

Assessment of the diploma work „The effects of widescreen on the aesthetic of the film image“ written by Lourenco Sassetti Correa

The aim of this work was to explore how far the implementation of wide screen technology affected the way films are made not only technologically but aesthetically speaking. The goal is to understand how each of the different practices that make up the art of filmmaking – the director’s staging, the cinematographer’s photography, the editor’s montage – are influenced by the image dimensions.

The work starts with consequent general survey of the motion picture history, basic inventions, patents and development of the first technical standards. Worth mentioning is the widescreen technology introduced already in 1927 by Abel Gance’s „Napoleon“ in a Polyvision format with three cameras and projectors as an ancestor of today’s Cinerama. Analyzing the socio-cultural and economic climate in the United States during the 50’s we can understand how widescreen finally saw the light of day as a necessary measure for the film industry to take. The first step was essentially an economic one to save film industry, more precisely the movie business. What did empty theatre palaces out was the important change of habits of the population after the World War II. People bought houses and cars and moved out of the city into the suburbs, further from the theatres. Above all, came the domestic appliance par excellence – the television.

The Cinerama experiments not only made it clear that industry needed a comparable system if it was to draw audiences back to theatres. In 1952 Twentieth Century Fox released CinemaScope with final projected aspect ratio 2.66:1, joined by MGM, United Artists, Disney and Columbia. Only Paramount resisted and developed its own widescreen format Vista Vision.

Further text discusses technical and aesthetic problems of the CinemaScope system and quotation that the progress depends upon technique. As an example is used the first CinemaScope film „The Robe“ released in 1953. Dealt with are questions related to so called clothesline staging, problems with close up shots – mumps, limited depth of field, lens aberrations. The large horizontal dimension of the screen gives more space to stage the characters across the same frame according to their relationship in the story. The simple positioning of the actors and the furniture tells the whole story of the scene in one image. It gives different weight to different visual elements across the frame. Widescreen proved a new way to look at the same stage, the space of the scene did not change, only the eye looking at it. As time passes and cinema ages, with many different formats available, one must recognize the fact that the size of the image itself plays a role in the storytelling and so becomes a crucial part of the „mise-en-scène“ and the storytelling.

From the point of view of the cinematographer, looking at paintings from different centuries and artistic movements, we can see that painters make use of similar proportions and composition to that of widescreen. The spectator’s eye needs to be guided and it is the cinematographer’s role to ensure that we know where to look. These statements are

documented with practical examples. The shape of the widescreen requires an approach to composition wherein the horizontal dimension of the frame is inherently predominant. The use of close-up shots in widescreen format is discussed in separate chapter followed by chapter dedicated to portraying characters and editing. Both introduce again practical examples and compare widescreen format with classic one.

The last chapter deals with the recently used formats and the possibilities of the future digital age providing filmmakers with the ability to mix aspect ratios and create a quite uniquely modern aesthetic. In 2016, cinema and television aesthetics are closer than ever. The main reason is the arrival of digital technology for both acquisition and exhibition for cinema and broadcasting for television. Television is now essentially a widescreen medium. The chiefly economic push towards unification of screen shapes pushes the medium of film into an aesthetic corner. The work concludes with the statement „it is the industry’s economic strategies – what made it into an industry in the first place – that define the shape of the future of moving images; it is the business that defines the shape of the screen.“

Vast collected analysis, information, examples make this work an important study material that can be recommended to everybody who is interested in this topic. I suggest the grading A.

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