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Abstract

With the growing popularity of television in the 1950s, theaters experienced a significant drop in audience attendance. Film studios explored new ways to attract audiences back to the theater by making film a more totalizing experience through new technologies such as wide screen and Technicolor. My paper gives a brief analysis of how these new technologies were received by film critics for the theatrical release of *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) and how Warner Brothers incorporated these new technologies into promotional material of the film.

Keywords

Technicolor, *The Searchers*

The Search for Spectators: VistaVision and Technicolor in The Searchers

by Ruurd Dykstra

In order to compete with the rising popularity of television, major Hollywood studios lured spectators into the theatres with technical innovations that television did not have - wider screens and brighter colors. Studios spent a small fortune developing new photographic techniques in order to compete with one another; this boom in photographic research resulted in a variety of different film formats being marketed by each studio, each claiming to be superior to the other. Filmmakers and critics alike valued these new formats because they allowed for a bright, clean, crisp image to be projected on a much larger screen - it enhanced the theatre going experience and brought about a re-appreciation for film's visual aesthetics. Although critics argued that these new technologies were appealing to film audiences, they also noted that widescreen and Technicolor were not enough to make up for a bad acting and a mediocre film plot.

CinemaScope, a format developed by 20th Century-Fox, was a filming and projection process that created a widescreen image through the use of special anamorphic lenses. While many studios experimented with their own formats, by 1953 every major studio, with the exception of Paramount, was licensed to use CinemaScope (Slide 40). VistaVision was Paramount's answer to the widescreen CinemaScope system. This process used a camera through which 35mm film traveled horizontally, rather than vertically. This resulted in an image with an exposure area three times larger than that of a normal 35mm negative, creating in a larger depth of field, and a clean, crisp image. Unlike the complicated CinemaScope system that utilized special lenses and projectors, VistaVision was reprinted on regular 35mm film, which could be screened in any commercial theatre projector (Slide 22).

John Ford used the VistaVision format in his 1956 film The Searchers. Bosley Crowther, a critic for the New York Times and Holl, a critic for Variety agree that VistaVision is a great format for capturing the nuances of life on the frontier, and complements Ford's vast scenic shots in Monument Valley. Holl notes "Winston C. Hoch's [Ford's cinematographer] VistaVision lensing and other technical aspects are of top-notch quality [...] the VistaVision-Technicolor photographic excursion through the southwest - presenting in bold and colorful outline the arid country and area of buttes and giant rock formation- is eye filling and impressive" (Holl). Ford creates images that are so detailed that they seem to be painted on screen. The film is shot with long takes, which are framed in either long or medium shots, allowing for action to unfold within the frame rather than through editing. These are images that could not be reproduced on television; large, colorful landscapes are far more impressive in Technicolor than they are in black and white.

VistaVision allows for a generous amount of depth of field, which Ford uses to his benefit. When Reverend Clayton and Ethan Edwards are about to leave the cabin to search for Lars Jorgenson's stolen cattle, there is a scene where Ethan gently kisses Martha Edwards on the forehead while Clayton, in the foreground of the frame, drinks his coffee unaware of the events happening behind him. VistaVision gives a rich and detailed account of action within the frame, allowing for everything in the foreground to the background to be crisp and clean.

There were some unanticipated downsides to VistaVision. Crowther notes the "director has permitted too many outdoor scenes in the obviously synthetic surroundings of the sound stage. Mr. Ford's scenic stuff, in color and VistaVision, in the expanse of Monument valley that he loves, has his customary beauty and grandeur, but some of those campfire scenes could have been shot in a sporting-goods store window." Since the resolution of VistaVision is too high, it exposes the phoniness of the

out door scenes shot on an indoor sound stage. The scenes shot on a sound stage are not like Mr. Ford, and they are not like most of the picture, “which is as scratchy as genuine cockleburrs” (Crowther).

VistaVision and Technicolor are terms that reappear throughout both the reviews and the promotional material for The Searchers. Within the first twenty seconds of the theatrical trailer, the title of the film appears in bold, red letters. Underneath the title, in a distinct font, is written, “Color by TECHNICOLOR.” This text is superimposed on a scene in which star John Wayne is riding his horse in full gallop through a hostile Native encampment. The trailer also displays the wide range of color that is available in a Technicolor film. In one clip there is the “sand-choked desert of Arizona” with its golden brown dust, in the next shot there is the “snow-swept plains of Canada” with its large herds of buffalos and bright white snow. The very last image the viewer sees in the trailer is a title card; on it is imprinted in big, bold bright yellow letters: “Directed by JOHN FORD in the BREATHTAKING PANORAMA OF VISTAVISION” with the words John Ford and VistaVision being the same size. The trailer also includes some of the most visually compelling shots in the film, which are enhanced by VistaVision. When Scar’s men surround Reverend Clayton and his posse, the scene is shot with an extreme long shot, with half a dozen horses and their riders in sharp focus in the foreground along with nine horses and their riders in the background in sharp focus, the entire screen is engulfed with Monument Valley. The trailer is not only promoting the film, but showing off the VistaVision and Technicolor technologies.

Aside from traditional one sheets and theatrical trailers, Warner Brothers used television to market The Searchers. The film was marketed during Warner Bros. Presents: Behind the Camera, a television shot that would play in middle or the end of a televised Warner Brothers film. The show set up in a repetitive, serial style where stylish host Gig Young interviews film stars, visits exotic shooting locations and explores behind the scenes. The four part series featuring The Searchers showcases the very first “diary of a motion picture,” which featured clips from a short documentary which John Ford had commissioned during the film’s production in Monument Valley.

Since black and white television is unable to reproduce panoramic shots offered by VistaVision and the bright colors offered by Technicolor, the Behind the Camera uses star-power to attract television audiences. In the first segment, Young explains that you can point out a rising star in the film industry by the amount of double page spreads he or she gets in a fan magazine and how many requests the studio receives for 8x10 inch promotional glossy photos. Young assures the viewer the current guest and star of The Searchers, Jeffery Hunter is one of these rising stars. The behind the scenes footage and exclusive interviews makes the viewer feel privileged because they are given access to such confidential material.

At the end of the second segment, host Gig Young states “it’s an exciting story, a tender story, but when you see the C.B. Whitney picture The Searchers in your local theatre in VistaVision and Technicolor, I think you’ll agree that it’s also a beautiful picture.” Young describes the footage from the film because how the scenes are rendered on the television screen does not do the film justice, only if seen it at a local theatre in Technicolor and VistaVision, will the viewer realize how stunning it is.

The Searchers is also a homecoming for Ford, a film in which he re-explores the genre with which he is most associated. The film was Ford’s first western after a six-year hiatus from the genre and Crowther notes that he is glad that Mr. Ford “hasn’t lost his touch.” The only downfall he notes in the film is that it is exhausting to watch, “episode is piled up upon episode, climax upon climax and corpse upon corpse until the whole thing appears to a taken a couple of turns around the course.” Holl notes that though the John Ford directorial stamp is unmistakable, “it’s not sufficient however, to

overcome many of the weaknesses of the story.” Holl finds The Searchers somewhat disappointing because the film was too long and repetitious. He complains that there are some subtleties in the simple storyline that are not adequately explained. Possibly the subtle affection between Ethan and his sister-law? The tension between Ethan and his brother? For Holl these are the pitfalls of the film, while for some critics these are small nuances that make the film more intricate and interesting.

Both critics agree that the VistaVision format is fitting companion to any John Ford feature, but the format also points out the flaws in the film. Ford is associated with the western as a genre and when Crowther states that the scenes are “not like Mr. Ford” he is stating that the shots do not seem genuine. Such a scene does not belong in the west that Ford has created, but instead on the set of Rawhide. Maybe VistaVision and these new technologies expose the western for what it is: not a historical truth, but a film genre.

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