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Theater Quality Evaluation Program

By Kenneth M. Mason and John P. Pytlak

A voluntary Theater Quality Evaluation Program, designed to give immediate technical feedback to motion-picture theater management and help them improve presentation quality, is proposed. Members of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE) attending theaters would fill out a comprehensive evaluation form, sharing their technical opinions and expertise with the theater management on a confidential basis. These subjective evaluations would be done in the course of normal theater operation without special test films or equipment, thus allowing broad application and reflecting day-to-day performance as the audience experiences it.

As experts in imaging and sound technology, members of the SMPTE are vitally interested in optimum presentation quality. The high quality of state-of-the-art theatrical motion-picture presentation attests to the decades of effort by members of this professional organization. Unfortunately, the quality of presentation in many of today's theaters falls far short of optimum. An article entitled "The Perils of Moviegoing" by Ron Haver, in the May, 1981, issue of *American Film*,¹ begins:

"Going to the movies isn't what it used to be. I'm not referring to the quality of the films, but to the decline in the quality of theater operation."

Film critics have begun to review not only films, but the theaters that exhibit them. Theater owners and newspapers frequently get letters decrying the poor projection, distorted sound, scratched prints, and uncomfortable viewing conditions that affect even "first run" theaters. Glenn Berggren, past chairman of the SMPTE Theatrical Projection Technology Committee, notes in a recent *Boxoffice* magazine article² that "the public and the press are holding up a mirror to the movie theater, and the image is not good."

Theater Ratings

Many in the film industry, especially on the production side, feel that theater ratings are the answer to declining theater quality. A paper by

Claude Soulé,³ Executive Director, UNIATEC, details a rating system used in France. Theaters that meet a rigid set of technical specifications are awarded a Cinema Certification Label.

Other proposed listings⁴ would rate theaters on a point system similar to that of hotels and restaurants, with a "Five Star" theater as the best. The ratings could be used in advertising or by film distributors and audiences in selecting theaters. Another proposal would be simply to make awards to the theaters with the best conditions.

There are many serious, unanswered questions about the fairness, legality, and logistics of any mandatory rating scheme. With over 17,000 theater screens active in the U.S. today, there are certainly not enough service technicians trained, equipped, and qualified to rate each theater objectively on a meaningfully frequent basis.

Yet, with or without ratings, audiences still want the best in picture and sound — and know when they don't get it. Although they may not complain, they may not come back again. Unfortunately, theaters may not even be aware that they are losing their audience because of poor presentation quality.

The Intersociety Committee

The Intersociety Committee for the Enhancement of Theatrical Presentation, chaired by former SMPTE President Kenneth M. Mason, brings together key people and organizations in the motion-picture industry to "facilitate the exchange of information on problems relating to the improvement of motion-picture presentation in the theater."⁵ Member organizations of the Intersociety now include the

SMPTE, the Theatre Equipment Association (TEA), the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), the Association of Cinema and Video Laboratories (ACVL), and the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO).

Through the years, other industry representation has been welcomed to work on specific projects; for example, National Film Service participated in a recent study of print damage. The Intersociety Committee works both behind the scenes and in very visible ways to enhance the motion-picture experience. By providing a forum for producers, distributors, equipment manufacturers, engineers, and exhibitors to discuss common problems, mutually agreeable solutions are often found. A recent example is the question of whether encoded stereo/optical prints are truly compatible with monaural projection equipment, or whether dual inventories of stereo and mono prints are necessary. More visible accomplishments through the years included presentations at theater owners' conventions; seminars on theater sound; the educational and entertaining film, "Professional Projection for the Reel People"; and support of the comprehensive study by the SMPTE Theatrical Projection Technology Committee on "The Whys and Wherefores of Film Damage," which identified sources of print damage in laboratories, shipping, film exchanges, and theaters.

Theater Quality Evaluation Program

The Theater Quality Evaluation Program grew out of discussions held by the Intersociety Committee. Members recognized the need to improve theater quality and the impracticality of a mandatory rating scheme. The committee noted that theaters are often unaware of technical deficiencies on a timely basis. Objective evaluations using test films and equipment are infrequent and costly, theater personnel usually have little or no technical background and are often too busy to critically monitor picture and sound, and general audiences rarely make the effort to complain about

A report received April 29, 1983, from Kenneth M. Mason, Chairman of the Intersociety Committee for the Enhancement of Theatrical Presentation, and John P. Pytlak, Chairman of the SMPTE Theatrical Projection Technology Committee. Copyright © 1983 by the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers, Inc.

technical deficiencies.

At the September 1, 1982, meeting of the Intersociety Committee in New York City, John Pytlak, Chairman of the SMPTE Theatrical Projection Technology Committee, proposed a voluntary Theater Quality Evaluation Program designed to give immediate technical feedback to motion-picture theaters to help them improve presentation quality.⁶ Members of the SMPTE attending theaters would fill out a comprehensive evaluation form, sharing their technical opinions and expertise with the theater management on a confidential basis. These subjective evaluations would be done in the course of normal theater operations, allowing wide application and reflecting day-to-day performance as the audience experiences it. Theaters could encourage participation by acting on the comments received and by returning the cost of admission, at their discretion.

Advantages of the Theater Quality Evaluation Program

There are approximately 8000 members of the SMPTE in the U.S. and Canada,⁷ many of whom regularly attend movies. Most are professionally involved with some aspect of image or sound technology and can render useful subjective technical opinions on the presentation quality of the movies they attend. If we can encourage only 10% of SMPTE members to attend a movie in any given week and to participate in a technical evaluation, over 40,000 evaluations would be returned to participating theaters each year, thus giving broad coverage that would be concentrated in the most critical film and television production centers where many SMPTE members live and work.

Because the evaluation is subjective, it can be done in the course of normal theater operations without test films and equipment and will reflect what the audience normally sees and hears. Unlike some proposals for a mandatory rating system, the feedback would be confidential and aimed at improving specific conditions. Discussions and sample evaluations have shown that theaters are much more likely to participate in a voluntary program designed to help them, rather than in a system that forces them to publicize faults.

Test of Program

The Theater Quality Evaluation Program was tried in Rochester, N.Y.,

with the cooperation of a theater circuit. Volunteers, including members of the Rochester Section, SMPTE, attended a multiplex theater and filled out evaluation forms. Although there were some minor discrepancies and expressions of personal opinion, several real problems were consistently reported. The president of the theater circuit was alerted to these problems, which had been missed in routine inspections, and was able to take corrective action. He felt that the technical feedback, although subjective, was valuable. The volunteers had no difficulty in filling out the evaluation forms, and appreciated the theater's providing free admission for their efforts.

The Evaluation Form

A master evaluation form is published in this issue of the *SMPTE Journal* (pp. 758, 759). The form may be copied by members making evaluations. The form is published on only two pages of the *Journal* to offer the possibility of copying the complete evaluation form onto two sides of one sheet of paper. Please retain the master evaluation form so that you can make future copies as necessary. Master forms will also be published in trade publications available to theater owners, so that participating theaters may also make copies available at the box office.

The evaluation form contains over 70 questions. Most of the questions are self-explanatory and ask for an appraisal on an unnumbered scale between opposite qualities. Other questions ask for information or comments, or for the participant to indicate where observations were made.

Evaluators should review the form before watching the movie, so that they know what is being asked. The form may be completed after leaving the theater. Evaluators should check only those items they have noticed, have a definite opinion on, and feel competent to judge. It is not necessary to answer all the questions — the theater is most interested in those items significant enough to be remembered after the movie. If no answer is given, it implies that the condition was acceptable.

Participating Theaters

Theater owners' organizations such as NATO and Exhibitors West (EW) have indicated support of the program and will promote participation by member theaters. Details of the program will also be published in theater

trade publications to encourage participation by non-affiliated theaters. Participating theaters will display a placard or decal (Fig. 1) at the box office that indicates participation and shows where to return the completed evaluation form and ticket stub(s). Some theaters may even have blank forms and pre-addressed envelopes available at the box office, but making your own copy ahead of time is a good idea.

Most participating theaters will acknowledge each completed evaluation by mail. Theater owners respect the expert opinion of SMPTE members. However, the theater is under no obligation to act on the comments received.

The Role of SMPTE Members

As a member of SMPTE, your active and continued participation in this program is essential to its success. We encourage you to use the evaluation form each time you attend a movie theater, even though you may have only a few comments. Your evaluation is useful — even if you help the theater to recognize and correct only one problem!

You can help promote the Theater Quality Evaluation Program by using the evaluation form at all theaters — even those that are not participating. As a customer, you are entitled to comment on presentation quality. And when you return a completed evaluation form, the theater will become familiar with the program and may decide to participate.

Conclusion

The Theater Quality Evaluation Program provides all SMPTE members with an opportunity to help a conscientious motion-picture exhibition industry improve presentation quality on an active and continuing basis.

References

1. Ronald Haver, "The Perils of Moviegoing," *American Film*, Vol. VI, No. 7, May 1981.
2. Glenn Berggren, "Theatre Ratings: Why, What for, and How?," *Boxoffice*, May 1982.
3. Claude Soulé, "Technical Quality Control of Motion Picture Theaters," *SMPTE J.*, Vol. 90, No. 4, p. 255, April 1981.
4. Howard T. La Zare, SMPTE Advisory Committee on Motion Picture Technology, Summary Notes of Meeting, March 24, 1982.
5. John J. Burlinson, Jr., Intersociety Council for Theatrical Motion Pictures, Minutes of Meeting, Dec. 1, 1969.
6. Kenneth M. Mason, Intersociety Committee for the Enhancement of Theatrical Presentation, Minutes of Meeting, Sept. 1, 1982.
7. Membership Report, 1982 *SMPTE Directory for Members*, May 1982.

This theatre participates in the
Quality Evaluation Program
of the Intersociety Committee for the
Enhancement of Theatrical Presentation
(SMPTE-NATO-TEA-MPAA-ACVL)

CHIEF ENGINEER	
THEATRE CIRCUIT	
ADDRESS	
CITY	
STATE	ZIP

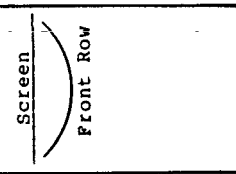
Figure 1. Notice posted at theater box office.

Theater Quality Evaluation Program

Sponsored by the Intersociety Committee for the Enhancement of Theatrical Presentation,
Post Office Box 23943, Rochester, NY 14692
(This Evaluation Form may be reproduced as needed)

Name of Theater _____
 Address _____
 City _____ State _____ Zip _____
 Name of Movie _____
 Date Evaluated _____ Time Evaluated _____
 Evaluated by: Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____ State _____ Zip _____
 Telephone _____ SMPTE Membership Number _____

Job Experience _____
 Please review this form before watching the movie, so that you know what is asked and can complete the form after leaving the theater.



Indicate approximate seat in theater with "X".
 Indicate where you would have most preferred to sit with "O".
 During the movie, approximately what percentage of seats were occupied? _____ Percent

INSTRUCTIONS

Indicate your appraisal with an "X" on the scale (. . . X . . .).
 Check only those items that you have noticed, have a definite opinion on, and feel competent to judge.
 Please add comments or indicate specifics if possible.

A. Viewing Conditions

1. Screen brightness
 Too dark Too bright
2. Uniformity of illumination
 Uneven Uniform
3. Flicker/fluctuating intensity
 Annoying None
4. Color and brightness change between reels
 Poor Well matched
5. Physical condition of screen (tears, seams, discoloration)
 Poor Excellent
6. Indicate location of bad areas of screen surface:
7. Comments _____

(Optimum) ↓

B. Ambient Light

1. Stray light on screen
 Annoying None
2. Indicate source: _____
3. Light sources within field of view
 Annoying Well shielded
4. Source (e.g., exit signs): _____
5. Auditorium lighting during show
 Too dark Too bright
6. Auditorium lighting between shows
 Too dark Too bright
7. Comments _____

C. Image Quality

1. Sharpness
 Blurry Sharp
2. Field flatness
 Edges less sharp Uniform
3. Focus drift
 Distracting changes Consistent
4. Flare (loss of contrast)
 Noticeable Acceptable
5. Vertical steadiness (jump)
 Poor Excellent
6. Horizontal steadiness (weave)
 Poor Excellent
7. Travel ghost (image streaking)
 Noticeable None
8. Comments _____

D. Image Geometry

1. Height
 Too much of Noticeable cropping
 frame showed
2. Width
 Soundtrack or Noticeable cropping
 perfs showed
3. Skewing or geometric distortion
 Obvious No distortion
4. View of screen
 Obstructed Clear
5. Source of obstruction: _____
6. Comments _____

E. Sound Quality

1. Level (loudness)
 Too quiet Too loud
2. Level change reel-to-reel
 Noticeable changes Well matched
3. Low frequencies
 No bass Too bass
4. High frequencies
 No treble Too treble
5. Was there distracting hum, crackle, hiss, or other noise on the soundtrack?
 Annoying None
6. Describe: _____

(Optimum)

- 7. Wow/flutter Annoying None
- 8. Distortion/clipping Annoying None
- 9. Was movie advertised to be in stereo? Yes _____ No _____
- 10. Stereo effect None Distracting
- 11. Surround effects None Distracting
- 12. Comments _____

F. Room Acoustics

- 1. Acoustics (reverberation) Too live Too dead (muffled)
- 2. Was there distracting ambient noise? Annoying None
- 3. Indicate source (e.g., air conditioning, lobby, movie in adjacent theater): _____
- 4. Comments _____

G. Print Conditions

- 1. Were there any film breaks during show? Many None
- 2. Splices noticed Many None
- 3. Splices requiring reframing of projector Many None
- 4. Loss of continuity (missing film) Objectionable None
- 5. Visual cue marks at reel ends Objectionable Normal
- 6. Emulsion-side scratches (green-yellow-white) Objectionable None
- 7. Indicate position and appearance on screen:
- 8. Base-side scratches (black) Objectionable None
- 9. Indicate position and appearance on screen:
- 10. Overall (black) dirt level Objectionable Clean
- 11. Dirt/scratches at reel changes Objectionable Clean
- 12. Other print damage Much None
- 13. Describe _____
- 14. Hairs/dirt in aperture Much None

(Optimum)

- 15. Was print balance (flesh tone) correct? Too cold Too warm (blue/green)
- 16. Was reel-to-reel color balance consistent? Objectionable Consistent
- 17. Comments _____

H. Showmanship

- 1. Did picture start on time? Early Late
- 2. Was picture out of frame? Often Never
- 3. Framing (cropping) Too high Too low
- 4. Was countdown leader ever visible? Often Never
- 5. Were reels in wrong order? Yes No
- 6. Was wrong lens used (and then changed)? Yes No
- 7. Use of curtain (No curtain) Obtrusive Proper
- 8. Use of house lights Obtrusive Proper
- 9. Use of coming attraction trailers and advertising Excessive Enjoyable
- 10. Condition of trailers and date strips Poor Excellent
- 11. Adjustment of focus, framing, sound, etc. Obtrusive Subtle
- 12. Comments _____

I. Presentation Environment

Please make any comments you want about how the theater, its surroundings, facilities, and personnel, may have contributed to, or detracted from, your enjoyment:

Thank you for your participation in helping to enhance the motion-picture experience. PLEASE RETURN YOUR TICKET STUB(S) AND THE COMPLETED EVALUATION SHEET TO THE PERSON AND ADDRESS INDICATED ON THE BOX OFFICE SIGN. To encourage your further participation, the theater may reimburse you for the admission price at its discretion.

The opinions expressed on this voluntary evaluation carry no authority other than the personal professional opinion of the person filling out the evaluation sheet. The theater is under no obligation or liability to act on the comments.