

This Is Cinerama

By Kyle Westphal

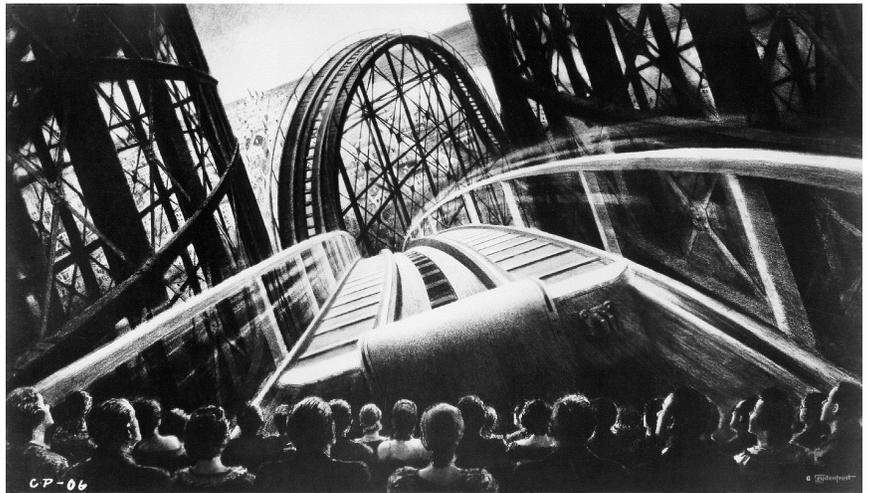
“The pictures you are now going to see have no plot. They have no stars. This is not a stage play, nor is it a feature picture not a travelogue nor a symphonic concert or an opera—but it is a combination of all of them.” So intones Lowell Thomas before introducing America to a ‘major event in the history 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 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 Cinerama 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.¹ While playing at only one theater in America, the Broadway Theater in New York City, the independently-produced “This Is Cinerama” became the highest-grossing film of 1952, illustrating its seismic impact.

Home viewers could not replicate the Cinerama experience—but then, neither could most movie theaters. During its ‘50s heyday, Cinerama had little more than a dozen dedicated theaters in the US, which typically ran new Cine-



Cinerama gave audiences the feeling they were riding the roller coaster at Rockaway’s Playland. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

rama productions for a year or two. Retrofitting existing theaters with Cinerama equipment was an enormously expensive proposition—and the costs didn’t end with installation. With very high fixed labor costs (the Broadway employed no less than seventeen union projectionists), an unusually large portion of a Cinerama theater’s weekly gross went back into the venue’s operating costs, leaving precious little for the producers.

Hollywood may not have wanted Cinerama, but with television rapidly eroding the theatrical audience, the studios certainly needed Cinerama ... or something like it. Cinerama was a vanguard process, but not a revolutionary one—it didn’t empower new players or force thousands of non-Cinerama theaters to close. In fact, the only company to take a drubbing from the innovation was Cinerama itself. Over the course of the 1950s, the Hollywood studios assiduously co-opted the Cinerama paradigm—delivering wide-screen film with much cheaper processes (CinemaScope, VistaVision, SuperScope, Panavision, Technirama) and following Cinerama’s lead on magnetic sound. Cinerama, which once rated front page coverage in the “New York Times,” became a niche novelty. The company released four more travelogues before partnering with M-G-M on “How the West Was Won” and “The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm.” In 1963, the trade name was re-appropriated for single-strip 70mm presentations and several prominent Hollywood features (including “2001: A Space Odyssey” [1968] and “It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad-World” [1963]) were released under the Cinerama moniker.

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 immodest 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 retreads 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.

¹ There had been widescreen films exhibited before Cinerama—"The Big Trail" (1930) in Fox's 70mm Grandeur process; "Billy the Kid" (1930) in MGM's 35mm Grandeur knockoff, Realife; and countless standard gauge films blown up and cropped through the Magnascope process for select scenes, including "Chang" (1927), "Wings" (1927), and "Portrait of Jennie" (1948). There had been films with stereophonic sound before Cinerama, too, such as "Fantasia" (1940) with its experimental Fantasound process. There had been hard-ticket road shows as well, stretching back to the silent era.

Further Reading

John Belton. *Widescreen Cinema*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.

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

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