**This Is Cinerama**

By Kyle Westphal

“The pictures you are now going to see have no plot. They have no stars. This is not a stage play, nor is it a feature picture not a travelogue nor a symphonic concert or an opera—but it is a combination of all of them.” So intones Lowell Thomas before introducing America to a ‘major event in the history of entertainment’ in the eponymous “This Is Cinerama.” Let’s be clear: this is a hyperbolic film, striving for the awe and majesty of a baseball game, a fireworks show, and the virgin birth all rolled into one, delivered with the insistent hectoring of a hypnotically effective multilevel marketing pitch.

“This Is Cinerama” possesses more bluster than a politician on the stump, but the Cinerama system was a genuinely groundbreaking development in the history of motion picture exhibition. Developed by inventor Fred Waller from his earlier Vitarama, a multi-projector system used primarily for artillery training during World War II, Cinerama sought to scrap most of the uniform projection standards that had been established with the arrival of sound cinema twenty-five years earlier.

Using three 35mm projectors running simultaneously, Cinerama presented a triptych that stretched across a deeply curved, 146° screen that surrounded the audience and approximated peripheral vision. The seams joining the three images were always evident, like a fold-out map folding back on itself, with creased peaks and concave valleys. Seven-channel stereophonic sound was delivered via a fourth strip of 35mm magnetic film. Running at 26 frames per second (instead of the sound standard of 24 fps), with each frame six perforations tall (as opposed to 35mm’s usual four perforations), Cinerama delivered an immaculately sharp and steady image—an order of magnitude better than anything audiences had seen before, or frankly, since. (At present, Cinerama can still be seen occasionally at only three venues in the world: the National Media Museum in Bradford, England, the Cinemama Theatre in Seattle and Pacific’s Cinerama Dome in Hollywood.)

There had been experimental widescreen films, stereophonic sound films, road show epics and spectacle pictures going back decades, but “This Is Cinerama” combined them all in one package with a genuine sense of showmanship—and its success was too notable to ignore. As for “This Is Cinerama,” it remains a singular experience, a work of ruthless commercial calculation shot through with a genuinely avant-garde predilection towards purely formalistic inquiry. What could Cinerama see that you and I cannot? How does its new vision change us? Do our bodies bear the scars of Cinerama afterwards? This interest was spelled out in the commemorative “This Is Cinerama” program book available during the film’s premiere engagement:

> If, to take an extreme example, in our first picture we had some tremendous attraction, let’s say Charlie Chaplin doing Hamlet, the focus of atten-
tion would be either on the great clown or on the new approach to Shakespeare.... We didn’t want to be judged on subject matter. This advent of something as new and important as Cinerama was itself a major event in the history of entertainment. The logical thing to do was to make Cinerama the hero. And that is what we have tried to do. This, our first, is a demonstration.

Suspension of disbelief was never the name of the game with Cinerama. "This Is Cinerama" foregrounds self-conscious spectacle. Producer-investor-narrator Lowell Thomas opens the film with a prologue presented in a tiny, black-and-white square—akin to your pathetic little television. The constitutionally immoedest Thomas traces Cinerama’s lineage back to prehistoric cave paintings, and then sketches a few evolutionary hiccups leading up to the present moment: Zoetropes, Eadweard Muybridge’s animal locomotion studies, a condescending tribute to Edwin S. Porter’s "The Great Train Robbery" (1903). "By our standards," he admits, "it wasn’t exactly colossal, but it was the first road show and it started the nickelodeon." Tipping his hand like a true poker greenhorn, Thomas adds, "And it made a lot of money."

But all that is prelude, because "This Is Cinerama!" The curtains fly open and we’re in a roller coaster car at Rockaway’s Playland, with all manner of whispers, carnival music, ambient sound jumping from one speaker to another at random. From there, the first half of "This Is Cinerama" takes a circuitous Grand Tour of Europe. Aside from the canals of Venice, all of the attractions are disarmingly unembarrassed retreats of Vitaphone material: operas, boys’ choirs, Catholic solemnity. Unlike the early talkies, though, these segments inscribe the audience within the scene—indeed, the sight and scale of the gracious crowds are an integral aspect of the spectacle. The attentive masses suggest the whole enterprise aspires more to being an implacable monument than a mere movie.

Following an intermission the Cinerama demonstration continues, but with the added interest of an undiluted Pax Americana flavor. Having nodded toward Old Europe, Thomas now promises "something of our own land, through new eyes." Here are sun-kissed Southern belles who cavort by the Everglades, pure in morals and free from history, fully-formed dream visions made flesh. After preening hither and yon, they shed their dresses and become bathing beauties, pliable bikini props for a round of water stunts.

Next, Thomas offers a confession: “Cinerama makes me aware that never did I really see my country—until now.” Cinerama is more real, more legitimate, than real life. A seven-channel stereophonic rendition of “America the Beautiful” from the Salt Lake City Tabernacle Choir accompanies our coast-to-coast helicopter tour. "Now you see what it’s like to land a plane at the Kansas City Airport," booms Thomas, presumably answering some child’s prayer. Whilst in Washington, D.C., we glide silently past the Capitol Dome and the Washington Monument, but the Pentagon receives a lengthy, martial tribute. By the time we reach the industrial wonders of Gary, Indiana, “This Is Cinerama” is nothing less than the world’s most expensive and interminable family slideshow.

Luckily Lowell Thomas finds an American Zion to wrap things up—literally, Zion National Park in Springdale, Utah. From there, up and up to the pearly, soft clouds of the heavens.

As an artifact of imperial belligerence, directed inward, “This Is Cinerama” is appropriately rousing. It assays a brand of loud and proud patriotism too outsized for mere civic discourse. Not for nothing does Thomas describe Arches National Park as a landscape where “all is fantasy.” This astounding reversal is the crux of the Cinerama project. We do not project our feelings onto the landscape; that landscape is instead the projection of our dreams and desires. We are the authors of every stream, every blade of grass. The American wilderness itself becomes the literal embodiment of manifest destiny—moving ever westward, toward the destiny that was Cinerama.

Further Reading

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Kyle Westphal is a programmer at the Northwest Chicago Film Society, a non-profit organization dedicated to the exhibition, dissemination, and preservation of celluloid history. Westphal began his film career at Doc Films, the University of Chicago’s year-round, student-run cinematheque, serving variously as treasurer, projectionist, historian, and ultimately programming chair. He subsequently served as the Chief Projectionist of the Dryden Theatre at George Eastman House, and also projected at the Little Theatre, the Film Studies Center, and the Wisconsin Film Festival. On behalf of the Northwest Chicago Film Society, he supervised the photochemical preservation of the independent musical feature Comer’s-A-Poppin’ (1955). He is a 2009 graduate of the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation.