MARTIN ŠRAJER / 8. 4. 2016

Film's big 70 – 70 mm films and cinemas in Czechoslovakia

Films screened using the original 70 mm copy are something of a holy grail for cinema connoisseurs demanding nothing but the highest-quality audio and video. The exclusive feel of such screenings is apparently even more pronounced because of the current overwhelming dominance of digital film as well as the fact that a vast majority of 70 mm cinemas have closed down with the 70 mm cine-projectors sold off. While today's 70 mm worshipping cinemaphiles from all over the Czech Republic (and neighbouring countries too) converge every year at Mír cinema in Krnov in the Moravian-Silesian region, in the past the country offered several dozen cinemas equipped with the required technology.

"In contrast to the regular 35 mm cine-projectors, 70 mm always meant a diversion from the everyday screenings and spiced up one's work given the enthusiasm of learning to operate a new invention and fascinating technology and equipment." [1]

When asked to explain why viewers should watch his epic space melodrama *Interstellar* (2014) from a 65 mm reel, Christopher Nolan referred to the film's theme, rather immodestly saying it was the universe itself. [2] According to the English-born film director, anything less would have prevented him from capturing the grandeur of space and delivering the fullest experience. It is best left to each viewer to judge the fullness of the experience but the reel from which *Interstellar* was screened, for example in IMAX cinemas, was certainly substantial given the film's width of seven centimetres and a weight exceeding 10 kilograms.

Nolan, as well as other proponents of 70 mm such as Paul Thomas Anderson (*The Master*, 2012) or Quentin Tarantino (*The Hateful Eight*, 2015), address mainly those members of audience who are not yet convinced that the best quality video and audio

can only come from 70 mm film. Those already converted are headed to Krnov in early April to attend what is already the 11th annual festival of 70 mm films, entitled KRRR! (The 2016 listing includes the abovementioned *Interstellar* and *The Hateful Eight*, both to be screened from a 70 mm reel for the first time in this country and most likely for the last time as well).

There are a number of similar festivals held in other European cities, such as in Karlsruhe, Germany (Todd-AO 70 mm-Festival), Bradford, England (Widescreen Weekend) and Oslo, Norway (70 mm Film Festival). In 2015, three days of the Neisse Film Festival were held in Varnsdorf, on the Czech side of the border. They were dedicated to 70 mm films [3]. The 2009 edition of Berlin's film festival put on a retrospective of 70 mm films made between 1955 and 1970, aptly named *Bigger than Life*.

The building years

Before the German WWII occupation turned the country into the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, there were some 1,800 cinemas unevenly strewn across the territory of Czechoslovakia, most of them small and lacking in technology. That number had shrunk to 1,418 by the time the war ended. However, the cinema count soon began to increase rapidly thanks to central planning which targeted mainly smaller towns and rural areas. This resulted in a more evenly distributed network of cinemas with improved equipment. The second stage of the cinema network development, initiated among other things by the advent of rival television broadcasting, improved viewers' comfort levels, and brought better projecting technology and – starting in the latter part of the 1950s – wide-angle screening.

The number of cinemas rose to 2,437 in 1964, of which 482 boasted wide projection screens. [4] Elsewhere in the world, 1960 saw widescreen films become all the rage. There were around a dozen widescreen formats available at the time as a result of competition among big Hollywood studios. Following the initial excitement of both the creators and consumers of widescreen content, the inevitable came about and the number of widescreen formats was reduced to the few most frequently used ones.

The people made responsible explored the idea of building a 70 mm-capable cinema in Czechoslovakia as early as in 1962. One such cinema was even built the following year

in the open air theatre in Boskovice. There was a small detail missing though: there was no 70 mm projector around. The first 70 mm cinemas only began operating in Czechoslovakia in the second half of the 1960s. [5] A sharp increase in demand for such cinemas from the chairpersons of municipality committees took František Pilát, the then deputy central director of Czechoslovak Film responsible for technology, completely by surprise. He was unable to provide cinema operators with the necessary funds or equipment. [6]

The first to find the beam was cinema Sokol in Kladno. Its first 70 mm film, screened in 1965, was an adaptation of Vsevolod Vishnevsky's play *Optimistic Tragedy* (1963). In order to make the fullest use of the costly 70 mm screenings, given how quickly this format of film succumbed to wear and tear, and the resulting tendency to screen such films for as many viewers as possibly, cinemas with at least 500 and preferably 900 seats were desirable. However, at that time there were only a handful of such cinemas in the country. Another issue to grapple with for cinema operators was the limited selection of 70 mm movies on top of a continued lack of corresponding cine-projectors. A solution to both shortcomings was to come from the Soviet Union as the making of 70 mm films by the Czechoslovak filmmakers was still some way off:

"There is still this cardinal issue: Do we have themes at Barrandov that would warrant exploration using the 70 mm format? That would be able to make a good use of the format's features? That would not be made in 70 mm just because the format is available, without any real benefit? The answer is: we not only lack themes to warrant several 70 mm films, we don't even have a single one that would be able to utilise the features of the format." [7]

The beginning of 70 mm cinema in Czechoslovakia was thus rather difficult. As interviewed cinema managers let on to *Kino* magazine in the mid-1960s, there were often problems in building regular, 35 mm cinemas. On the other hand, they also said that when the production and design works' planning was right, the funds were secured, the building company contracted and both materials and volunteers available, the conversion of a regular cinema into a 70 mm-capable venue was manageable within five weeks at a cost of 300,000 Czechoslovak crowns. There was even proof that this claim was no exaggeration in the form of Brno's Jadran cinema, the second in the country to be adapted for the screening of 70 mm films.

Construction work began on 27 September 1964 and the cinema was ready to operate on 3 November of the same year. [8]

It was only in the final years of the 1960s that the above-average demand for screenings of 70 mm films could be satisfied with versatile projectors manufactured in the country, by Přerov-based company Meopta. Its 70 mm cine-projector Meopton was able to project from regular 35 mm films as well as films twice that width. Some 100 cinemas were gradually equipped with the projector, the majority of which were surprisingly located in northern Moravia. A clue to one of the possible reasons for the imbalance may have been provided in an interview with Pavel Tomešek, the manager of cinema Mír in Krnov: "In Ostrava alone there were four such cinemas, probably to provide suitable entertainment for the miners." [9]

Krnov saw its Mír attraction open as a 70 mm-capable cinema in May 1969. Until its refurbishment in the early 1990s, it showed more than 140 70 mm movies. The construction of the Panorama cinema in Varnsdorf began at the turn of the 1970s and a ceremony to open the cinema was held in 1971. The first motion picture to bring life to its panoramic screen was the American war epic *Battle of the Bulge* (1965). Most of the audience was for the most part comprised of labourers and volunteers who had helped to build the cinema. [10]

The climax and the fall

Roadshow-type presentations, or exclusive screenings in a limited number of selected premiere cinemas for an increased admission fee, really took off in the United States thanks to 70 mm epic movies. The theatre-like structure of the screenings was often preceded by a musical performance and the screening itself would be interrupted by an interval during which the audience was able to stretch their legs, get some refreshments and share their impressions. In Czechoslovakia, something of this kind took place when the West German documentary on sailing the Mediterranean, *Flying Clipper – Under the White Sails* (1962), premiered in the country. Brno's Jadran screened the movie, on and off from May 1965 until January the following year. Another highly popular movie was *Old Shatterhand* (1964), first screened in Czechoslovakia on 14 May 1965 to mark the opening of panoramic cinema Dukla in Bratislava.

Both *Flying Clipper* and *Old Shatterhand* were shot on Superpanorama 70, one of the European counterparts of the American Todd-AO and first marketed in 1955. Todd-AO was named after US TV and theatre producer Michael Todd (1909–1958) who had earlier helped to promote Cinerama, a widescreen system based on projecting images by three 35 mm projectors simultaneously. [11] The Todd-AO system received a considerable boost from the commercial success of the first two movies shot using it, namely the musical *Oklahoma!* (1955) and especially the multiple-Oscar-winning, star-studded adventure comedy *Around the World in 80 Days* (1956).

One of the alternative 70 mm formats in use stateside was Ultra Panavision 70. It gave rise in 1959 to Super Panavision 70, which ushered in anamorphic lenses. European producers were particularly fond of Super Technirama 70. Soviet filmmakers used Sovscope 70 (compatible with Todd-AO), beginning with *Chronicle of Flaming Years* (1961), while their East German colleagues used DEFU 70. Sovscope 70 was one of the first systems where the 70 mm strip was used both by the camera and the projector.

"The screening of 70 mm movies is dependent on whether the technology is properly utilised and stays in line with society-wide cultural-political and economic interests." [12]

In the U Stýblů Palace on Wenceslas Square in Prague the premier cinema Alfa was converted into a 70 mm theatre after the ceiling of the original structure collapsed. It became the first cinema of its kind in Prague, but it was in fact only the tenth in the country (if open air 70 mm cinemas are counted in). Following the complete overhaul, the cinema also obtained a stereo sound system and a curved, stadium-like auditorium. It was one of the best equipped cinemas in the country from its reopening in 1967 until it finally closed down in 1994. [13] The second cinema in the capital capable of screening 70 mm films was Moskva. It now makes up the main auditorium of the Ládví multiplex. In early 1969, the Congress Palace in Prague's Julius Fučík Culture and Recreation Park (today's Výstaviště, or Exhibition Ground) was also adapted for 70 mm screenings. A total of 27 cinemas capable of projecting movies from 70 mm films opened across Czechoslovakia between 1964 and 1969.

Although Alfa ranked among the few cinemas that avoided a drop in attendance due to an extended selection of other leisure-time activities, and managed to sell out most

of its shows before its reconstruction, [14] trouble was not long in arriving. The country's Central Film Distribution (ÚPF) was unable to provide the necessary number of good-quality 70 mm copies [15] and each 70 mm show needed to be promoted as a special and unique occasion due to the higher costs and corresponding admission fees. For example, in 1973 Alfa exclusively premiered the Soviet racing movie *Racers* (*Gonshchiki*, 1972). While a uniform admission fee applied for other formats across all cinemas in any given category, it was higher for 70 mm films. [16]

Alfa for the first time fell into the red in the mid-1970s. In 1979, when the cinema's financial situation became untenable, its management requested a new and more advantageous pricing tariff for both traditional and widescreen films. Other cinemas also battled during the 1970s with the discrepancy between the higher costs of 70 mm screenings and the low attendances drawn by the mostly Soviet epic films. In 1974 there were 67 widescreen cinemas (including open air cinemas), seating a total of 988,000 cinema goers. [17]

The first domestic live action feature film shot on 70 mm was *Vysoká modrá zeď* (*High Blue Wall*, 1973), premiered in the early summer of 1974. In its particular case, it was merely a blow-up of the original 35 mm film. Some idea of the content and message conveyed by the motion picture can be obtained from a letter sent to the Communist Party's mouthpiece *Rudé právo* by a combative reader:

"It is only logical that cinemas in cities such as New York or London will not screen this Czechoslovak movie. Yet it would be so beneficial if our so-called friends in the West, who still deep down hope to achieve one day what failed in 1968, actually watched *Vysoká modrá zeď*. It would make them realise that today's members of our People's Army, side by side with their comrades in arms of the other armies of the Warsaw Pact, are ready to erect, against anyone who would attempt to disturb the peace and serenity, a wall just as solid as their fathers did in 1968." [18]

Another blow-up from the 35 mm format was *Sokolovo* (1974), along with its sequel of sorts *Osvobození Prahy* (*Liberation of Prague*, 1975). A two-part epic was later filmed in coproduction with other Eastern Bloc countries: *Vojáci svobody* (*Soldiers of Freedom*, 1976–77, USSR, Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary), followed later still by the two-part *Boj o Moskvu* (*Battle of Moscow*, 1985,

USSR, Czechoslovakia). It is no surprise then that the vast majority of 70 mm films shown in Czechoslovak cinemas came from the Soviet Union which up until the 1980s was one of only a handful of countries producing several widescreen films a year.

The costly making of 70 mm copies, the considerable risk of damage to the magnetic audio track and higher admission fees eventually caused 70 mm films to fall out of favour. [19] Hollywood studios stopped using the format, save for the odd exception, and James Clavell's *The Last Valley* (1970) was, fittingly, the last 70 mm film for quite some time. The making of 70 mm copies from 35 mm negatives became the prevalent practice.

The demise of the 70 mm format was accelerated by the improving quality of the 35 mm material. The difference between the two formats became indiscernible for the regular cinemagoer. The wider format remained in use for grand scenes with a lot of detail. Once the distribution of 70 mm copies stopped in the 1990s, as the format was no longer produced by distributors, the vast majority of cinemas were converted to purely 35 mm wide-angle screenings. The last motion picture distributed on 70 mm film in Czechoslovakia, at a time when it was on the verge of its own demise, was *Total Recall* (1990) in 1992.

Experts say that the main advantage of the 70 mm format is not the size of the image but its exceptional resolution (only the IMAX system has a larger film frame). In similar fashion to vinyl records offering inimitably pure sound, the qualities of the format are not reserved for connoisseurs only. Even viewers with a less trained eye are very likely to experience a difficult-to-describe "different" sensation when watching a movie projected from a 70 mm strip as opposed to a digital film that generally invokes an artificial feeling while offering lower sharpness and stability. A 70 mm screening not only looks different but also feels different. But it is one thing to offer unique levels of image and audio quality and a completely different thing to make sure such a film is shown under corresponding circumstances. In addition to the right cine-projector, a wide enough screen and a proper sound system, there is a demand for an experienced operator who knows how to handle a widescreen film.

Motivating audiences to stop exclusively relying on their own home resources and to seek true entertainment in a cinema is only one facet of the renewed interest in the

classic film format. The resurgence of the 70 mm reel is also a manifestation of defiance in the face of rapid digitisation. Moreover, it is a way (for filmmakers) to follow up on the departing era of analogue film. However, not even the enthusiasm of cinemaphiles among filmmakers, such as Quentin Tarantino, can let loose a revolution that would paradoxically bring back an outdated technology, unless viewers themselves take a greater interest in the quality of what they watch and where they watch it.

Anyone interested in further information on the 70 mm format is welcome to visit *www.in70mm.com*. It offers an exhaustive overview of 70 mm films, shows and systems.

Notes:

1. Čada, Karel, Hanzlík, Jan, *"Jak řekl Griffith, pokrok nezastavíš…" Iluminace* 19, 2007, issue 4, p. 119.
2. The film was shot using 35 mm and an IMAX camera with a 65 mm film. A copy was transferred onto a 70 mm film (with 5 mm reserved for the audio track) only subsequently, for distribution purposes, in similar fashion to a number of other 70 mm systems. It would therefore be more accurate to refer to a 65/70 mm process.
3. 70 mm Weekend was to take place between 12 and 15 May in Varnsdorf; for more information see:
   https://www.facebook.com/70 mmvarnsdorf/posts/985699458173605
4. Havelka, Jiří: *Film v číslech a událostech. K 20 létům čs. filmu*. Praha: ČSF, 1965, pp. 50–51.
5. A list of all Czech and Slovak 70 mm-capable cinemas, most of which no longer operate, can be found in the following file:
   http://www.krrr.cz/fileadmin/user_upload/2010/ke_stazeni/KRRR__Seznam_70 mm_kin.pdf
6. A response from František Pilát, then the deputy central director of Czechoslovak Film responsible for technology, to a reader's enquiry. *Kino* 23, 1968, issue 4 (22 Feb), p. 10.
7. Same source as above.
8. Humplík, Alois, *Jak se staví 70 mm kino*. Kino 20, 1965, issue 13 (1 July), p. 7.

9. Recollections of Pavel Tomešek, as recorded by Gregor, Jan in *Větší než život*. Respekt 2010, issue 16 (19 April).

10. The cine-projector in Varnsdorf remained switched off for a decade following the privatisation of the property in 1991. Only in 2001 was the derelict cinema acquired for the symbolic price of CZK 1 by collector of film technology Pavel Nejtek, who embarked on an extensive reconstruction. The refurbished Centrum Panorama screened its first film in February 2005.

11. The Soviet answer to Cinerama, introduced in 1952, was Kinopanorama launched four years later and utilising the same principles of recording, postproduction and projection.

12. An excerpt from an answer by František Vomela, the deputy director of Central Film Distribution (ÚPF) reponsible for managing its technology subsidiary Kinotechnika. *Kino* 27, 1972, issue 12 (8 June), p. 12.

13. Alfa used Favorit 70 as its projector; it was capable of working with other film formats, not only 70 mm.

14. Matoušková, Alena, *Ze života premiérového biografu*. *Kino* 22, 1967, issue 6 (23 March), p. 13.

15. For example in 1977 the only motion picture projected from a 70 mm reel was the Soviet *Tabor ukhodit v nebo* (1975).

16. Central Film Distribution (ÚPF) classified cinemas in three categories according to their respective visitor numbers. The first category included cinemas with more than 10,000 viewers per year, with category II spanning cinemas with 3,000 to 10,000 viewers, and category III covering cinemas with less than 3,000 viewers a year.

17. -Sý-, *Pro milion diváků*. Rudé právo 1974, 20 Aug, p. 5.

18. A reader's letter. Škavarda, Břetislav, *Není film jako film*. *Rudé právo* 1974, 19 Nov, p. 5.

19. Films shot in 70 mm were simultaneously distributed in 35 mm copies so there was not much of an incentive for cinema managers to acquire 70 mm technology.