

It's Not the Size (of the Screen) that Matters: IMAX, LIEMAX and the "Meaning" of a Brand

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In September 2008, at a meeting of the Giant Screen Cinema Association in New York, Richard Gelfond, co-CEO of IMAX, told the assembled audience, largely made up of IMAX technicians, filmmakers and theater operators, that "we don't think of [IMAX] as the giant screen" (qtd. in Anon., "Gelfond: IMAX," 2008). This may seem initially puzzling, as for many moviegoers, the giant screen is *precisely* what is associated with the IMAX brand – an assumption perhaps not entirely without justification as the brand name IMAX is itself, of course, a conflation of "maximum image." With this pronouncement, however, Gelfond was articulating a new corporate understanding of what, from the company's perspective, the brand truly represents. IMAX, he argued, instead encompasses a range of technological and phenomenological criteria that all contribute to the "IMAX Experience," such as the positioning of the seats, the quality of the projection and the sound, and the arrangement of the speakers. IMAX, in other words, represents far more than simply the physical size of the screen.

This pronouncement was not insignificant, as it coincided with IMAX Corp.'s just-announced ambitious venture that would take the company further beyond the museums and science centers, which for years had represented the company's basis of operations, and into the lucrative, theme park simulacra of multiplex theaters. Implicit in Gelfond's statement, if not explicit, is that not only should IMAX not be considered solely in terms of screen size, but rather that screen size was effectively becoming only an incidental factor in what the company understood as the "IMAX Experience." The key issue in the company's planned colonization of more mainstream film exhibition venues, and what apparently irked many of the traditional IMAX theater operators in attendance, was that these new "retro-fitted" screens were designed to be, on average, roughly one third of the size of a standard IMAX screen. The implications of the company's new corporate trajectory, and the concerns of both the exhibitors and the moviegoing audiences, would play out during the coming months through various discursive channels related to the affairs of the film industry. The controversy, sparked in part by various high profile blog posts by influential members of the film industry,

manifested over the subsequent months in the blogosphere and in both the trade and popular presses. The competing interests of the industry and the public were made evident, and conflicting interpretations of the “meaning” of both IMAX and theatrical film exhibition as a whole were put forward.

This article is concerned with the public backlash that emerged in response to IMAX’s widespread campaign to expand into multiplex theaters, launched in 2008. This backlash manifested primarily discursively, with the most pronounced critiques arising from an admittedly nebulous mass consisting of disgruntled viewers relatively attuned to the specifics of screening environments, industry insiders and cinephiles – particularly (and notably) IMAX loyalists, drawn to the technical specifics of film exhibition. In other words, this informal alliance was composed of relatively niche audience groupings and was by no means representative of a cross-section of the North American moviegoing public. Ultimately, while initial evidence seems to indicate a resoundingly positive effect on box office numbers, the lasting consequences of both IMAX’s campaign and the resulting backlash are more likely to be felt in the long-term effects related to corporate identity and consumer/brand association than in the specifics of box-office finances. The consistent bone of contention running throughout the myriad of complaints levied against IMAX’s theatrical campaign is the company’s refusal to rebrand or differentiate between its traditional, massive-screen presentations, and its substantially reduced, retrofitted screens introduced in multiplex theaters. Central to this debate are competing and divergent notions of the concept of immersion, and how this term is both strategically deployed by IMAX and is ultimately understood by audiences. The affair serves as evidence of a considerable gulf and a fundamental disconnect between popular understandings of the “meaning” of a particular brand and technology – IMAX – and the corporate rhetoric of that same company’s understanding and promotion of itself.

Digitization and Reconfigurations of “Materiality”

What is perhaps a central irony of the film industry in this current age of digitization of film production, distribution and exhibition – when cinema itself is becoming increasingly less “material” – is that this process is curiously accompanied by a concurrent shift towards an increased focus on the materiality of exhibition environments themselves. Of course, as David Rodowick reminds us, the transition to digital has not meant that

cinema has somehow become entirely immaterial. Rather, simply the conception of materiality itself has changed (Rodowick, 2007: 9). In the case of distribution, exhibition and projection, the scale and nature of cinema's materiality is changing, but not its central existence. Cumbersome reels of 35mm film are reduced to small hard drives, and analog projectors are replaced with digital projectors. The media of projection remain material and present, but simply in reduced physical formats. However, while the technologies of projection take on a less visible and material presence, the broader apparatuses of exhibition become increasingly prominent. Three-D glasses, restructuring of seating arrangements, and of course changes in the physical size, dimensions and qualities of movie screens, are all evidence of this trend. Furthermore, whereas moviegoing audiences – notwithstanding the occasional disgruntled purist – have demonstrated little resistance (or arguably even knowledge of) the now decade-long transition away from analog celluloid projection, they have proven remarkably and vocally invested in the material restructuring of theatrical environments. The digitization and changing materiality of film exhibition, while of great interest to theorists and critics of cinema, has transitioned more or less seamlessly and unremarkably for the majority of movie theater patrons. Changes in the materiality and physical space of theaters, and specifically screens themselves, have on the other hand elicited comparatively far more vocal reactions.

One such reaction, and ultimately the one that initiated the public backlash towards IMAX, began in May 2009, when comedian Aziz Ansari paid an additional five dollars on top of a standard ticket price to see *Star Trek* (2009) at an AMC theater in Burbank, California. The theater was out of his way, but this inconvenience coupled with the inflated ticket price “felt worth it at the time” for the promise of the IMAX experience (Ansari, 2009). The presentation, however, was a far cry from what he expected. Furious after discovering the screen to be only slightly larger than the other standard screens in the megaplex, and falling well short of the typical 70 foot (and larger) screens viewers have come to expect from IMAX, Ansari confronted management at the theater's guest services, demanding a refund – not for the full price of the ticket, but rather for the five dollar premium paid for the “IMAX Experience.” In response, he was initially denied his refund and told that the screening was in fact IMAX “quality picture and sound” (Ibid.). From the standpoint of the exhibitors, the actual size of the screen, it appears, was not in fact what defined an IMAX presentation.

Effectively, what irked Ansari was the considerable disconnect between his expectations, and assumedly that of a large segment of the moviegoing public as a whole, concerning the collective understanding of what an IMAX presentation consists – first and foremost, a gigantic screen – and the corporate understanding and rhetorical promotion of that same experience, held by the IMAX company itself. He immediately blogged about his experience, accusing IMAX of “whoring out their brand name and trying to trick people,” and urging his readers to “REBLOG THE FUCK OUT OF THIS” (Ibid.). The blog, in digital parlance, went viral, and both the mainstream and trade press quickly picked up on the issue. *Variety* described the ensuing controversy as a “rare moviegoers’ revolt” (Cohen, 2009: 3), and the *Washington Times* attributed Ansari’s post as the “spark” that ignited the “uproar” (Bunch, 2009: B01).

While there are in fact a number of significant differences between the screening environments in IMAX’s traditional theaters and those in its new retrofit theaters in multiplexes, the crux of the issue for Ansari and most other vocal critics lies with the physical size of the screen itself – considered by many to be the defining feature of the IMAX brand. Traditional IMAX theaters, those typically found in institutional settings with purpose-built theaters and employing the original IMAX GT projectors, are on average roughly 60x80 feet large. The largest of these theaters, found in Sydney, Australia is an enormous 96 x 117 feet, or 11,350 square feet large. By comparison, IMAX’s recent wave of multiplex screens, which employ digital projectors, rather than IMAX’s traditional 70mm format, average approximately 1,184 square feet, which is less than 40% of the average GT screen, representing 1/10th the size of the largest screen (Anon., “The Shrinking,” 2010). For audiences unfamiliar with traditional IMAX presentations, these retrofit theaters would appear as noticeably larger, if only modestly so, versions of the other screens in any given multiplex. For audiences familiar with IMAX presentations, however, these screens clearly would fall well short of the expectations that those traditional screens established.

Perhaps the most tangible effect of the attention brought to the issue by Ansari’s post was the subsequent introduction of the “Destroy Fake IMAX” blog, which quickly became known as LIEMAX. The blog, established by James Peach, was inspired by Ansari’s rant and went online within hours his original post. With a simple blog format on Blogspot, with an accompanying component on Google Maps, LIEMAX immediately took it upon itself to act as a user-driven source for information about IMAX screening environments across the United States. Theater patrons were

encouraged to use the site to report on the authenticity of IMAX screens across the country (as well as a few international locations in Canada, Brazil, the United Kingdom and Australia), based on such factors as screen size and aspect ratio. The specific technical knowledge of contributors to the site varied considerably, and in terms of detailed understanding of IMAX specifications, Peach himself candidly admitted to "not understanding what the hell [he is] talking about!" (Peach, 2009). Sound system calibrations, perhaps tellingly, did not seem to be a factor of assessment. Green flags on the map represented what were deemed authentic IMAX theaters, whereas red flags represented a "fake" theater. In less than two months of operation, the site had 350,000 views and over 200 flaggings of IMAX theaters, both "authentic" and "fake."

Peach was forced to retire from the blog in August 2009 for personal reasons, but by that point the site had been visited hundreds of thousands of times, and had been featured in a multitude of press reports pertaining to the IMAX backlash. In the site's final posting, Peach directs attention to the *LF Examiner*, the first and most notable independent journal dedicated to the large format motion picture industry. The publication's editor, James Hyder, in fact has been the touchstone figure to whom Ansari, LIEMAX, and seemingly all other sources invested in the IMAX situation defer. A veteran of the large format industry, Hyder worked for many years as the manager of the IMAX theater at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, and even assisted in the production of various IMAX films. He founded the *LF Examiner*, then called *MaxImage!*, in 1997, and it has been a leading source of information concerning the ongoing developments, technological innovations and corporate decision-making pertaining to the large format industry. The articles and features that the publication releases are the most commonly referenced sources about IMAX's activities, particularly with respect to technological specifications. Prior to any of the discursive online controversy, the *LF Examiner* was reporting on the issue from the moment IMAX began its program. Yet, the publication clearly serves a rather niche market: those interested in the day-to-day affairs of the large format film industry. Prior to Ansari's post and the resulting interest drawn to the IMAX issue, the *Examiner* typically received on average 8,000 hits on its website per day. The day following Ansari's post, which directed viewers to the *Examiner* web site, that figure jumped to 500,000 hits, and peaked a few days later, after the mainstream media picked up the story, at 2.2 million hits (Hyder, "IMAX Reacts," 2009).

That same month, May 2009, none other than Roger Ebert weighed in on the issue on his blog for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Ebert, aside from his usual contributions as a movie reviewer, in recent years has become a rather outspoken critic of technological issues facing the film industry. He has been a consistent opponent of 3-D filmmaking and projection; he has become an ongoing champion of the so-far largely neglected MaxiVision process, and with this blog post in 2009, he joined the chorus in opposition to IMAX's new multiplex venture. Earlier, in March 2009, Ebert had posted to his site a letter he received from a disgruntled filmmaker, Mike Williamson, about a similarly dissatisfied trip to an IMAX megaplex screening (interestingly, at the same Burbank theater that Ansari attended). With liberal usage of capitalization, Williamson accused the IMAX Corporation of "FALSE ADVERTISING," arguing that the film presentation he attended was nothing short of "PATHETHIC by IMAX standards" (Williamson, 2009). Williamson, a filmmaker by trade, is clearly more versed in technological details and nuances than the average filmgoer. Furthermore, a single letter penned by one disgruntled audience member – and one particularly attuned to issues of technological performance at that – is, on its own, admittedly not necessarily representative of a broad-based populist moviegoing revolt. However, Ebert remains the most read and popular film critic in North America, and as such, a post such as this on his blog would have been extremely widely read by active moviegoers. In fact, Williamson's letter prompted numerous follow-up responses that echoed and embellished upon his complaints, many of which Ebert subsequently published on his blog. One author drew a brand name parallel: "A VW Bug with a Rolls Royce grill, is still a VW Bug. It is not a Rolls Royce" (Melsted, 2009). Perhaps most telling is a letter from an IMAX projectionist worried about the direction the company is taking. The anonymous author claims IMAX's new theaters are essentially "killing what made IMAX special in the first place" (Anon., "Projectionist," 2009).

What stands out among this deluge of dissatisfaction is that the authors all have such concern for the company. These are dedicated IMAX traditionalists and their fervor is motivated as much by a sense that the company is doing itself a disservice through brand dilution as it is by simple anger over being overcharged. It also bears mentioning that much of the criticism raised throughout these letters displays a rather acute knowledge of film technology. While Ansari and LIEMAX were primarily concerned with the size of the screen alone, the authors of these letters, some of whom are of course filmmakers and projectionists, are more

attuned to the accompanying elements that they associate with IMAX presentations. Williamson, for instance, while clearly miffed at the substantially smaller screen size, crucially identifies the projectors as digital, rather than the "beautiful, crisp 70mm" of standard IMAX films. Rather succinctly, he summarizes his arguments: "If it's NOT 70mm film. If it's NOT a giant square screen. If it's NOT seating which puts you in the center of the action...Then it's NOT IMAX" (Williamson, 2009). Much in the same vein, another author proclaims: "A double projector digital projection on a screen that is not 3:4 and is not many times larger than a regular screen, is NOT, I repeat NOT IMAX" (Melsted, 2009).

The "Meaning" of the Brand

The consistently expressed sentiment that "it's not IMAX" raises an important question regarding who ultimately determines what a brand "means." From the perspective of IMAX, the company should theoretically be able to manufacture greeting cards if it wanted to, and still proclaim it an IMAX Experience®. Yet, much like other popular brands that strike an intimate chord with consumers, dedicated patrons of IMAX films feel they have a personal stake in what the brand ultimately represents. These new retrofit IMAX theaters violate deeply held conceptions of brand identity. For many viewers upset with the new IMAX presentations, arguably even the majority, the issue is merely one of false advertising and a sense of being overcharged for a presentation that is essentially a marginal improvement over a standard theatrical exhibition. But for others, particularly those patrons devoted to the IMAX brand, the presentations associated with these new theaters tap into something bigger: a sense of betrayal. Since the publication in 2000 of Naomi Klein's *No Logo*, consumers and critics alike have been attuned to what the advertising industry has known for a long time: that the most successful brands are those which embody a "lifestyle" rather than a specific product. Consumers tend to align themselves closely with brands that "speak to them" and, as such, form an emotional bond that goes beyond the specific material properties of the product. For the frustrated niche audience members loyal to IMAX and to the unique cinematic experience it offers, this recent campaign represents more than a mere issue of overcharging a few dollars. Instead, it represents a much more profound and personally felt violation and betrayal of what the brand supposedly represents.

Celia Lury (2004) and Adam Ardvison (2006) have demonstrated the centrality of branding to contemporary corporate practice. Lury explains

how the contemporary notion of branding “marks a new stage in the mediated relationship between producer and consumer” (2004: 18). Historically, of course, brands were created to forge a sense of consumer trust regarding the origin and consistency of a certain product or service. While aspects of this notion certainly persist today in branding practice, Lury’s argument is that contemporary brands perform a more complicated function, acting as an “abstract machine” for the constant reconfiguration of production. No longer tied to the fixed identity of a particular product or service, the brand instead mediates between the consumer and constantly evolving corporate practices. Brands are developed in a flexible manner so as to expand and subsume innovations, so long as they fit within the brand’s core identity (2004: 26-27). Turning the focus more squarely on Hollywood, Paul Grainge has documented the strategic importance that branding has played in the motion picture industry as it navigates changes in the commercial entertainment sector. His observations on Dolby sound technology, in particular, are instructive. While branding in the film industry is perhaps most associated with the major production studios, Grainge reminds us of the importance the practice has played with technical companies, such as Dolby, to “shape, influence and cue the encounter with film” (2008: 90).

IMAX’s evolution in terms of branding practice is entirely consistent with both Lury’s and Grainge’s observations. Following Lury and her characterization of contemporary branding trends, the company’s multiplex campaign represents a rather considerable realignment of brand identity. The IMAX brand name is increasingly becoming less associated with a particular product than it is with a range of commercial applications, services and products, through what is often referred to as brand extension (Lury, 2004: 27). Grainge singles out the years 1995-2003 as particularly noteworthy for branding practice in the film industry, a period in which the concept essentially became “an organizing principle – what some would call an orthodoxy” (2008: 15). Tellingly, IMAX’s current activities can in many respects be seen as a culmination of changes resulting from its corporate restructuring during this very period that Grainge identifies. In 1994, two investment bankers, Richard Gelfond and Brad Wechsler, bought the company with ambitious goals of expansion (Kirby, 2009: 26). Since that point, the IMAX company has been steadily reorienting its priorities and the scope of its activities in a bid to break out of the niche market it has largely occupied since its inception in 1967 and instead into the more lucrative mainstream exhibition market. A major turning point in the company’s realignment

was the introduction in 2002 of a proprietary digital remastering technology, known as DMR, which allows for the conversion of popular, non-IMAX films into the format for projection on IMAX screens. This marked a major venture for the company into the commercial, entertainment sector of the film industry, and away from its roots in the scientific or educational tradition, which was profitable but perhaps limited in its capacity for expansion. Unlike the more recent colonization of multiplex theatrical venues, this initial venture marked, in a sense, a form of reverse colonization, where the IMAX environments remained the same, but the content imported into those venues began to change. While these conversions proved popular with the public, the initiative was not without its detractors. As early as 2002, the year of DMR's release, Truett Latimer, the President of the Giant Screen Theater Association at the time, warned that the conversion of films not originally intended for IMAX's 15/70 format ran the risk of driving out the largely independent producers of film on that format (Whitney, 2005: 91; Latimer, 2002: 14). Moreover, Allison Whitney, citing an interview with Goulam Amarsy, a producer of numerous IMAX films, notes that there was a concern that DMR would create confusion regarding the branding and supposed medium specificity of IMAX and its products (Whitney, 2005: 91).

Charles Acland has noted how IMAX can be considered at once a "multiple articulation of technological system, corporate entity and cinema practice" (1998: 429). All three of these spheres can be seen to be in flux. The trend established IMAX's initial foray into the mainstream entertainment industry and has continued to characterize much of the company's activities in recent years. Gelfond speaks almost disdainfully of IMAX's filmmaking tradition, when in a recent interview he reminds readers that "IMAX used to show bears, whales and seals movies, not Hollywood movies," and in the process, implies that that style of filmmaking is essentially a thing of the past (qtd. in Strauss, 2009). Scholars such as Acland and Alison Griffiths have tracked this gradual shift in IMAX's activities, (1998; 2006) and its recent venture in multiplex theaters would appear to be a natural extension of this impulse. This theatrical initiative was not begun with the recent campaign that prompted all of the controversy in 2008, nor can it be seen as an instantaneous, radical break with its traditional presentation format. IMAX first attempted a business arrangement with multiplexes in the late 1990s, and the first wave of theaters introduced were in fact "purpose-built" and employed the same GT projectors used in traditional IMAX theaters. **[1]** Crucially, in varying degrees, they also followed the basic geometric parameters of IMAX

theaters, as described by William Shaw and Creighton Douglas in a 1983 article in the journal of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers. Thirty-seven of these theaters currently exist worldwide, mostly built during the late 1990s. However, after the financial crisis that struck the North American film industry in 2000, further construction of these theaters and widespread adoption in the industry proved financially unfeasible, as exhibitors were leery of the huge associated costs (Hyder, "What is Immersive?," 2009). IMAX's SR system proved somewhat more financially feasible for construction, as it reduced the size (and cost) of projectors, screens and theaters, while maintaining the traditional IMAX aspect ratio of 1.43:1. Thirty-three such theatrical systems are in operation in the world today (Ibid.). IMAX found more success with an even smaller system design for retrofitted multiplex theaters with its MPX format released in 2004, which proved even more affordable for theater owners. This was the first format to abandon the traditional IMAX aspect ratio in favor of the 1.85:1 ratio more typical of Hollywood films. But as successful as this format was, with 60 such theaters worldwide, it was largely considered a "placeholder" until the current digital projection system was announced. This current campaign, using retrofit multiplex theaters and digital projection systems, has proven to be by far the most attractive option for exhibitors, with both costs and profits divided more equally between the two parties. The digital platform meant for additional savings from the films themselves, where a 70mm print which might have cost \$60,000 could now in a digital format be stored on a simple hard drive for \$300 (Kirby, 2009). What all of these corporate developments indicate is a gradual, rather than an immediate, shift in IMAX's activities away from its origins in purpose-built, institutionally-based theaters towards an integration with the more mainstream film industry, specially housed in multiplex theaters. Directly associated with this shift is a concurrent adjustment of the specific material qualities of its presentations, notably in terms of the digitization of the films, the aspect ratio of the image, and the physical geometry of the theaters themselves – all modifications to elements that were considered at one time to be vital components of the format and of the IMAX brand identity.

"Immersive" Cinema

However, what has remained a consistent thread in the company's narrative trajectory throughout this gradual reorientation towards the commercial industry has been its continued association with the concept of "immersion." This "immersive" quality that the experience of an IMAX presentation purports to offer is perhaps the key issue that characterizes

almost any discussion of the brand. Use of the expression is evident in both the promotional rhetoric of the company as well as the critical and scholarly writings on the format. Richard Gelfond proclaims that the brand represents the "best immersive experience on the planet" (qtd. in Hyder, "Is Imax the Next" 2009). While situating IMAX within the tradition of the travel film, Alison Griffiths argues that in terms of brand identification, this aspect of IMAX nevertheless remains secondary to "being immersed in the image" which remains the defining feature of the format (2008: 94). What remains unsettled, however, is what is meant exactly by "immersion" and what specifically enables this process. Perhaps a suitable, basic definition of the term is that proposed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin. For them, an immersive medium is one "whose purpose is to disappear" (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 21). With respect to motion pictures, immersive cinema would therefore imply a process wherein some form of immediacy is suggested between the spectator and the moving images, allowing for an ostensible (but of course not actual) unmediated absorption into the world of the film. Implicit in Griffith's claim is that in the case of IMAX, immersion is first and foremost a product of the image. For many, such as Ansari and the LIEMAX contributors, this is reducible to the sheer size of the screen. IMAX's stance, at least as articulated since its multiplex campaign, is that the IMAX "Experience," and its implied sense of immersion, is not merely a product of screen size, or even singularly of the image at all. Enhanced sound, for instance, has always been and remains a vital part of the effectiveness of an IMAX presentation. Tim Recuber, while critical of the motivations and effects of contemporary "immersive cinema" (applied more broadly than IMAX itself), acutely identifies the immersive tendencies of sound on a sensory level. Sound vibrations, for instance, unlike sight, can be felt throughout the whole body, and is affective on a far more physiological level than light, which is effectively only sensed by the eyes (Recuber, 2007: 323). Recuber's primary criticism of contemporary immersive cinema is that it fails to fulfill promises of actual interactivity or active participation, claims that widescreen formats have been making for decades, as John Belton and Ariel Rogers have shown (Belton, 1992: 76-77; Rogers, 2012: 76). For Recuber, immersive cinema's over-reliance on technological advancements in fact engenders a certain passivity that dissuades more political or contemplative forms of spectatorship. The "dominant physicality" of immersive cinema "restricts the nature of cinematic experience and deters the meaningful contemplation of film's aesthetic and political implications in lived space" (2007: 326). Recuber is seemingly nostalgic for more traditional forms of

cinematic “absorption” that stemmed less from technological advancement, and more from traditionally artistic components of the cinema such as screenwriting (2007: 316).

In this sense, Recuber’s arguments echo those of Ebert, who has been rather vocal on his stance on the immersive capabilities of the cinema, 3-D and IMAX in particular. For Ebert, immersion is a far less physiological experience. He explains:

If a film is properly projected and has good sound, it is as immersive in regular theaters as in upgraded ones. Immersion is an experience of the imagination, not the body. Besides, not everybody *wants* to have a head trip at the movies. Some people want to sit *outside* the film and simply *look* at the damned thing. (Ebert, “That’s Not the IMAX,” 2009)

This concept that immersion results from the qualities of the text itself, and of the imagination, rather than the physical properties of the medium, dates back generations in the field of literature, as Marie-Laure Ryan has shown. Conceding that motion pictures are indeed the most immersive of contemporary media, Ryan traces the genealogy of authors that have historically appealed to this concept (2001: 120, 89). This textual “absorption” has manifested in at least four separate categories, she argues: concentration, imaginative involvement, entrancement and addiction (Ibid., 98). Furthermore, reception studies in other areas of visual media have noticed audience claims of immersive experience. Matthew Lombard and his collaborators, for instance, note the considerable immersive sense of “being there” reported by test subjects in a study on television screen size and viewer response (Lombard et al., 1997: 104). With such divergent understandings of what constitutes an “immersive” experience, the term itself becomes almost meaningless. This definitional ambiguity only contributes to the confusion and conflict associated with the IMAX multiplex situation.

A further complexity to the issue of immersion is what Bolter and Grusin have identified as an immediacy/hypermediacy dialectic (1999). For them, the process of remediation typical of contemporary media is largely characterized by a curious tendency that paradoxically tries to conceal its presence in the name of immediacy yet simultaneously foregrounds the media apparatus itself through its hypermediated presence. Channeling Bolter and Grusin in his discussion of contemporary immersive cinema, Chuck Tryon points out how on one hand, audiences are drawn to IMAX

and 3-D presentations out of a desire for total immersion. Yet in achieving this sense of immediacy, audiences are consistently made aware of the mediation process through the sheer physicality involved (Tryon, 2009: 71). The glasses required in a 3-D presentation, or the imposing physical aspects of an IMAX screening (not to mention the pre-show informational presentations) ensure audiences' constant awareness of their material surroundings and effectively serve to foreground the mediation process.

Furthermore, these issues relating to the concept of immersion cannot be considered a uniquely recent concern. The state of "immersion" historically has been rhetorically deployed by Hollywood in a variety of ways to describe the possibilities that the cinema represents. The expression gained particular prominence in the marketing and reception of the series of widescreen and large format technological developments introduced in the 1950s. These formats, such as Cinerama, CinemaScope and Todd-AO, so the story goes, helped to revitalize the film industry in the face of competition posed by television. In fact, as Belton reminds us in his work on the subject, the concept of widescreen cinema dates back to the earliest years of motion pictures, with a particularly pronounced, but ultimately aborted, burst of interest in the late 1920s (1992). The period of the early 1950s, however, truly marked with great fanfare the arrival of widescreen formats for good. Cinerama is largely considered the first commercially successful widescreen format and achieved its immersive effects through the use of three aligned projectors and a considerably curved, concave screen. Belton provides ample evidence of its rhetorical claims to effectively "sweep" the spectator into the picture itself (1992: 98). Ultimately, however, much like later IMAX theatrical formats, despite some initial success, the costs associated with it proved too intensive for wide scale adoption. Furthermore, its immersive qualities were only fully realized in specific, centralized seating in the theater (Wollen, 1993). On the other hand, the CinemaScope format, introduced in 1953, succeeded where Cinerama did not, and by 1956 the majority of theaters in North America were equipped for its specifications. The material demands of conversion to this format were less pronounced, as it required only a single projector and a less intensely curved screen (Ibid.). The widescreen aspect ratios of these formats were clearly prominent factors in the sense of immersion they established, but not exclusively so as this effect was further maximized by the relationship between the curvature of the screen and the spectator's geographic situation in the theater. Rogers notes how this new scale of spectatorial

encounter, heightened by the screen's curvature and the stereophonic sound, cultivated an experience that was marketed as both immersive and overwhelming, both thrilling and anxiety-inducing. (2012: 76-79).

As large screen formats with an investment in fostering immersion, these innovations in a sense anticipated the arrival of IMAX decades later. Clearly there is a connection between the marketing of the concept of immersion and a direct association with screen size. However, as Allison Whitney reminds us, critics have perhaps all too often overstressed this supposed genealogy of the screen formats. Whitney argues that more contemporary accounts occasionally run the risk of conflating the formats' respective technological characteristics, or assuming a shared historical pedigree, when in fact IMAX's specifications and origins are fact considerably different (Whitney, 2005: 11-12). **[2]** IMAX, after all, is not even technically a widescreen format. According to Belton, widescreen has been historically defined as any format with a projected image that features an aspect of at least 1.66:1, in contrast with the early standard of 1.33:1 (1992: 14). Even by this historical definition (the Hollywood standard is now of course typically wider than this), traditional IMAX does not meet the criteria of a widescreen format, with a ratio of 1.43:1. **[3]**

Reconfigured Spaces

The association with immersive cinema, however, does historically link the various formats, particularly with respect to the geography of the theater. The emphasis on reconfigured physical specifications of theaters required of Cinerama is even more pronounced in traditional IMAX theaters. The effect of IMAX's immersive visual qualities, as Tana Wollen and others have pointed out, is not simply an issue of screen size (though that is certainly important) but also crucially the audience's positioning in relation to the screen. The geography of traditional IMAX theaters is structured quite deliberately with "sharply raked rows relatively close to the screen" (Wollen, 1993: 18). In the classic IMAX theatrical model, the basic ratio of the theater's measurements is as important as the specifics of the screen's size. The back wall of the theater should be approximately as far removed from the screen as the screen is wide, resulting in an overall shape that is essentially square. While IMAX's recent retrofit theaters clearly fall short in terms of overall screen size in relation to the traditional screens, they similarly fail to respect the spatial parameters of those theaters as well. Hyder points out that in the process of conversion from pre-existing 35mm theaters to the new digital IMAX format, typically the first few rows of seating are removed to make room for the new

screen that is installed. The IMAX sound system is also installed, but everything else in the theater is typically left intact (Hyder, "What is Immersive," 2009). As such, the vast majority of retrofit theaters ultimately retain the more rectangular shape typical of multiplex theaters, rather than the more square shape of traditional IMAX theaters. This ultimately dilutes the full sense of "immersion" that the original IMAX specifications were designed to maximize (Shaw, 1983). The use of a more conventional aspect ratio combined with shorter screen heights and deeper theatrical space inevitably results in a less overall immersive image, as the screen image fails to dominate the entirety of the spectator's range of vision.

Despite these apparent limitations in these newer theaters, the foregrounding of the specifics of technology has always been a core element in IMAX presentations, so much so that presentations have traditionally been as much about the IMAX format itself as about the content of any particular film (Acland, 1997; Wasson, 2007). However, while IMAX frequently continues to foreground its technology with elaborate introductions prior to its multiplex screenings, the reality is that what has been understood as the core essence of the format, namely 70mm film and gigantic screens (not to mention specifically built theaters and films conceived and shot on the format), is simply no longer the case in these contexts. Haidee Wasson's observation in 2007 that "the IMAX screen does not simply occupy the theatre; it constitutes the specificity of the viewing experience" (2007: 86), while unquestionably appropriate a few short years ago in traditional IMAX environments, would appear to be an increasingly inaccurate description of audience experience in the newly introduced retrofit multiplex theaters. IMAX's recent activities mark a substantial realignment of brand identity, which is particularly notable given how closely this distinctive identity was associated with specific and unique technological and material conditions. Richard Gelfond's logically circular and ultimately tautological pronouncement that "IMAX is IMAX" (qtd. in Hyder, "IMAX Reacts," 2009) may represent the official company line, but the ensuing controversy resulting from the campaign indicates, at least amongst certain segments of the population, an understanding of the brand that varies rather considerably.

On the surface, a simple solution might have resolved the whole dispute. Hyder, through his platform at the *LF Examiner* and in all of his interviews with the mainstream press, has suggested that a simple gesture on the part of IMAX to distinguish the new campaign under such a moniker as "Digital IMAX" or the "IMAX Multiplex Experience," would alleviate much

of the frustration (qtd. in Bunch, 2009: B01). Many exhibitors, in fact, were reluctant at first not to provide any distinction or disclaimer identifying the differences between the traditional IMAX experience and the presentations offered in their venues. The company's two largest partners in the United States, AMC Entertainment and Regal Entertainment, reportedly both wanted to use the distinction "IMAX Digital" in their promotional activities, but were denied the option by IMAX. Likewise, according to Hyder, most institutional IMAX operators approved of such a brand distinction as well (Hyder, "Is IMAX the Next," 2009). Yet to date, IMAX has refused to consider such a move. Gelfond continually cites internally conducted surveys that reveal overwhelming audience satisfaction with the campaign, and beyond promises to look into the issue further, no changes have been introduced in corporate promotional policy.

"Bigger. Better. Bolder."

In fact, the company has actively fought any attempt by exhibitors to publicly address the issue. In September 2010, the Giant Screen Cinema Association, an international organization dedicated to the interests of the giant-screen industry, introduced a marketing campaign with the tagline "Bigger. Bolder. Better." [4] The tagline, as well as the association's "Certified Giant Screen" logo, were introduced for participating theaters to use in their promotional activities to "differentiate the giant screen experience and support members in their efforts to communicate and market that differentiation" (Giant Screen Cinema Association, 2010). The following month, Theresa Andrade, IMAX's VP Sales, contacted over thirty IMAX theaters participating in the GSCA's promotional campaign, with the warning that they may be violating the terms of their IMAX leases. According to IMAX, the logo and tagline constituted unapproved third party trademarks, which were unacceptable under the terms of their business agreement (Anon., "IMAX Warns," 2010). Unspoken but implicit in this gesture is that IMAX was clearly concerned that this promotion effectively served to highlight the considerable differences between the company's actual giant screen theaters and the much smaller retrofit theaters. Ironically, according to Rob Lister, IMAX senior executive VP and general counsel, one of the company's justifications for the threats (the implications of which were not made clear) was that the "Bigger. Better. Bolder." campaign "could weaken the consistency of the IMAX brand" (Lister qtd. in Anon., "IMAX Warns," 2010), a feat many claim IMAX was single-handedly accomplishing itself.

IMAX's venture into theatrical exhibition was to a certain extent anticipated by critics of the field. Acland, for instance, some ten years prior to the company's widespread expansion into multiplexes, noted how the experience of IMAX "is becoming more generalized in the culture, and less associated with education and the museum specifically" (1998: 433) and that the technology is increasingly being seen as "one image of future cinema-going" (1998: 443). Examining IMAX within the context of the contemporary film industry, and the place of the technology within multiplex settings and within broader contexts of film exhibition, tendencies typical of the current state of moviegoing, and of the expectations of audiences, are made apparent. Given that audiences are generally accustomed to large-screen entertainment units in the domestic space, and quite comfortable and willing to access content through downloading and other digital delivery systems, the continued existence and success of theatrical exhibition appears to be largely dependent on the promise of a distinctive performance. Whether this is achieved through such means as a promised public sociability, or through more technological means such as the introduction of widescreen, or innovations in sound as Grainge has shown with Dolby, continuously throughout cinema's history, producers and exhibitors alike have had to adapt and evolve to maintain audience interest in theatrical presentations. If anything is evident from this examination of a recent case of audience protest towards a marked shift in a particular aspect of theatrical exhibition, it is that size does appear to matter, at least when it comes to the physical scope of the screen. Audiences have proven that they are entirely willing to pay premium prices for enhanced viewing conditions, as the recent commercial success of both IMAX and RealD 3-D would attest. However, they have demonstrated that they will not be taken for granted either, as the less than enthusiastic response to hastily produced 3-D conversions might indicate. **[5]** Audiences may not demonstrate a pronounced preference for or against the digitization of film (the allure of the rhetorical connotations of "digital" for many may even outweigh the as-of-yet mostly inferior technological capabilities compared to 70mm or even 35mm). But, evidently, the size of the screen matters a great deal, particularly when promised the "IMAX Experience" and rightly or wrongly all that phrase conjures in the minds of its audience.

The claims of this article should not be read as an attempt to argue that the backlash from a specific, and admittedly niche, segment of the moviegoing public has necessarily had a negative influence on the box

office success of IMAX's digital theatrical presentations. In fact, despite all of the controversy, most evidence seems to indicate that the campaign has been a unanimous success for the company (Kirby, 2009). While the backlash against the multiplex initiative was largely confined to North American audiences, IMAX's global expansion of the digital theater program has been explosive. Although European growth has been perhaps not quite as swift, as exhibitors have been experimenting with other premium large screen formats, IMAX now has a presence in 52 countries worldwide. Growth has been particularly pronounced in Russia and China – countries where traditional IMAX theaters had markedly less of a presence, and accordingly less of the accompanying brand associations typical of markets more familiar with the company. Multiplex expansion has been so central to IMAX's recent ventures that these theaters now make up 529 of the company's 663 worldwide screens (IMAX Corp., 2012). IMAX's global box office take for its DMR titles in 2010 was a reported \$546 million, more than double what the company made the previous year (IMAX History).

Box office receipts, however, are certainly not the only means to gauge an audience's relationship with the cinema, and any initiative that elicits this much negative reaction is surely symptomatic of larger cultural trends. What can be concluded from this affair is that there is unquestionably a corporate and technological realignment underway within the IMAX company. The "meaning" of the IMAX brand, which was once understood in terms of very deliberate and unique technological specifications, is undergoing a rather profound makeover. For audiences with a vested interest and commitment to the original IMAX format, this trend represents a considerable violation of their expectations and associations with the brand – the ramifications of which have clearly manifested in the ensuing outcry and backlash. For audiences less familiar with the traditional IMAX experience, but actively attending the brand's more recent theatrical incarnation, a new popular understanding of the brand is establishing itself – one more based in a slightly enhanced, "premium" viewing experience, but far removed from the enormity and distinctiveness of the more traditional model of the brand. Movie audiences have for decades been accused of passivity, and current critiques of immersive cinema implicate it in furthering this claim (Recuber, 2007). Although it may not have impacted IMAX's corporate policy or negatively affected its financial bottom line, the public backlash against IMAX, while perhaps operating primarily in the realm of the discursive and the symbolic, is nevertheless telling of film audiences'

commitment to the specifics of film exhibition and to an engagement with the material conditions of their cultural lives.

Notes

[1] The IMAX GT is the original projector model introduced by the company in 1970. For further information on the various IMAX models, see Anon., "The Shrinking IMAX Screen" (2010).

[2] Whitney points to two critics in particular: Stephen Huntley (1993) and Tana Wollen (1993)

[3] IMAX's DMR conversions of Hollywood films, however, tend to fall more in line with the films' original wider aspect ratios.

[4] The GSCA defines a "giant screen" as either 70 feet wide or 3,100 square feet in total area for flat screens, and 60 feet in diameter for domes. All seating must be placed within one screen width of the screen plane (Giant Screen Cinema Association, 2010).

[5] This has notably led to the promotional catch phrase "Conceived and Shot in 3-D."

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