

COVER STORY

WIDESCREEN from E1

With pan and scan, 'you're missing a chunk of the movie'

Basically, when a wide-screen movie is transferred for viewing on a regular TV screen, it's presented one of two ways (see Lesson 1 on the cover):

➤ The image retains its theatrical proportions, leaving black space (not "bars") above and below but showing the movie the way it was intended to be seen. This is sometimes called a "letterbox" presentation.

➤ The image is modified from its original presentation to fit the screen from top to bottom and side to side, losing part of the picture in the process. This is called a pan-and-scan presentation.

"If you don't see a wide-screen movie in a widescreen format, you're missing a chunk of the movie. It's as simple as that," said Leonard Maltin, film historian, critic and DVD producer. "That particular chunk might be an actor or a group of actors; it could be the second participant in a two-person conversation; it could be a significant piece of action."

"There are really creative directors and cinematographers, and even art directors, who like to use the widescreen frame; otherwise, why bother shooting it that way?" he added.

"When they carefully compose those shots, any variation on that is going to destroy what they did."

John Carpenter is one of those filmmakers. The director of films such as "Halloween" and "Starman" says he spent extra money for the widest presentations on even his lowest-budget movies because he felt it made a difference.

Asked what he thought of pan-and-scan home versions of movies, he said, "It makes me sick to my stomach."

He cited one of his favorite films, "Once Upon a Time in the West," as an example.

"You can't watch that thing

in a pan-and-scan version," he said. "It's an atrocity."

Robert Harris, a leading film preservationist who has restored such classics as "Lawrence of Arabia" and "My Fair Lady" sums up the issue: "The message here is that the filmmakers know that a pan-and-scan version is no longer the film, so you do what you have to do to satisfy Everyman, the audience out there that wants to see pan and scan."

The rest of the picture

Even though watching a movie in widescreen format is preferable, it's not perfect on a regular TV set. Maltin tells of watching a widescreen VHS of "Lawrence of Arabia" long before the advent of DVDs.

"I put it in my machine and immediately moved 6 feet closer to the television, because it was hard to take it all in at a distance," he said, because the image was so small.

Even the director of the film, David Lean, expressed similar concerns, Harris said.

"When we were preparing 'Lawrence of Arabia' for home video in 1989, I sat down with David Lean," Harris recalled. "He looked at it in [its original widescreen] ratio on a monitor, and he said exactly what Alfred Hitchcock once said: 'It looks like a boa constrictor going across the screen. We're not using the real estate.'"

"... The filmmakers are aware of the fact that wide-screen, especially on smaller TVs, can be really problematic, because you're using only half the pixels on the TV. So where do you go? A 27-inch TV, by today's standards, is tiny," he said. "It's always a tradeoff."

(The newer widescreen TV sets, to be discussed in a future lesson, handle widescreen movies better. But they have the opposite problem from



A demonstration on the DVD for Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 film "Contempt" uses a gray overlay to show what was cut from the film's image for pan-and-scan presentations. Before the DVD, the film had never been available in widescreen on home video.

Criterion Collection

Learn more about Lesson 1

Here are resources for further exploration of widescreen vs. pan-and-scan presentations:

Movies: DVDs with both presentations in the same package (not separate releases) include the two-disc special edition of "The Mask of Zorro" (Columbia TriStar, \$27.95), and John Carpenter's "Escape From New York" (MGM, \$14.95) and "The Fog" (MGM, \$19.98).

DVD extras: The "Why Letterbox?" featurette (second disc, under "Cutting Room") on the special edition of "Die Hard" (Fox, \$26.98) explains and compares both presentations. So does a hidden extra on the Vista Series edition of "Pearl Harbor" (Buena Vista, \$39.99); under the first disc's setup menu, highlight "Audio Options," and then press the down button on the remote and press enter. Also see the second disc of "Contempt" (Criterion, \$39.95).

Internet: The Letterbox and Widescreen Advocacy Page <http://www.widescreen.org> is a good place to start.

older movies and most TV programming: Those differently proportioned images leave blank space on the sides of the screen.)

Harris also pointed out that elderly viewers and those with poor vision might need full-screen presentations.

"They can't look at a boa constrictor running across the screen," he said, "and it's un-

fair to make them do it."

Then there are people who understand that they're losing part of the movie when watching a pan-and-scan presentation. They just don't care; the image must fill their screen.

"You're never going to convince those people," Maltin said. "It's as simple as that."

Maltin, Harris and Carpenter all agreed that educated

viewers deserve a choice, but they didn't refrain from being blunt about those who opt for pan and scan.

"If you really want to watch some recent film that way, you get what you deserve," Maltin said.

"They have a right to watch something upside down and backward if they want to," Harris said, "although I won't give them a choice in anything that I do for home video."

"If I had my druthers, I'd give the option," Carpenter said. "Just put an extra disc in there and give the original [widescreen] version . . . and then give the idiots their pan-and-scan version."

Ensuring that viewers know enough to make an informed decision is the key and remains the biggest hurdle.

"It's a process of education," Maltin said.

Welcome to Widescreen 101.

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Future lessons

Widescreen 101 will run biweekly as part of the regular Tuesday DVD feature. Here are the lesson plans with publication dates:

Lesson 1: What is widescreen? (today)

Lesson 2: Why are some wide-screen images "wider" than others? (July 8)

Lesson 3: What is open matte? (July 22)

Lesson 4: What does OAR mean? (Aug. 5)

Lesson 5: What is anamorphic? (Aug. 19)

Lesson 6: How do widescreen TV sets work? (Sept. 2)

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and privacy blinds
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