

Associated Press

George Lucas, who digitally recreated this scene for "Star Wars: Special Edition" in 1997, made the recent "Phantom Menace" a test case for digital production and projection.

Taking Film Out of Films

By ROB SABIN

THE close of the 20th century is not being kind to poor old Thomas Edison.

Granted, we're still firing up a descendant of his first incandescent light bulb, 120 years after the fact. But the introduction of the compact disk in 1982 spelled the end of the phonograph — one of the Wizard of Menlo Park's pet projects — after 105 years. And now it looks as if the motion picture camera and projector, loosely based on his kinetograph and kinetoscope of the late 1880's, are about to bite the dust as well.

That's how it appears ever since George Lucas, the "Star Wars" patriarch, went out of his way recently to spotlight the pending death of film. Not of movies, mind you, or of cinema, but of motion picture film. Specifically, Mr. Lucas took his "Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace" and set out to prove that the creation and projection of film-quality images in theaters is now technically viable by purely electronic means.

Movie studios have strong incentive to pursue this path. It costs them \$1,500 to \$2,000 to duplicate a single 35-millimeter print of a major feature and transport it to and from the theater. Often, several thousand of these must be created for opening weekend, only to be quickly junked as multiplex operators make way for fresh titles.

Electronic or digital cinema reduces a film to digital data, allowing studios to send releases to theaters via satellite, fiber-optic cables or inexpensive optical media like digital video disks. Meanwhile, theater operators can instantly change movies to maximize attendance at all screens. Scratches, dirt and tears from wear on film prints are eliminated, and every digital dub looks as good as the digital master, rather than suffering the quality loss of third-generation film copies.

Shooting a movie with high-definition digital video cameras simplifies

Going digital saves time, money and wear at many steps of the moviemaking process.

post-production. Already, portions of many films are transferred to digital for color corrections and other editing. Birthing a movie in the digital domain lets the filmmakers work on special effects without incurring the cost, time or loss of quality associated with going from raw film to video and then back. That's a plus for the science-fiction and action-adventure genres prevalent today. "The Phantom Menace" has nearly 2,200 digitally generated shots, making up 90 percent of the movie.

Today's best high-definition video cameras aren't ready to replace their film counterparts, although portions of "The Phantom Menace" were shot in high-definition and successfully mixed with film sequences. But the next generation of experimental cameras is due any minute, and if Mr. Lucas likes what he sees, he says, he plans to shoot his next "Star Wars" feature entirely in video.

It has also been a challenge to project high-definition video images with the detail, brightness, contrast and color resolution now attainable by film projectors using arc lamps to fill theater-size screens. The cathode-ray tube or liquid crystal technologies in conventional video projectors either can't produce enough light or can't deliver the pure blacks that give film its tremendous contrast and depth.

Recently, though, two manufacturers have evolved breakthrough projectors that overcome these obstacles. For four weeks this summer, audiences in the New York and Los Angeles areas could view "The Phantom Menace" on either of these systems in addition to the regular film version, making this the first digital exhibition of a full-length feature. Two theaters in New Jersey were selected, one in Secaucus and the other in Paramus. To compare, I saw both systems in one day and then took in the film version as well.

Before these showings, "The Phantom Menace" had to be digitized. For each projector, a first-generation copy made from the film master was optically scanned and transferred to high-definition video using a new system built by Philips

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Rob Sabin's most recent article for Arts & Leisure was about home theaters.

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Natalie Portman in George Lucas's "Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace", some was shot in high-definition video.

Taking the Film Out of the Films

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Electronics. After color and brightness corrections, the data was compressed (to take up less memory) and loaded onto 19 hard disks, 18 gigabytes each, in a small, rack-mounted box. The content of the movie's seven reels, about 12,000 feet of film, was dubbed to this component before being shipped to the theater, where it was decompressed and fed to the projection system. The digital soundtrack was stored on a separate hard-disk recorder.

To achieve their large, bright pictures, the two projectors used for the demonstration integrated the light from a standard, high-powered projection bulb into the video image. The technology in Secaucus, made by Texas Instruments, goes under the trade name Digital Light Processing. The Texas Instruments solution was to mount 1.3 million microscopic aluminum mirrors on a silicon chip measuring just 0.9 by 1.1 inches. In a way, the concept is similar to the liquid crystal display screen on a laptop computer, in which individual pixels, or picture elements, are directly fed digital information that fires up each one in just the right brightness, at just the right time, to create the desired image.

With a digital micromirror device, each pixel is represented not by a liquid crystal cell, but by a mirror on a swivel post. The digital bits fed to each pixel control the mirror's orientation by physically tugging on either side with an electrostatic charge — the same force that makes a balloon stick to a wall. When a mirror is in its on position, it reflects light from the projector's 5,000-watt xenon lamp toward the screen, creating a tiny rectangular spot. In its off position, the light is directed to a light absorber, resulting, theoretically, in total darkness. The mirrors can change state up to 50,000 times a second, and by carefully controlling the time each mirror spends in the on position, the

projector varies the brightness for that pixel.
To make colors, the Texas Instruments projector used three micromirror chips, one each for the primary red, green and blue picture information. The light from all three converged in the projector using optics and blasted onto the 40-by-20-foot screen through a single lens.
What I saw in the theater impressed me. The image was bright, with sharply defined edges around objects and excellent detail. Contrast, while not so deep as the best film can offer, was very good. Colors were rich and natural, with realistic and saturated flesh tones and lush, inviting greens and blues in the landscapes and sky. The pixel structure,

Projectors are being developed that can give video images a richness like that of film.

which can show up as a faint grid on this type of projector, was never obvious, even from the first few rows.
The overall look was different from conventional film, and in some respects better. The pristine electronic projection, coupled with the care taken with the digital transfer for this high-profile engagement, guaranteed an ideal presentation. There was no image flicker from the projection lamp or shutter, as in the film version, and there was less grain in the image. Color also appeared to be optimized to a degree not evident even on the film, perhaps partly because of corrections made during the digital transfer. Some of the movie's bright desert scenes seemed to show better contrast and color saturation.

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Liam Neeson as a Jedi knight in "The Phantom Menace."

Manhattan, Bronx, Queens, Nassau, Suffolk, New Jersey, Westchester, Staten Island, Connecticut, Upstate. A grid of theater listings for 'The 13th Warrior' across various New York City and surrounding areas.

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The pixelized construction of the image contributed to that crisp, etched look, which some viewers will prefer to film, while others won't. But undoubtedly, the average theatergoer would have been unlikely to detect that this was an electronic image and would have no reason to complain about the cinematic experience.

projector during calibration. But that spotlights a potential pitfall: video projectors offer a wide variety of sensitive picture adjustments not available on film projectors. How will tomorrow's digital projectionists guarantee a consistent experience on every screen?

In sum, the Hughes-JVC system passed the same test as the Texas Instruments system while experts might find reasons to quibble with these images, typical moviegoers would neither recognize nor fault them for being electronic. So the "Phantom Menace" run proved, at least to me, that the technology for electronic projection has indeed arrived.

When it will arrive in your local theater is another matter. Estimates range from 2 to 10 years, although permanent installations may appear within three years. The projectors described above are costly: the Hughes-JVC model goes for \$250,000, and Texas Instruments wouldn't even attach a price to its prototype. But it is not expected to take long for these systems to fall to the \$100,000

When will digital projection arrive in your local theater? Estimates range from 2 to 10 years.

of today's film projectors. Beyond price, some details still need to be worked out, including industry agreement on how best to distribute the digital signals and technical standards for doing so. There must also be new standards for theaters (which use all manner of screens), for projector calibration and for handling a movie's digital transfer. Then there's the politics: what happens to the film factory workers, print processors, projectionists and truckers who stand to lose their livelihoods as cinema goes digital?

You can be sure the Hollywood studios, driven by their bottom lines, will forge ahead. After more than a century of film and the rich culture it begat, there will be critics who loudly bemoan the loss. But, like it or not, the time has come to bid farewell to Edison's form of cinematic magic and swap it for another. □

At other times, the picture was more reminiscent of video, specifically of a projector or television set with its contrast control turned up. On those bright desert shots, the sand-colored backgrounds sacrificed some of their natural richness to pick some detail in the darker areas of the picture.

Of course, these are matters of minute subtleties and personal taste, many viewers would prefer the punchy image dialed into the

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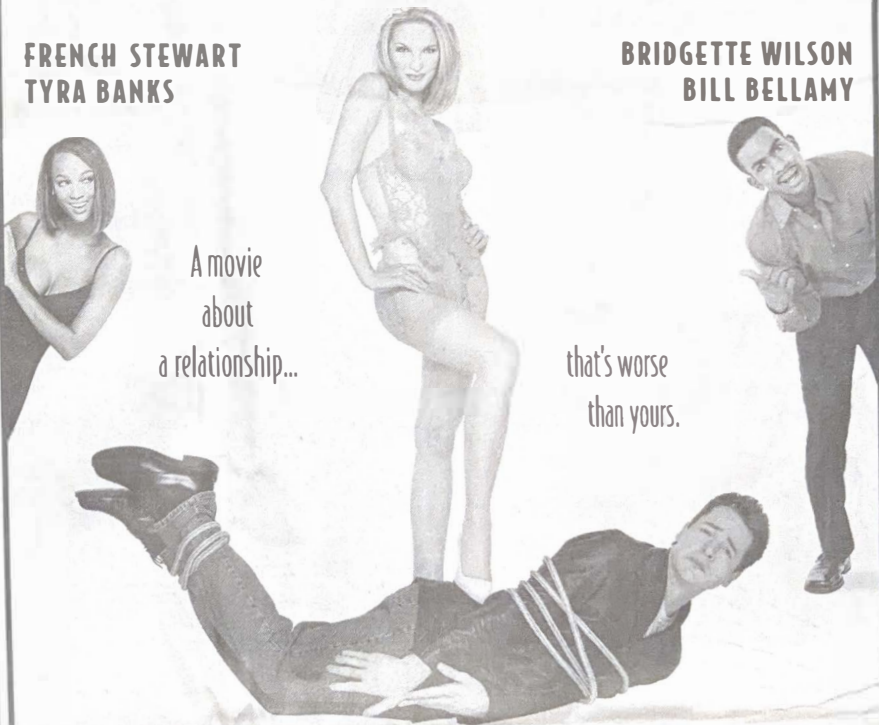
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