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Published by

Screens.
Amsterdam University Press, 2016.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66545.

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PART II

Technology and New Practices
Scaling Down: Cinerama on Blu-ray

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Cinerama was not meant to be competitive with conventional movies, and it certainly could never be shown on television.
– Hazard Reeves, president of Cinerama, Inc.

The introduction of the Cinerama system, with the premiere on September 30, 1952 of This Is Cinerama, ushered in a period of upheaval in American cinema marked by experimentation with technologies such as widescreen, 3D, and stereophonic sound. Although the film industry had a complex relationship with television exceeding simple competition, public discourses pitted the sensory plenitude offered by the new movie technologies against the reputed deficiencies of the small screen. Cinerama produced its novel spectacle by overhauling approaches to both production and exhibition, making these two components so inextricable from one another that Cinerama films’ migration to television seemed next to impossible.

Marketing for the system emphasized its theatrical installation as a major component of its appeal, insisting that elements of that installation such as stereophonic sound and, especially, the large, curved screen offered viewers an experience of “participation” unavailable elsewhere.

Not only were the films made in a process that utilized three filmstrips simultaneously, requiring a three-projector Cinerama set-up for exhibition, but they self-consciously displayed the large screen and stereo sound constituting that set-up.

The recent release on DVD and Blu-ray of the 1950s Cinerama films makes sense insofar as it has capitalized on painstaking restorations and made historically significant films widely available for the first time, pairing what had been a particularly high-resolution film format (Cinerama) with a video format (Blu-ray) noted for its own high resolution. But given the apparent inextricability of these films from an exhibition context conceived in contradistinction to television, the platform for which the new discs now paradoxically destine them, their release on home video is also perplexing.

Even the best-equipped contemporary home theater systems – and even those featuring large, curved screens echoing the equipment associated with 1950s widescreen exhibition – do not come close to matching the massive size (64 feet by 23 feet at the system’s debut) or deep curvature (to a depth of about 25 feet) of Cinerama’s screen. Moreover, the Cinerama discs enter a media landscape marked equally by the increasingly small
screens of mobile devices. This essay explores the implications of Cinerama’s migration to this new media environment. Although the Cinerama films’ release on home video seems perverse, I will argue that it casts new light on Cinerama and, more broadly, illuminates the variety of ways in which movies operate in conjunction with the screens displaying them.

Scholars confronting the diminutive screens that have proliferated since the turn of the millennium have shown how the material qualities of exhibition contexts, including, in particular, the scale of screens, shape films’ functions and viewers’ experiences. That insight is particularly apt in addressing Cinerama, given the importance of the large screen to its conception and use. Indeed, scholarship on widescreen cinema has emphasized the ways in which the new screens’ role in exhibition affected film style and transformed cinematic experiences. These observations might seem to recommend dismissing the Cinerama videos outright since they extract the films from the large theatrical installations for which they were made and transplant them to a dramatically different context marked by much smaller screens. However, recognizing the importance of the material dimensions of exhibition does not preclude taking home video seriously as a format that contributes to, rather than simply undermining, cinematic experiences. Expanding beyond an attention to scale and exploring the heterogeneous functions of both the Cinerama screen and the domestic and mobile screens now capable of displaying the films uncovers continuities and modulations among them. As Haidee Wasson contends, film “is productively understood as a family of technologies, an assemblage of things and systems that are multiply articulated across its history and its contexts,” and the screen itself “is but one part of this shifting assemblage, a telling portal to a range of creative languages, modes of performance and display, contexts of exhibition, and audience formations.” As parts of that shifting assemblage, both the Cinerama screen and the contemporary video screens now featuring the films have multifaceted functions, informed but not exhausted by their scale.

Anne Friedberg’s conception of the forms of spatiality structured by screens offers a way of parsing these functions. Outlining a notion of spectatorship that “emphasizes the relation between the bodily space inhabited by the spectator and the virtual visuality presented on the space of the screen,” she shows how the material dimensions of the screen collaborate with the immaterial images projected upon it, forming particular conjunctions of actual and virtual cinematic space. In what follows, I map such conjunctions by highlighting several forms of spectacle recurring in the Cinerama films and exploring how they worked in tandem with various material qualities of the Cinerama screen – including its size, curvature, aspect ratio, and collaboration with the three projectors filling it – to construct particular forms of cinematic space. The conjunctions I identify are not exhaustive, and my focus on the screen bypasses the detailed exploration of sound that the films’ deployment of stereo technology merits. My goal in high-
lighting these resonances is to elucidate some of the multiple ways moving images took shape on mid-century theatrical screens. Doing so exposes tensions and rifts even within what seems like a particularly unified configuration of the cinematic apparatus, showing how even the tightly bound Cinerama system functioned within a variegated web of discourses and practices. Such an exploration reframes Cinerama by positioning it within a nexus of media histories, ranging from the genealogies of immersive media and kinetic entertainment within which it is usually included to histories of nontheatrical and experimental media practices associated with multiple-screen and split-screen displays. It also suggests ways of nuancing our understanding of films’ migration to new platforms, cautioning against a straightforward distinction between earlier and contemporary screens along the lines of scale and highlighting the ways in which other aspects of the screen, such as its functions as surface and frame, endure its transformations.

The Cinerama System

By the time Cinerama debuted in 1952, its inventor, Fred Waller, had been working on it for decades: he designed several multiple-projector systems, including 11-projector and 7-projector systems, in the 1930s as well as a 5-projector system to train American machine gunners during World War II. These experiments were driven by Waller’s conviction that stimulating viewers’ peripheral vision enables them to experience images more realistically, supplying the sensation of three-dimensionality. Also devised with this idea in mind, the Cinerama system was further streamlined, featuring three projectors throwing three contiguous images onto a large, deeply curved, louvered screen. In production, three-lensed cameras were used to expose three 35mm strips of film simultaneously, with each frame extending six perforations high rather than the usual four. The use of three separate filmstrips, each with an expanded frame size, produced images of very high resolution, even when projected on large screens. A slightly higher frame rate than usual (26 frames per second rather than 24) further contributed to the clarity of Cinerama’s images. The Cinerama system paired these images with seven-track stereophonic sound. In the theater, five speakers were spread out behind the screen, with additional speakers at the sides and rear of the auditorium. In production, up to seven microphones were arranged, in Waller’s words, “in the same relationship to the scene being photographed as the speakers were to the scene when projected.” This setup allowed sounds to move across the span of the screen and to the offscreen spaces to the left and right of it; it also made it possible for sounds to travel from the rear of the auditorium toward the screen. The advertised effect was one of unprecedented audiovisual engulfment: the system was heralded as offering viewers the feeling of being within the field of action. Ads, for instance, proclaimed, “You
won’t be gazing at a movie screen – you’ll find yourself swept right into the picture, surrounded with sight and sound."

The films themselves anticipate the theatrical installation. There were five Cinerama films made in the 1950s: This Is Cinerama (1952), Cinerama Holiday (1955), Seven Wonders of the World (1956), Search for Paradise (1957), and South Seas Adventure (1958). All are travelogues, and although some experiment with characters (whom we follow on their travels), the films are predominantly non-narrative and focused on presenting astonishing sights. Marketing for Cinerama touted the idea that the Cinerama camera – with its multiple wide-angle lenses, its access to aerial perspectives, and the institutional privilege of its operators – gave viewers unprecedented views of the world. For instance, souvenir programs for This Is Cinerama claimed that Cinerama made it possible to see “the world through new eyes.”

With familiar landmarks, this entailed offering better views than tourists could achieve, such as a flight under the Brooklyn Bridge or the view of an opera at La Scala from the edge of the stage. More pervasively, and especially in the later films, it also meant offering access to sights that viewers had little hope of encountering first-hand, such as views into the lives and rituals of indigenous peoples in Africa and the Pacific Islands, which the films present through an assertively colonialist lens. With its advertised immersive effect, the Cinerama system promised to give viewers a remarkable sense of presence and thus offered the opportunity to experience these sights as if in person. In this way, Cinerama aligned itself with a long tradition of immersive media offering an experience of virtual travel.

The spectacles on display in these films can generally be classified according to four overlapping categories. First, there are spectacles of grandeur, ranging from the natural grandeur of vast land-, mountain-, and seascapes to the cultural grandeur (especially in the first three films) of massive and ornate architecture in world-famous settings. Second, there are spectacles of kinesis, as the Cinerama camera (often surveying the aforementioned land-, mountain-, and seascapes) soars through the sky in airplanes; speeds across land and sea aboard trains, cars, boats, and sleds; mounts carnival rides; lumbers atop an elephant; and simulates a leaping kangaroo. Third, there are spectacles of performance, upon which the Cinerama camera offers viewers a privileged perspective, often positioned either in the front row or in the midst of the performance itself. Finally, there are spectacles of technological achievement, ranging from the display of Cinerama as a technological achievement itself to the films’ pervasive enthusiasm for aviation technology. These two technological wonders are often celebrated in tandem, as is emblematized by the shadow of the plane carrying the Cinerama camera that is frequently visible superimposed on the landscapes being filmed. The films harness these spectacles of technological achievement as evidence of the modernity and power of the United States.
Spectacles of Grandeur, Spectacles of Kinesis, and Screen Scale

The films’ spectacles of grandeur and kinesis are the most recognizable elements of the 1950s Cinerama productions. In his review of This Is Cinerama, appearing on the front page of the New York Times the day after the film’s premiere, Bosley Crowther, for one, observed that “the most spectacular and thrilling presentations were those that combined magnificence of scenic spectacle with movement of an intensively actionful sort.” These scenic and “actionful” spectacles are tightly bound to the most prominent component of the Cinerama installation: the large screen. When projected on this gigantic platform, the landscapes featured in the films evoke the sublime in much the same way that IMAX does. The spectacles of kinesis also achieve their visceral effect through projection on the large screen, which allows the rush of sensations to reach viewers’ peripheral vision – the primary source, according to Waller, of people’s perception of their position in space. The many landscape shots in which the camera canters back and forth (usually as the plane carrying it banks left and/or right), making the pictured horizon slant dramatically, bring together these two spectacles in anticipation of large-screen projection that would both evoke awe at the vastness of the imagery and provoke a visceral feeling of motion. Moreover, such images, when projected at their intended scale, offered viewers a particular kind of encounter with geopolitical space. The massive projection of the films’ spectacles of grandeur and kinesis, as well as technological achievement – coming together especially forcefully in This Is Cinerama’s culminating “America the Beautiful” segment, which features an aerial tour of the American landscape – at once elicited awe for the United States and encouraged viewers to align themselves with its power. Indeed, the overwhelming scale of the Cinerama spectacle, particularly paired with the visceral effect and nationalist messages of the films, contributed to the system’s deployment as a vehicle of propaganda for the United States (the Soviet Union’s version of the system, Kinopanorama, served a similar function).

These effects are, of course, transformed significantly when pictured on the smaller scale of domestic or mobile screens. The result is similar to the experiment Haidee Wasson describes of showing her students the IMAX film Everest (1998) in a large auditorium on a 27-inch screen: “If IMAX-as-IMAX can be thought of as a meditation on the gigantic, then IMAX-as-TV becomes a tortured forty-five minutes of trite narration, staid framing, and orientalist thematics. [...] As an aesthetic and an experience, IMAX is made qualitatively different by a small screen.” Similarly, the spectacular nature of the Cinerama films’ landscapes is greatly diminished on home screens, no longer eliciting the sense of infinity and exteriority that, as Susan Stewart argues, is often associated with the gigantic and displaying instead the contained and domestic nature that she attributes to the miniature. Additionally, when presented on the smaller scale of televisions, the
films no longer activate the viewer’s peripheral vision, a difference that profoundly affects the impact of the films’ moving shots. All of those canting horizons, for instance, no longer provide a viscerally rattling experience, instead becoming an intellectual curiosity. The losses accrued in transferring big-screen spectacles of the 20th century to the increasingly small screens littering the 21st are by now well-recognized enough to have become the stuff of jokes, as David Sterritt exemplifies when he concludes his review of the Cinerama videos by admonishing readers, “Just don’t watch these on your cell phone. This is Cinerama after all.”

Spatial Continuity and Spectacles of Performance

Cinerama did more than simply increase the size of the cinematic platform, however. A related but distinct function of the Cinerama installation was its creation of a sense of continuous space spanning built and represented realms. The scale of the Cinerama screen was only one factor contributing to this reconfiguration of cinematic space. In Cinerama systems, the screen’s scale worked in tandem with its curvature and positioning within theaters to blur the boundaries between image and theater space. The size of the screen pushed its frame to the far reaches of viewers’ peripheral vision, downplaying awareness of its edges; its curvature made the image itself three-dimensional, reaching into the theater space and seemingly encircling viewers in filmed images; and guidelines for its installation had it placed in front of ornate proscenia, obscuring an element of theater space that might distract viewers from the onscreen spectacle. The sound system aimed for a similar effect, with the speakers arrayed throughout the auditorium blurring any boundary between the sonic spaces of the spectacle and the theater. The sense of spatial continuity evoked by this installation contributed to the idea that the system proffered an experience of engulfment, seemingly positioning viewers within the films’ diegetic space.

Certainly, the films’ spectacles of grandeur and kinesis capitalized on this sense of spatial continuity, inviting viewers to enter exotic landscapes and to feel themselves thrusting forward into diegetic space aboard speeding vehicles. However, the films’ spectacles of performance are designed both to harness that sense of continuous space and to bolster it in a way that merits special consideration. Particularly notable is the fact that most scenes featuring performances utilize diegetic audiences to enhance the sense of spatial continuity evoked by the system, further blurring the boundaries between represented and actual space. These diegetic spectators function in an analogous way to the staffage figures placed in the foreground of landscape paintings, beholding the view, that, as Tom Gunning argues, “inaugurate imagined narratives of entrance into the represented space.” The diegetic audiences in the Cinerama films, presented in configurations that closely mirror those of the films’ own audiences,
also suggest a shared audience space spanning represented and actual realms. In doing so, they muddy the distinction between viewer and viewed by resisting relegating them to different sides of the screen. By aligning its own viewers with Spanish observers filmed at an outdoor flamenco performance, for instance, THIS IS CINERAMA (rather disingenuously, considering the spectacular display of the system at other points) suggests that the object of view is not the film (which the flamenco audience cannot perceive) but rather the dance (which both sets of viewers see). When exhibited in Cinerama, such a moment creates a sense of continuity between built and pictured spaces populated by actual and filmed spectators, transgressing the screen plane: it is as if the film’s viewers sit within the flamenco audience.

Such moments highlight a function of the Cinerama screen distinct from its scale. The pervasive use of diegetic audiences calls attention to the screen’s function as a surface. Specifically, such scenes present the Cinerama screen surface as a penetrable membrane, not only a window upon a world but a portal into it. In doing so, they retroactively suggest that traditional screens acted as a barrier to that world. Although the large size of Cinerama’s screen contributed to this function by moving the frame outside the viewer’s central vision, the sense of awe and the sensation of motion activated by its scale are less important to these spectacles of performance than is the way in which the screen, as a penetrable surface, reframes the relationship between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space. In a converse movement to stereoscopic 3D, which transgressed the screen plane by bringing the cinematic spectacle into the theater space, the Cinerama screen, as William Paul has argued, invited viewers into the depths of diegetic space.

Contemporary domestic and mobile screens are not as physically immersive as was the Cinerama screen. As John Belton puts it, the “engulfing experience” of viewing widescreen films “on wraparound theater screens bears little or no relation to the experience of seeing them on a television screen, even in their proper aspect ratio.” The experience of immersion can be recreated in other ways; as Barbara Klinger contends, for instance, discourses on home theaters have insisted “on the home’s ability to compete with the theatrical experience,” presenting “the movie house as the uncontrolled environment riven with distractions” and allowing the home entertainment center “to epitomize the possibility of a stress-free, quiet, and unimpeded rapport with the screen.” However, because most domestic and mobile screens are not integrated into their setting as thoroughly as the Cinerama screen’s size, curvature, and architectural dominance allowed it to be, the Cinerama videos’ represented space does not structure viewing space in the way the films anticipate. As a result, elements of the films that capitalize on this structuring, such as the depicted audiences, risk losing their meaning (or seeing it fundamentally transformed) when divorced from a Cinerama installation.
The Cinerama discs register this risk by representing a Cinerama installation – something that distinguishes these videos dramatically from most others and attests to the ways in which these films are especially bound to their original exhibition context. The videos include elements that might be considered para-textual, such as overture, intermission and exit music, which had been independent of any cinematic image. Most striking is the decision, during these periods, to portray components of an actual theater space, proscenium curtains, which were filmed on location at the Cinerama Dome in Los Angeles. The curtains remain during the Academy-ratio prologues with which most of the films start, before they open to reveal the wide frame and subsequently dissolve away. They return at intermission, opening and again dissolving with the resumption of each film.

These theatrical trappings indicate the films’ inextricability from Cinerama’s mode of exhibition at the same time that they mark the discs’ inability to recreate it. Even after the curtains disappear from the frame, the black spaces at the top and bottom of the image created by the “Smilebox” letterboxing format meant to simulate a curved screen, unlike standard letterboxing, gesture toward an intended three-dimensional theatrical installation and, at the same time, assert its absence. Thus, even when the filmed trappings of the Cinerama Dome are no longer present, the semicircles of black at the bottom and top of the frame, though obviously confined to the vertical plane of the television screen, simultaneously continue to suggest a horizontal theater floor and ceiling. That these
do not map onto the floor or ceiling of the videos’ viewing space further indicates the films’ uneasy fit in their new environment.

The films’ pictured audiences inhabit this new form of display in an ambiguous way. On one hand, their significantly reduced size and confinement not only within the framed view of a television screen, but also within the even more restricted space of the “Smilebox” frame, make the pictured spectators look more like the inhabitants of a diorama than members of the same audience as the film’s viewer. And the black semicircles created by “Smilebox” letterboxing, frustrating the sense of shared three-dimensional space, serve as constant reminders that the pictured audience space is discontinuous from the viewer’s own. On the other hand, these diegetic observers continue to invite viewers, like the staffage figures discussed by Gunning, to enter diegetic space, gesturing, even in the videos, toward the form of continuous space evoked with a Cinerama installation. Even though the screens on which they now appear most often do not enhance this sense of spatial continuity in the way Cinerama screens did, the diegetic viewers nevertheless continue to serve as a bridge between physical and represented space by relocating the distinction between viewer and viewed away from the screen plane and into the deep space of the diegesis, thus presenting the screen surface as a threshold rather than a barrier.

The video presentation sets up more obstacles to crossing this threshold than did the theatrical installation, especially since the “Smilebox” letterboxing, when viewed on a flatscreen television or mobile device, constantly confronts the illusion of a three-dimensional installation with the reality of a planar screen. The effect can be distancing, reminding the videos’ viewers that they are not experiencing the films in their intended manner. However, that play between screen surface and three-dimensional space only exacerbates a tension that was fundamental to Cinerama to begin with. Indeed, the videos multiply such surfaces (the actual television screen and the represented Cinerama screen) and spaces (the actual viewing space of the videos, the represented Cinerama viewing space indicated by the black semicircles in the videos, and the represented viewing spaces populated by diegetic audiences in the films), conveying not only the distances between the spaces mediated by these surfaces but also the persistent drive to bridge them. With Cinerama, the prospect of bridging actual and diegetic viewing spaces entailed a promise of greater authenticity, aligning the cinematic experience of viewers on one side of the screen with the experience of live performance attributed to the represented viewers on the other side. With the videos, the prospect of bridging these spaces also involves a promise of greater authenticity; however, here the depicted theatrical exhibition of Cinerama emerges, together with the portrayed experience of live performance, as a model of such authenticity.
Windows as Spectacles of Technological Achievement

Certain examples of what I am calling the films’ spectacles of technological achievement work in strikingly similar ways to the diegetic audiences populating the spectacles of performance. There are several instances across the films in which the Cinerama camera shoots through windows or sets of windows that echo the aspect ratio, segmentation, and (often, though not always) curvature of the Cinerama image itself. Such shots act as spectacles of technological achievement in which the films echo and celebrate Cinerama projection itself as a technological wonder. As a prominent metaphor for the screen, the window is often taken as a figure of transparency; however, as Anne Friedberg notes, windows, like screens, act simultaneously as openings, boundaries, and delimitations of a view.41 Rather than simply affirming the realism of the Cinerama image, the windows appearing in the Cinerama films, like the diegetic audiences, function in tandem with the system’s installation to portray Cinerama as a feat of spatial synthesis that achieves a sense of continuity between actual and represented space.

The use of windows is most striking in CINERAMA HOLIDAY, which features a scene in which the Cinerama camera, together with the Swiss couple it is tracking, travels in the California Zephyr train’s “vista dome,” which reveals panoramic views of the American landscape through curved, glass panels whose shape and sectioning evoke Cinerama projection. At two other points in the film, we see the characters framed in front of large plate-glass windows whose three panels divide the views beyond (of San Francisco and, later, Paris) in another echo of Cinerama’s triple-projector display. In SEARCH FOR PARADISE, the Cinerama camera presents the view of an airport runway from behind a similar set of windows, which spectacularly shatter as jet airplanes speed by, presumably producing a sonic boom. In another trope displayed in these films, the camera presents views from within cars and planes, displaying a front windshield flanked by side windows.42 Not only do the multiple window panes in these shots reflect the three panels constituting the Cinerama image, but the angle at which the windows sit echoes the curvature of that image and its constitution from three separate views taken and projected at angles from one another. Like the operators of these vehicles, Cinerama viewers see the landscape passing not only in front of them, but also to their left and right.
Insofar as they serve as figures for the Cinerama screen displaying them, these pictured windows work to align the virtual vistas projected on that screen with actual vistas as apprehended through transparent glass. For instance, when CINERAMA HOLIDAY presents views of Paris through the windshield of a speeding taxi, it analogizes its own presentation of Paris to the view an actual tourist would have when looking through such a windshield. In addition to conveying the authenticity of the Cinerama image, these windows, like the films’ diegetic audiences, also suggest that the boundary between viewer and viewed might be placed somewhere other than the screen plane – in this case, at the plane of the pictured window. The representation of the window as a boundary, in other words, downplays the screen’s function as such. In this way, these spectacles of technological achievement, like the film’s spectacles of performance, work together with the system’s installation to convey continuity between viewing space and image space, aligning the viewer’s own environment, for example, with the interior of the Paris taxi.

As with the films’ treatment of diegetic audiences, the effect of the windows’ migration to home video is ambiguous. On the one hand, smaller screens attenuate the effect of the through-the-window shots by failing to reproduce the experience of immersion evoked by the Cinerama installation: it is hard for viewers to ignore the material presence of a screen whose frame occupies their central field of vision, especially if they hold it in their hand. Moreover, the kinetic effect of moving shots, displayed through windshields, diminishes when, on home screens, motion no longer surrounds the viewer. On the other hand, the
windows’ appearance on television screens continues and extends the play between surface and depth that I discussed earlier. As with the films’ depictions of diegetic audiences, the migration of these through-the-window shots to the “Smilebox” frame not only creates a new rupture between viewing and image spaces but also works to bridge those spaces in a way that echoes the functioning of Cinerama itself.

Francesco Casetti’s notion of relocation offers a useful way of approaching this ambiguity. As Casetti argues, relocated cinema works in two ways, which reflect cinema’s dual function as both a product and a form of use. On the one hand, the home video version of a film operates as a “relic” insofar as it embodies a displaced fragment of the production. On the other hand, a home theater functions as an “icon” insofar as it simulates a movie theater, reactivating “the presence of the model, even as it simultaneously draws attention to the model’s absence.” The Cinerama videos are unusual in that they not only operate as relics (maintaining some component of the films’ image and soundtracks) but also themselves take on an iconic function through their simulation of the movie theater – the latter fact an indication of the particular inextricability of product and use in the case of Cinerama. When watching these videos in their own home theaters, viewers encounter double theatrical icons, their living room space replicating, more or less faithfully, general notions of the movie theater (as dictated by choices relating to ambient illumination, screen size, speaker arrangement, etc.) and the films simulating a particular Cinerama installation (through the representation of curtains and floor space).

In this sense, the discs echo the way in which the Cinerama films themselves treated windows, the Cinerama-screen-within-the-television-frame serving, like the windows-within-the-Cinerama-frame, to convey a sense of proximity associated with a different, and supposedly better, viewing situation (the experience of a theatrical Cinerama presentation or the view through an actual window). Both the Cinerama films themselves and their home video versions work in this way as well to reconfigure the relationship between diegetic and spectatorial space by evoking a model portrayed as more authentic. At the moments in which the videos portray the windows, like the moments in which they portray diegetic audiences, this occurs two times over: the television screen conjures but fails to duplicate a Cinerama screen, which conjures but fails to duplicate a window or live performance. At the same time that such moments make us recognize what is lost in compressing a Cinerama theater to fit within the confines of a television screen, they simultaneously update a gesture already enacted in the films, allowing the theatrical presentation of cinema to play a role previously ascribed to windows and live performances. Whereas the Cinerama screen, in the 1950s, forged novel forms of spatial synthesis by evoking the figures of window and stage, the screens displaying the videos create new forms of synthesis by evoking what is now the older model of the Cinerama screen.
Split Screens as Spectacles of Technological Achievement

The windows-within-the-screen in the Cinerama films function not only as views into other represented spaces (where the view through the window evokes that provided by Cinerama itself) but also as part of a graphic logic emphasizing frames-within-the-screen. Notably, Anne Friedberg, while acknowledging that Cinerama was predominantly used to “give the illusion of an expansive, continuous panoramic display,” includes it in her discussion of the contemporary trope of multiple virtual windows, in this case aligning it with multiple-screen and split-screen displays. The methods the films employ to hide or downplay the seams between the three images filling the Cinerama screen often produce tripartite compositions that map onto the multiple projections constituting them. What David Sterritt describes as the films’ “obsessively symmetrical framings” serve not only to emphasize “the center and [keep] the seam lines clear” but also to create a graphic regime organized around three adjacent but distinct panels – each, as David Bordwell points out, often with its own vanishing point.

Architectural elements, such as pillars, are frequently aligned with the seams between the images, segmenting the mise-en-scène in a way that simultaneously reflects and naturalizes the triple projection. The windows mentioned earlier support this graphic regime by working as another element of the diegetic architecture that downplays the seams by trisecting the frame (aligning the image’s seams, in the case of several such shots, with the spaces between the represented windows). Even more blatantly than the scenes relying on other elements of architecture, the window shots simultaneously operate as instances of split screen, bringing together different views, shot from different angles.

The films also include sporadic but significant instances of straightforward split screen, recalling Abel Gance’s deployment of triple projection for spatial montage at the end of Napoléon (1927). The first of these occurs in the culminating segment of the Cypress Gardens sequence in This Is Cinerama, which breaks the panoramic screen into three different, framed images (one per projector), spatially juxtaposing what might be deemed “best-of” moments from earlier in the sequence. Here, the split screen recycles and brings together shots we have already seen, featuring waterski performances, motorboat stunts, and glimpses of female performers changing. While deployments of split screen in narrative films often convey temporal simultaneity, the images spatially juxtaposed in This Is Cinerama, as we know since they repeat earlier moments in the film, represent different points in time, uniting spectacular highlights of the aquatic show in a way that aims, ultimately, to multiply their affect, driving home the point that Cypress Gardens has presented an abundance of good, clean, American fun. The display of triple projection – and with it, the emphasis on the expanse of the screen – simultaneously flaunts Cinerama itself as the technological wonder making this spectacle of abundance possible.
South Seas Adventure utilizes split screen somewhat more conventionally, juxtaposing simultaneous events occurring in different diegetic spaces. Its split-screen sequences, also occurring toward the end of the film, take place in a segment that follows a father-daughter family transplanted to Australia from what the narrator describes as “troubled Central Europe.” The pair encounters their new home in the vast Outback, where children participate in a “school of the air” that congregates far-flung students via transistor radio. The film uses split screen to present the school play, in which each student wears his or her own costume in his or her own house, participating via radio on what the film identifies as a 300-mile wide stage. Later, split screen returns in presenting the simultaneous activities as an injured boy awaits medical help and the doctor on call rushes, by airplane, to his aid. In both cases, split screen offers a visual representation of the work done by the transistor radio and airplane in reconfiguring the geography of the Outback for what is portrayed as a dispersed, yet interconnected community indebted to cutting edge technologies. Like the split-screen sequence in This Is Cinerama, the sequences in South Seas Adventure also present Cinerama as a powerful technology capable of reconfiguring space and time into novel syntheses, putting such an achievement in the service of national (in this case, Australian) pride.

Whereas an emphasis on screen scale aligns Cinerama with notions of audio-visual immersion and illusion that can seem at odds with the small size and cluttered environments of domestic and mobile screens, the multiple images
and split screens also characteristic of Cinerama are more easily aligned with the fragmentation, distraction, and surveillance often associated with the experience of contemporary media. As Beatriz Colomina has shown, the latter qualities were already coalescing around the use of multiple-screen displays in the 1950s. This is not to say that Cinerama fits more squarely within genealogies of multiple virtual windows than with those of massive panoramic views, nor that these lineages are mutually exclusive (quite the opposite). Rather, this exploration of the conjunction of Cinerama films and Cinerama platforms shows the multiplicity of media practices with which that system was in dialogue. Attending to the diverse functions of the Cinerama screen, as it intersects with the representational strategies of the films, guards against unduly privileging certain aspects of Cinerama (such as the scale of its images) over others (such as their proliferation).

Although promotional rhetoric for the Cinerama system encourages such privileging, the films make it difficult to maintain, especially when they are viewed through the lens of home video. Rather than simply transforming the films, the videos illuminate the various dimensions such transformations take when films are relocated from one exhibition context to another. The Cinerama films, created to be displayed on (and to display) a specific screen, expose heterogeneous ways in which moving images inhabit screens. These films collaborated with the Cinerama screen not only to evoke the sense of awe and sensation of kinesis associated with the scale of that platform but also to reconfigure diegetic and graphic space in a variety of ways. As Erkki Huhtamo indicates in aligning Cinerama with Disneyland and television as “new” cultural forms of the 1950s that “had to do with the metaphor of traveling and the corresponding redefinition and relocation of the travelling body,” certain aspects of Cinerama’s spatial reconfigurations were far less opposed to the experience of television than the promotional discourse suggests. Here, what counts are not the dimensions of Cinerama or television screens, but rather the ways in which, as surfaces, they mediate particular spaces and, as frames, they delimit relationships within and among objects on view. In this regard, the Cinerama videos, far from simply undermining the forms of experience associated with the widescreen format, provide a surprisingly fitting update.