

# IS FILM DEAD?

By Wyndham Wise

**IS** film dead? "Ridiculous. It's laughable," says Colette Scott, worldwide product manager for Kodak Canada. "There is no comparison between film and digital technology." Yet, for the first time since the rise of the talkies in the late 1920s, the basic technology of movies is changing. To some, the rise of digital filmmaking foretells, like the Internet of only a few years ago, a new technological utopia, in which movies will be easier to make, distribute and preserve. For others, the supposedly imminent obsolescence of film entails nothing less than the death of a cherished art form. For both sides, last year's symbolic moment came at a press conference trumpeting digital cinema, where executives, in a theatrical gesture, tossed some film cans into a trash can.

Theatrics aside, "filmless" filmmaking is in the foreseeable future. The guru of digital filmmaking, *Star Wars* creator George Lucas, is wrapping the shoot for *Star Wars Episode II* in Australia. *Episode I* was probably the first Hollywood blockbuster to feature digital effects in virtually every single frame, some multi-layered to staggering effect. Lucas's producer on *Episode II*, Rick McCallum, is quoted on the official *Star Wars* Web site as a strong proponent of digital cinema. "*Episode II* is but the first step in a cinematic revolution. Film has exhausted all of its possibilities. They can develop better and better stocks, but in the end, it's dealing with an archaic process that has been around for 100 years. Digital projection, exhibition and acquisition of images is just beginning. In the next few years there are going to be cameras that can capture images that are twice the resolution of film, but much more importantly, allow us, the filmmakers, to distribute films much cheaper."

So if the cutting edge is digital, where does this leave the "archaic process" of actually loading film in a camera? Actually, pretty much where it was before digital came along. Like Mark Twain, traditional cinema has been declared prematurely dead. It has staunch supporters throughout the industry, most notably from the people who handle it for a living — the cinematographers. "Film Is Dead! was a banner headline on page one of *Daily Variety* in 1956 when videotape was invented," says Victor Kemper, president of the American Society of Cinematographers. "Other predictions that went awry were as follows: Television will kill radio; television will kill the cinema; television will create a theatre in every house with benefits for children and cultural education. The last prediction was made in 1930 by David Sarnoff, the founder of

## STAR WARS EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE

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NBC and RCA, who apparently didn't envision *Temptation Island*. The real revolution is occurring in digital post-production. The truth is that film is a superior image-capture medium that provides a significantly different palette with more resolution and a broader range of contrast and colours."

Kemper's sentiments are supported by a wide range of cinematographers that Kodak has been rounding up to aggressively counter the digital revolution and promote film as the superior image-capturing product. "The best digital camera is worse than our least expensive film technology," claims Scott, and she has her supporters in the industry. Janusz Kaminski, director of photography on *Saving Private Ryan* and *Schindler's List* says, "My concern about digital technology is that it will diminish the importance of images in storytelling. There is more of a tendency to stop and talk when we are shooting film. My experience with video is that there is a roll tape ritual that is much less thoughtful. There is no question that film looks better today, because it is more organic." Lance Acord, director of photography on *Being John Malkovich*, concurs. "Whatever the advances in digital video, the reality is that you are working with a different set of tools, and the images you create look dif-

ferent because of that. That's not to say it's good or bad, or that one is better than the other. But there's an element of magic in the photographic process, and because of that, film will always be more interesting to me."

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But film has its high-profile detractors as well. Sidney Lumet, the director of *The Fugitive Kind* (1960) and *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), has recently returned to television where he got his career start in the 1950s at CBS. He is now directing *100 Centre Street*, a courtroom drama starring Alan Arkin, for the A&E network. In a recent *Toronto Star* piece about the making of the series, the Hollywood veteran had some interesting things to say about this film vs. digital debate. The series is being shot in the latest HDTV (high-definition television) technology, which essentially means slipping a video cassette into a very expensive high-definition camera. "Film colour is primarily beautiful," Lumet is quoted as saying, "rather than true. The blue of a sky that you see on film, you've never seen in real life. It doesn't exist. For anything where you want total realism, this camera is irreplaceable. If I had it when I was doing *Dog Day Afternoon*, I would have fought with Warner Bros. to let me do the picture this way."

Capturing imagery with a 24-frames-per-second, progressive-scan, high-definition camera has been lauded as one of the most exciting technical innovations to hit the motion picture industry since its pioneering days. Even though the technology was largely sight-unseen until recently, the mere idea of 24p (progressive) high-definition photography has stirred Hollywood into a frenzy of heated debate about the future of filmmaking. Sony has come on the market with what it calls the

HDW-F900 camera, a revolutionary 24p HDCAM (high-definition camera) whose 24-frames-per-second capture rate and 180-degree shuttering are similar to those of a motion picture camera. The resultant look is closer to film quality than digital video has ever been, and 24p is becoming an attractive alternative for filmmakers, especially those working in television. By dispensing with film stock, 24p is more efficient, and its defenders believe its quality to be at least superior to 16mm.

*100 Centre Street* is not the only series to be shot by HDTV cameras. In Canada, the syndicated sci-fi series Gene Roddenberry's *Earth: Final Conflict* is one of the first productions to put the new 24p HD through its paces. Tom Duram, a cinematographer, says, "It's a pretty good format, and in my humble opinion it's ready for use in broadcast television. I don't think it's there for theatrical release yet, but Lucas may soon prove me wrong. But certainly for broadcast television, this is a great format and has far more resolution than required." Duram's partner, David Moxness, adds, "The look is not exactly the same as film, but it shouldn't be. After all HD is a different medium. I don't think it's really fair to directly compare it to 35mm because they are two completely different mediums."

Indeed, they are two different mediums, and a more balanced approach to the film vs. digital debate would suggest a seamless blending of the two. Film stock, with its superior clarity and focus, will, in all likelihood, be around for at least another 100 years, but the huge advantage of digital technology is in post-production and distribution. Pierre Gill, director of photography on Christian Duguay's *The Art of War*, predicts that, "Soon you'll be able to affordably scan entire films into the computer. I believe that at that point, the film negative will be even more important than it is now. We will have the quality and softness of film with the rapidity and flexibility of the digital world."

George Lucas has experimented with revolutionary ways of distributing the second *Star Wars* trilogy. Not only is it the most expensive and advanced digital filmmaking to date, Lucas beamed *Episode I* from a satellite directly into selected theatres. So much for that mythical film can. In the future, movies will be stored in digital file servers for on-demand delivery, piped directly into homes anywhere in the world, wirelessly. We will watch movies on large hybrid, liquid-screen computer-television displays (remember, they appeared in François Truffaut's 1964 futuristic *Fahrenheit 451?*) with portable viewing on small pop-up screens. Since the home delivery system will be digital, image quality will be resolution independent. In the future world, even HDTV will be history. Your home monitor will be able to display films in their original aspect ratios at any resolution.

Passionate advocates of film have long differentiated film from video on the basis of a more subtle picture portrayal being the very essence of effective storytelling. On the other hand, Sony claims that today, digital HDTV can rank with the best 35mm motion picture film. Who's right? Robert McLachlan, director of photography on *The Commish* and *MacGyver*, shall have the last word for now. "Years ago, when Adobe Illustrator first came out, we were all being told that now anyone could be a graphic designer and commercial illustrator. But it turned out that if you couldn't design a good layout without a computer, you sure weren't going to be able to do one with a computer. The same rule applies any time a new tool or technology comes along. Technology doesn't make art. Artists make art." ●

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