



PRINTER FRIENDLY

[\[Print\]](#) [\[Close\]](#)

Movie-viewing habits change with time and technology

By ***Tim Barker***

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Sunday, Mar. 02 2008

There was a time when seeing a movie was something special.

It's hard to say exactly when it stopped being that way. But somewhere between then and now, a steady succession of technological advancements turned movie watching into just another thing we do.

Harman Moseley, a 30-year veteran of the local movie scene, remembers when it was different. His first year in the business was 1977, the year Star Wars debuted on the big screen. "That picture played for a year at the Creve Coeur Cinema," he said.

Moseley scoffs at the notion that modern blockbusters compete on the same level. "It's a joke," said Moseley, who owns three local theaters, including the Galleria 6 Cinemas. "It's never like that anymore. It's never special."

There's little reason to think it's going to change back. Not when you consider how much has changed since the earlier days of cinema, when the neighborhood movie house represented the best, if not the only, way to see what Hollywood had to offer. A movie was an event.

Today, fans have such a range of options. Cable TV. Video on demand. DVDs. Digital downloads on cell phones. Live streaming on the Internet. Movie theaters have become, in some ways, an afterthought.

There are many folks like Jason Rorie, of Wood River, who seldom ventures into a theater. His own TV and speaker setup, he said, offers a better experience. It's certainly more convenient.

"Why go there when you can watch it at home?" Rorie said. "You can pause the movie and get up and go to the bathroom or whatever you want to do."

Movie fans have been atwitter over the recent news that Toshiba is abandoning its HD DVD format, leaving Sony's Blu-ray as the victor in the fight over the newest generation of movie-disc. The announcement cleared things up for consumers, who no longer need to worry over which DVD player to buy for their high-definition needs.

But on a grander scale, this was but a minor development in the evolution of our society's movie-watching experience. Some observers wonder if — a few years down the road — it will matter at all.

"Blu-ray has won the battle for high definition that you can hold in your hand," said Mike Budny, a deputy field marshal for Best Buy's Geek Squad. "But I would definitely say they haven't won the war quite yet."

That's because this was never a contest with only two combatants. Sony and Toshiba were simply fighting over which DVD format would prevail. Other companies are pushing technologies, including digital downloads and live video

streaming, which could make those discs obsolete.

"There are definitely people who want that to happen," said Natali Del Conte, a senior editor for CNET.com. "Apple wants that to happen. Microsoft is the same way."

Such companies, she said, would prefer to sell customers on the idea of renting or buying movies over the Internet, with digital files sent directly to user's computers or televisions. Apple TV, for example, allows users to download movies directly (prices range from \$2.99 to \$4.99) from the iTunes Store and watch them on a wide screen TV.

Even Netflix, which transformed the movie rental world with its no late-fees, return-by-mail subscription service, is delving into the arena, allowing Internet users to watch movies on their computers.

For some, the promise of freedom from physical media is nirvana. There would be no DVDs to store and organize. Nothing to scratch.

Not everyone, however, is ready to go diskless.

Ray Edwards, a local IT specialist, said he doesn't fear new technology; he just likes it a certain way. That means a tall stack of DVDs in his library.

"I'm just not a big fan of downloads. I want the cover art, the special features, the behind-the-scenes stuff," said Edwards, who works for a St. Louis communications firm. "I'm a big geek that way."

Hollywood poked a little fun at one high-tech gadget — the handheld viewer — during the most recent Academy Awards presentation. Host Jon Stewart pretended to be distracted while watching the 1962 classic *Lawrence of Arabia* on his iPhone, which features a 3 1/2-inch screen.

"To really appreciate it, you have to see it in the wide screen," Stewart said, turning the phone on its side. "Oh those are camels? That's cool."

It's also a problem, suggests Elayne Rapping, professor of American studies at the University of Buffalo. Rapping, a pop-culture expert, argues that the ongoing technological rush is costing our society one of its art forms. Movies, she said, were meant to be watched on very large screens in very dark rooms.

"It's not the same thing watching *Blade Runner* or *Brokeback Mountain* on a computer screen, much less an iPod," Rapping said. "It diminishes the experience of the art by making it smaller and smaller."

While tiny screens might not be able to offer the same cinematic experience, they do offer convenience and opportunity, said Stephanie Grisafi, Consumer Desktop Platform marketing manager for Intel.

You can't, after all, drag a 500-seat theater to the beach, the subway or your airplane seat.

"It depends on what you want to do and where you want to enjoy that content. And what type of viewing experience you want," Grisafi said.

This raises another question: Will there be room in the viewing equation for movie theaters. Can they compete?

While theaters are under pressure from numerous fronts, industry observers generally agree that there will always be a place for them and the communal experience they offer.

Some movies simply must be seen at the theater to appreciate them, said Janet Murray, director of graduate studies for Georgia Tech's digital media program. She points to the big summer blockbusters and movies with a strong sense of social significance, films such as "*Star Wars*" and "*Glory*," the 1989 epic about the experiences of black soldiers in the U.S. civil war.

"When the lights come up, there is a moment of mutual recognition — we all just saw that together," Murray said. "It's as if you shared a dream."

Movie theaters, however, must find ways to offer an experience that differs significantly from the home-viewing option. And unique experience needs to be more than just the freedom to hit the pause button.

Moseley, the St. Louis theater veteran, sees hope in new 3D technology and the gradual switch from film to digital projectors.

Theaters also need to improve their enticements, he said.

"It can't stay the way it was. You've got to have food. You've got to have alcohol," Moseley said. "You've got to be different."

tbarker@post-dispatch.com | 314-340-8350

If you enjoy reading about interesting news, you might like the 3 O'Clock Stir from STLtoday.com. Sign up and you'll receive an email with unique stories of the day, every Monday-Friday, at no charge. Sign up at <http://newsletters.stltoday.com>
