finding new ways to connect, surprise, and move them.

Looking ahead, the future of film will likely involve forms we cannot yet fully imagine. It may blend physical and digital spaces, respond to viewer choices, or even integrate with daily life in subtle ways. But no matter how it changes, film will continue to evolve. Its history shows a pattern of reinvention, and that pattern is far from over. The story of cinema is not about preserving a single way of watching but about exploring every possible way of experiencing a story.

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