

FILM FORUM

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OTION PICTURE, BROADCASTING
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March 16, 1993

Dear David,

Since I'm fluish (funny, I don't look fluish), I'm afraid the following is the best I can do regarding exhibiton. The point I want to make is that exhibition is the most overlooked part of preservation (I'm so glad you made a case for it on AMC), that history is lost if there's no access to it. It's also important to remind people that movies were created for exhibition in theaters (preferably with audiences): that they were shot, acted, timed and edited with a full house in mind. I consider video a handy tool, but it's like looking up the Mona Lisa in an art book. You still have to go to the Louvre to really see it.

It's important to remember that for 100 years films have been shot on 35mm film and it's in that proven (although sometimes unpredictable) format that they're best preserved. And for the time being, there's no mechanical image more hypnotic than a pristine 35mm print projected onto a theater screen.

The following two paragraphs are excerpts from letters I've sent Martin Scorsese: the first is in regard to my series "WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY PRESTON STURGES," which we ran in September 1991; the second concerns "ALL ABOUT MANKIEWICZ," which ran last December (shortly before Joe Mankiewicz's death). These describe some of our specific problems in trying to run a repertory/revival movie theatre in 1993:

...the existing 35mm distribution prints of the major Sturges titles are very poor, having been timed for tv. At the very least, I'd like to convince Universal to strike a new print of SULLIVAN'S TRAVEL, to match the beauty of UCLA's restoration copy. But, of course, ideally we'd like to see new prints of CHRISTMAS IN JULY, THE LADY EVE, THE GREAT MCGINTY, etc., as well as some of the films he wrote...

This retrospective was one of our most difficult to coordinate, as it relied heavily on Fox titles. As it turned out, we had to settle for old 16mm tv prints on PEOPLE WILL TALK, FIVE FINGERS, HOUSE OF STRANGERS and other major titles. As some studios are now beginning to junk 35mm distribution prints and even their old tv prints, comprehensive retrospectives like this are getting tougher and tougher to put on.

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As it turned out, we were able to convince Universal of striking new 35mm prints of the major Sturges titles. The series generated enormous press, grossed over \$150,000, and led to Sturges series around the country (and world). So the print costs certainly paid off for Universal. And, in the New York area at least, sales and rentals of Sturges videos soared.

But in order to get the kind of press we generate, a cinematic equivalent of MoMA's Matisse show must be mounted: in other words, we try to gather all of the work of the individual filmmaker, good or bad. We can now convince some of the studios to strike new 35mm prints, if they're guaranteed a week-long run: we've had great successes with long runs of ALL ABOUT EVE, 8 1/2, THE WAGES OF FEAR, BREATHLESS, CITIZEN KANE, CASABLANCA, DETOUR and other classics in new 35mm prints. But not every film is a blockbuster, so we have to rely on the following sources:

- 35mm DISTRIBUTION PRINTS: depending on the film and the distributor, these can be either quite beautiful or disgraceful. Ten years ago, just about all of the majors had "Classics" divisions which maintained print quality (and, more important, were run by people who understood the special requirements of revival theatres). Now, only Paramount and MGM/UA have specific classics divisions; Columbia recently disbanded theirs and for the moment are not servicing older films.

- STUDIO PRINTS: A handful of theaters are allowed to borrow studio archive copies from the following sources: Turner Entertainment (whose Dick May understands the importance of allowing films to be shown in theaters), Paramount (on special occasions only) and Warner Bros. (through Kit Parker Films). 20th Century-Fox and Universal do not allow the loan of studio prints. Studio copies are generally (but not always) in excellent condition; their use allows us to show rarer films in 35mm.

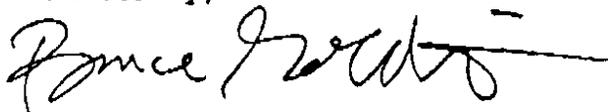
- 16mm TV PRINTS AND NON-THEATRICAL PRINTS: Some films exist only in old 16mm tv prints and, for years, this was the revival theater's sole source for many titles. But, with tv distribution going almost entirely to video, many of these prints are being junked. Although tv prints are generally inferior in quality to 35mm, they're often the only copies available to commercial theaters.

- ARCHIVES: Unlike distribution prints, archival copies are not intended to be run repeatedly, so we make our requests sparingly. When we do run archive copies, we limit the screenings (only once or twice) and hire an extra projectionist for the evening. A problem with borrowing archive prints is that the copyright of the film is usually not held by the archive, so the theater must pay a fee to the archive, in addition to film rental to the copyright owner. A solution to this would be a split of the film rental (normally 30-35% of the box office gross) to include a share to the archive.

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About seven years ago, Newsweek ran an article attributing the death of the revival theater to the popularity of videocassettes. But since then, revival theaters like the Stanford in Palo Alto, the Castro in San Francisco, the Brattle in Boston, and Film Forum in New York have been remarkably successful, and among their most phenomenal successes have been reissues of CASABLANCA and CITIZEN KANE -- both readily available on videocassette. There is definitely a desire to see movies in their proper setting; if anything, cable and video have only heightened this desire. The real competition of video and laserdisc is the superb sound and image quality available in those formats. The death of the repertory theater won't be due to lack of interest, but lack of good prints.

Sincerely,



Bruce Goldstein
Director of Repertory Programming
Film Forum, New York