

DIGITAL LANDING



Staged within Screen 1 of the Vue cinema in London's Westfield shopping centre at Shepherd's Bush, on 7th February, the DCS conference kicked off with preliminaries from event-organiser, Rob Arthur, before a quick-fire medley of presentations took us, first, through a statistical overview of the present state of the global 3D/Digital transition; and then a more detailed consideration of the various incoming technologies and associated technical issues likely to impact our sector, among them: light sources, sound upgrades and HFR.

The first main panel discussion of the day, moderated by Technicolor's George Eyles, comprised a line-up of Unique's Rod Wheeler, Odeon's Gerald Buckle also Richard Aseme from Paramount, and concerned itself with Digital's cost-efficiencies. Raised, here, was the need for more uniform standards that would save exhibitors the headache of needing to negotiate the presently complex and ever-evolving array of 3D/Digital options from the various providers, to say nothing of the, often huge, leap of faith required to know both when and with which systems to test and subsequently invest. The discussion also acknowledged that exhibitors have had the Digital situation forced upon them and 'not without much pain' – and particularly against the backdrop of the existing film projection set-up which had proven to have worked robustly and inexpensively enough. The matter of future-proofing also raised its head, with some in the audience harbouring reservations of projection obsolescence, and particularly with the incoming HFR technology. Reassurance came, however, that older movie-formats would still be playable, while action films, too, could be adapted to 48 fps.

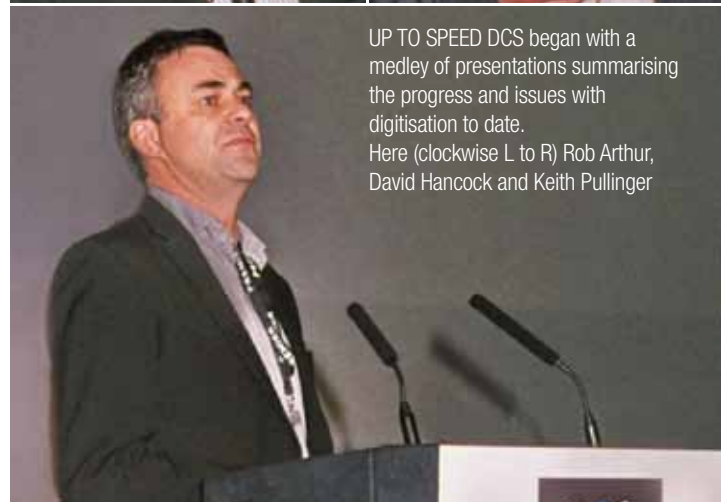
The tapering coexistence between film and Digital was also noted, and the statistic: approximately 9% to go before full digital completion, in fact acknowledged that it was more a case of being 9% away from the *start* of a whole new chapter in the ongoing Digital story, following embracement of some of the more recently-renovating areas of activity, including sound, light-sources and the changing movie-distribution model.

Discussed was distribution efficiency, which was agreed to be presently less-than-optimal. The exhibitor approach – couched as being somewhat simpler and less-technical – highlighted the need merely for the timely, and complication-free, delivery of product to screens and thus the need for better understanding of the distribution chain and its delivery economics. From the distributor's viewpoint came the constant need to minimise costs at the hub-level as well as to simplify depot and other back-room infrastructure to help make it all pay – evidently, an ongoing quest.

Emerging, too, was a general wariness of 'costly freebies', such as satellite equipment which could often prove burdensome to Exhibition – also very much a part of the Digital investment chain, of course – in terms of legal and landlord etc fees, also in obtaining the likes of planning and access rights before


The inaugural **Digital Cinema Solutions** (DCS) conference held at the Vue Westfield, in London, recently, was attended by over 250 international delegates. And, alongside summaries of the practicalities faced by exhibitors during the digital transition, were several focused panel discussions on how our industry might co-operative more effectively going forward. **screentrade** attended the conference.

IMAGES: Courtesy of Pic Photos



UP TO SPEED DCS began with a medley of presentations summarising the progress and issues with digitisation to date. Here (clockwise L to R) Rob Arthur, David Hancock and Keith Pullinger

any ROI would be seen; and, to compound matters, this situation becomes overwhelmed by the abundance of complexities, provider options and economies plus the nightmare that this can produce for management at the operational end.

The discussion evolved into how content-provision could be made to work across differing (and often fragmented and less-than-economical) territories in which free or low-cost trials, to date, may not quite have matched the envisioned fantasy; while examined, too, was how, going forward, satellite delivery could be made viable and better-integrated with the server package and booking etc tools, and much was learned following Unique's experiences having supplied Norwegian content. 



END OF THE BEGINNING – Technicolor’s George Eyles spoke of today’s present digitisation progress as being at the end of one, and beginning of a new, chapter in its relationship with Cinema



MAN-OF-THE-MOMENT – Sony’s Oliver Pasch offering a coherent précis of d-Cinema’s progress to date

Next came discussion of how the incoming technologies, such as: HFR, immersive sound, 3D-conversions and subtitling, etc often compete at both the artistic and economic level, along with some of the considerations that will be involved in selecting what goes into which territories and screens, and how the realities of the clearer-cut Hollywood model versus what happens at street-level demanded improved communication. For exhibitors, again, the comfort of knowing the cost of ongoing commitments along with the need to find more economical technical solutions it was agreed would have to be balanced against the realisation that not all new exhibitor services could be chargeable to end-consumers, the movie-goers. However, when set against the need for single standards with incoming 3D/Digital technologies, came concerns that creativity and innovation potentially could be stifled; but, in any case, it was agreed that the vantage-point of each of Cinema’s sectors needed to homogenise, rather than be allowed to segregate further, so as to cope better as an industry. An important point.

PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE...

Next, Sony’s Oliver Pasch offered a summary of how rapidly Digital Cinema had advanced in such a relatively short time, which took in the early days of 1.3K back in 1999, and the 15 completed digital installations by 2000, to the founding of DCI in 2002 and the first ever 2K screening a year later, and advent of the VPF and its economic challenges emerging from 2005. 2009’s *Avatar* was also cited as a further, recent, watershed moment in driving our industry’s digitisation. The distinction, too, regarding ‘3D vs. stereoscopic’ presentation was broached,

as was the audience’s expectation of ‘holographic’, and its generally mixed reception to HFR to date. Meanwhile, the advent of 3D sound in 2012 was followed by a hailing that 2013 would go down as being ‘The Year of 4K’.

New technologies on the exhibit horizon also took in the practicalities (including the economics), of launching laser light sources; as well as noting the inroads made by other, non-Xenon, sources such as Mercury lamps which have already achieved DCI-compliance. Movie-going refinements that are moving toward ‘glasses-free 3D’, together with the aim of making 4K 48 fps projection the next new industry standard concluded the session.

Debate then turned toward the lessons learned from the mechanics of the digital roll out, also to the matter of how the delivery, for example, of keys has become much more seamless and efficient in the wake of the earliest hurdles; as was consideration of versioning, namely: how to include more movie-versions (3D, subtitles, sound formats) onto the same single drive in the push to improve package-builds and the smoothness of work-flows.

EFFECT ON EXHIBITION

A panel represented by all three Cinema sectors next examined the practicalities of the Digital roll out. The exhibitors present for this session – Graham Spurling of Irish Movies@, and Andrew Myers of the Everyman Group (EMG) – agreed that, for them and their customers, the business should *always* be about the product and not the technology as the main focus and that, indeed, all that cinema operators really wanted to know is that

the product will be timely in its delivery as well as up to the job. It was argued too that customers, for the most part, remain less-than-concerned with technological advance when it comes to the movie-going essentials – and, indeed, that perhaps a majority already believed cinemas to be fully-digitised anyway. When it came to acknowledging Digital's less-than 100% track-record, the consensus was that it still came out very much in front when the reliability issues were agreed to be minimal.

Raised, however, was what was considered to be a missed opportunity in marketing, for example, both 3D and HFR to the public; and that, by doing so essentially 'in a vacuum', debate began, today, as to the extent to which audience-education and the marketing of technological upgrades might be shared more evenly between the studios and Exhibition. HFR, for instance, seemed to have fared well at Movies@, but only because it had had to be 'sold' first and a fuss made of it. For Myers, the emphasis was that, for EMG, the movie-going offer, being a little different from that of the mainstream, should not be forced to enter into an arms-race, that is, competing on a technology-basis with the majors, but conceded that updates and advances that would elevate movie-going standards would naturally filter through the exhibitive chain when the timings became right.

ALTERNATIVE CONTENT

The afternoon sessions continued with a protracted illustration of the ways Digital was enabling a diversity of Alternative Content (AC); and, following some opening facts-and-stats from *Screen Digest* on today's state-of-play, followed a session examining how AC needed better branding if to properly put it on the map, and the thought, too, that AC may yet rebrand to a more directed and appealing 'Event Cinema'. In establishing a stronger identity for AC came the need to calculate its box office performance and certainly a better, more coherent, means of presenting and promoting AC listings to the end-user movie-





IN THE EVENT – Melissa Keeping (ECA) and Lucy Jones (Rentrak) delivered presentations on how Alternative Content could be taken forward through rebranding and proper box office-tracking



goer. We also learned that AC will soon enjoy its own box office-tracking, which will help too with attracting investment, and it was put out by Melissa Keeping – the session’s moderator, also chair of the newly-formed Event Cinema Association – that a unifying forum for Event Cinema was already presently in the pipeline. Furthering these positive steps, came announcement from Rentrak’s Lucy Jones, of the latter’s going live with specific box office tracking for AC by as early as this coming Summer.

Various successful and encouraging applications of AC, to date, made only possible by Exhibition’s ongoing digitisation, spawned accounts from the Royal Opera House, The Comedy Store, The British Museum and The Cambridge Film Trust.

SUMMING UP

The final day’s panel-session concerned itself with a reflection on how Cinema has never looked better, while questioning also whether the movie-going customer actually appreciated this; and, with representation from Fox, BFI and others, discussions examined examples drawn from other sectors.

Lastly, an award for outstanding achievement in Digital Cinema was delivered – almost *This Is Your Life*-style, replete with video-linked well-wishing as well as, thankfully, less-than-po-faced stage-banter

– to Steve Perrin of the UK Digital Fund Partnership. Please see details of the award particulars in our News section on p10.

By way of conclusion, conferences, such as that hosted by DCS, remain a regular necessity in helping unify our industry’s admittedly disparate structure by encouraging timely convergence of the many key, and other, industry players, including many interested fringe elements, internationally, to both freely discuss and air grievances as well as to understand the latest positions and changing goalposts exerted by the restless Digital Cinema maelstrom. They afford, too, an essential opportunity to look toward improved industry cooperation. We look forward to meeting again at DCS 2014. **S**