

The reel thing

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Digital and film are slugging it out in the cinema, but which one will win? Katie Cincotta reports.

IN THE final scene of the Italian tearjerker *Cinema Paradiso*, film director Salvatore is spellbound as he watches a film crafted by the town projectionist - the man who inspired his love of movies. Spliced together from all the kissing scenes banned by the local priest, it is a poignant tribute to the old cinema as it faces demolition to make way for a car park.

Now, as digital technology begins to harness the attention of hot-shot directors and cinematographers, it is the traditional medium of film itself that faces the cutting-room floor, and be shelved altogether as a relic.

The advantages of digital are clear. The digital high-definition format allows filmmakers to record hundreds of megabytes of data per second with a resolution of at least 720-1080 lines, compared to regular TV at 486-576 lines. And the latest digital projectors can read those pixels from a hard drive and project them on a screen. The quality is pristine every time, without the degradation, dirt or scratches that marred the traditional 35mm print screened at cinemas.

So why haven't cinemas made the switch to digital projection?

Despite digital's creative inroads, movie projection and distribution continues to travel the well-worn path set by 35mm film almost a century ago. Cinema research group Dodona has found that 94 per cent of all films are still made on traditional film, with 99 per cent distributed on 35mm prints. Even the films that are shot or edited on digital are scanned back on to film and make their way to cinemas on the traditional celluloid reels."

Celluloid is still the gold standard. It's irrelevant whether they're being shot on film or digital. They still come in boxes of 20-minute spools," says cinema historian David Kilderry, a cinema projectionist since the age of 16 and now Village Cinemas' national technical manager.

Last year, only three big movies screened digitally at Village and Hoyts cinemas - *Chicken Little*, *Monster House* and *Nightmare Before Christmas*.

Only independent content, such as Australian films and documentaries, is readily available in the



Director Steven Spielberg shoots only on film.

digital format.

SO WHY AREN'T mainstream films being screened digitally to audiences? It seems that some of the answer has to do with costs and studio fears of piracy.

ACMI's head of film programs Richard Sowada says he finds the slow uptake of digital movie projection and distribution shocking, considering the cheapness of the hard-drive format."

I'm surprised at how slowly digital has been embraced by exhibition and distribution. A cinema film print is worth \$2000," he says.

An equivalent digital version of a feature film costs about \$190.

In the US, the average big feature requires 3000 film prints for global distribution. According to Dodona's forecasts, distributors can expect to save more than \$US3.4 million (\$A4.1 million) a film when they no longer have to produce 35mm prints.

But Dendy Cinemas general manager Mark Sarfaty says it could take another two decades to wipe out the 35mm film model."

There are not many industries in the world that are based on a model developed in 1917 that is still working in 2007," he says. "It's complex to try and convert that, but I'd say somewhere between 15 to 20 years would see the last of 35mm film."

For production and post (production), digital is a done deal.

The thorny issue we're wrestling with is that of distribution."

Mr Sarfaty says the complexity of digital encryption used to prevent piracy means the transition of cinemas to the digital format won't be simple.

Standardisation is also holding the technology back, he says, with Hollywood's Digital Cinema Initiatives imposing a benchmark of 2K resolution, which costs \$100,000 or more a screen. The Kodak 3D system, installed at four of Village's multiplexes, costs \$300,000 a screen, which includes licensing fees for the technology.

At Dendy's new Canberra cinema, nine 35mm film projectors have been installed along with three non-DCI 1.3K digital screens, for about \$20,000 each.

Mr Sarfaty says the decision not to spend \$100,000 for the standard 2K digital was a financial one. "The answers are not clear enough for us to invest an incremental increase in cost of \$80,000 per projector unit," he says.

The average cost for a brand-new 35mm projector is about \$30,000 - a modest outlay compared to \$300,000 for the best digital system on the market. Is it any wonder that exhibitors have been slow to embrace the new technology, and those who have are crying out for content?

Australian cinematographer Ben Allan agrees that digital won't wipe out film any time soon, but points out that more people are choosing to shoot on High Definition, preferring the quicker, easier and cheaper format to film."

My personal suspicion is that film is going to be around for a very long time, certainly decades," he says. "But there will be a point where digital will be the automatic choice and then people will have to justify shooting film, and that is getting very close."

Allan believes the latest digital HD cameras offer a viable alternative to film, but getting the best from them often requires experimenting with the settings. He scored an extraordinary testing ground in the form of prototype digital cameras left behind by US director George Lucas when filming Star Wars II in Australia.

Lucas has been a digital pioneer, using a High-Definition digital 24-frame system to shoot the 2002 release of Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones. After using the HDWF900 digital cinema camera, developed by Sony and Panavision, Lucas vowed never to shoot on film again.

Allan used his knowledge to finetune the look of the local TV show All Saints. "One of the things that is wonderful about film is that it's precise and repeatable. With digital, that's always been very difficult because there are so many variables within the camera. By locking down a lot of those settings we were able to create a very stable medium like film," he says.

Since the digital tweaking, people have commented that All Saints looks warmer, softer, dramatic and more realistic, which has reassured some of the actors worried that the new HD cameras were producing unflattering results.

Village's Mr Kilderry believes a new push in 3D digital projection may finally provide the impetus needed for cinemas to embrace the digital format.

He points to the fact that Hollywood heavyweight, Titanic director James Cameron, intends to pave the way with his new sci-fifilm, Avatar, starring Australian actor Sam Worthington, which will use 3D technology to blend live action and CGI.

But Mr Kilderry warns that predictions about new technology cutting traditional film out of the picture have been around since 1932."

They've been predicting the demise of film since that time. Just because we have the ability to project images electronically doesn't signal the death of celluloid," he says.

Mr Kilderry says when he worked on the Hoyts Chadstone opening in 1986, the ceiling was scalloped to accommodate video projectors, even then believed to be just around the corner.

While he believes film may make the transition to digital in the long term, it will never disappear completely, especially with Hollywood veterans such as director Steven Spielberg convinced of its virtues."

Spielberg says he'll still shoot and use film until there's nowhere left on the planet that he can do that," Mr Kilderry says.

Last year, Spielberg told Time magazine he was too nostalgic about film to make the move to digital.

"I'm the last person in Hollywood who cuts his film on film. I still love cutting on film."

The greatest films ever made in our history were cut on film and I'm tenaciously hanging on to the

process," he said.

Melbourne's digital screens

- Village Jam Factory
- Village Southland
- Village Sunshine
- Village Knox
- Hoyts Northland
- ACMI

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