

## Lessons Learned from Viewers of Giant Screen Films

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Over the last six years, the National Science Foundation has funded ten or more giant screen films on a wide variety of science topics. During the development phase, each film project obtained feedback from potential audience members, and many also examined the impact of the final film on actual viewing audiences. Multimedia Research has acted as an independent evaluator on seven giant screen films: *Stormchasers*, *Special Effects*, *Everest*, *The Greatest Places*, *Island of the Sharks* and the yet-to-be-released films - *Dolphins* and *Galapagos*. The evaluation process supported by the National Science Foundation grants begins with preproduction work to provide a basic understanding of the target audience, proceeds to formative evaluation using a conceptual version of the film and/or a rough cut or first assembly, and finishes with a summative evaluation to assess the final film's impact.<sup>1</sup> This paper will focus on what our evaluations of the above mentioned films have taught us about making this film format an entertaining and effective tool for lifelong learning by adult audiences.

### The adult audience

In our experience, the adult audience of giant screen films in American museum theaters ranges in age from their twenties to eighties with a mean age in the early forties. The typical viewing audience is comprised of more women than men and only two to three percent minorities. More importantly for the issue of lifelong learning, these museum film audiences are highly educated, with about one-third having a post-graduate degree and one-quarter reporting that their occupation is related to science. The adult audience waiting at the door of the museum theater is also very experienced with the giant screen format, with only one-quarter waiting to see their first film and one-quarter having viewed more than four large-format films.

### Experiential quality

Clearly the most critical feature of a giant screen film for the adult viewer is achieving a "you are there" feeling. This can be a first-person experience, as when the viewer "falls" off a skyscraper with King Kong in *Special Effects*, or a third-person feeling of being physically and mentally immersed in an environment or adventure, as when the viewer sees and hears the extraordinary effort it takes for climbers to lift one foot after the other up the mountain in *Everest*. Theater-goers expect to experience vicariously the environments promised by the film titles; they want to swim with sharks and climb with lemurs. Sometimes disappointment results when it is impossible physically to provide the first-person experience; for example, *Stormchasers* successfully created the feeling of the "chase" but some viewers unrealistically wanted to be "in" the tornado. Pity the filmmaker who tried to meet that expectation!

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of all phases of giant screen film evaluation, see Barbara Flagg (1998, Fall). "Audience research: Process and results." *The Big Frame*, Fall 1998, pp. 50-53, 82-85.

Theater-goers anticipate that at least one scene in a film will elicit the feeling of vertigo or stomach flip-flop, although a small percentage of adult respondents list this kind of segment as a negative feature of the giant screen film experience. They are not pleased to feel a queasy stomach.

### Cinematography

Excellent photography is the second most frequently mentioned feature of a good giant screen film. The panoramic views in *The Greatest Places*, the swirling schools of fish in *Island of the Sharks*, flying through a hurricane in *Stormchasers*, climbing the ice in *Everest* are all examples of the "beautiful scenery" and "larger-than-life" experience expected and appreciated by viewers of giant screen films. The only time when the giant-screen photography is questioned is when the opening segment is slow, philosophical and panoramic rather than attention-grabbing. Our appeal data show that if the audience had a remote, the channel would likely be changed in the first minute, but in the theater, they are a captive audience and have come to expect such openings as typical.

Providing historical context is a challenge in this format because the footage is often in a non-giant size. Historical photos of Everest climbers, original special effects films by Muybridge and television newsroom footage of storm coverage all fill a role in telling the films' stories, but the size differential is so obvious and jarring that viewers bring it up as a concern. Use of non-giant visuals needs strong justification to avoid being a memorable exception in an otherwise entertaining experience.

Supplemental explanatory animations, although atypical in giant-screen films, are appreciated where they add meaningful interpretation of the content; for example, the movement of currents surrounding Cocos Island was visually reinforced with an animated graphic in *Island of the Sharks*.

### Informative value

Among the top three features that audiences say they like about giant screen films is to have a "wonderful learning experience." Films that give only a vicarious experience or only beautiful photography are not as interesting as ones that also present new, unfamiliar and intriguing facts, concepts, events, methods or processes. Even without much narration, a strong visual can carry a great deal of information. For example, *Island of the Sharks* audiences viewed the swirling schools of fish being eaten and were surprised to observe the number of fish, the size of the school, the tornado-like movement, the beauty of the patterns, the herding technique, the diversity of animals taking part in the same hunt and the predators' decimation of the whole school. Words were not needed to convey all these conclusions - only the fascinating immersive visual.

On the other hand, visuals alone cannot always answer the adult audience's curiosities and desire for more specific and explanatory information. We frequently hear complaints that giant screen films are light on information: the films are "short on facts," "too simplistic," "have too much fluff." One respondent commented, for example: "Many IMAX films have sacrificed information for special effects. Better to puzzle young viewers and let them ask questions than bore older ones with

information everybody knows." In our analyses of media formats, we find that giant screen science films are much lighter in content than science television programs. Viewers can absorb and understand more than giant screen producers give them credit for, especially since the adult audience is so highly educated, with almost three-quarters having a college degree.

Audience members particularly like to hear of unusual or unfamiliar facts. Viewers of *The Greatest Places*, for example, were fascinated to learn the specifics that "trees live 1000 years on Madagascar," that Tibetan "temperatures can drop 80 degrees in a day," that "the Amazon has one-tenth of the bird species in the world" and that Greenland is "the largest island in the world."

Beyond factual information, our evaluations show that audiences also successfully learn about science concepts (like altitude acclimatization and plate tectonics in *Everest*) and about scientific methods (like those used to study, track and predict severe weather in *Stormchasers*). Moreover, adults report that seeing a giant-screen film affects their behavior in subsequent weeks: They discuss the film with others, search out more information, view related television programs and plan outings stimulated by the viewing experience.

Related to the informational quality of a film, audiences frequently tell us that they miss a strong storyline. Giant screen films tend to be compilations of short vignettes or "sequences strung together but not necessarily related" or "a medley of random information," as described by two of our respondents. A strong storyline is not only appealing but provides a structure on which the viewers can hang their memories of the science information presented. Facts and concepts learned are retained longer with a memorable story.

### Inspirational quality

The audience does not typically credit human characters as an important feature in a giant screen film. They are definitely secondary to the natural environment, the animals and the scientific information or processes presented. The danger of the mountain in *Everest*, the larger-than-life size of the falls, river and desert in *The Greatest Places*, the power of the storms in *Stormchasers*, all play a more significant role for viewers than the human characters. On the other hand, viewers recognized and applauded the inspirational courage of climbers in *Everest*, the survival skills of Tibetans in *The Greatest Places* and the dangerous risk-taking of scientists in *Stormchasers*.

### Sound effects, music and narration

Sound effects, music and narration in giant screen films are most often spontaneously mentioned by viewers only when they are discordant or irritating. Adults will comment when the theater sound is too loud, the sound effects do not seem natural, the musical mood does not match the visual mood or the narrating voice is difficult to understand. The film narrator and composer are remembered infrequently, in spite of well-known reputations. One viewer commented that *Everest* was "so spectacular that you could have had Mickey Mouse talking and it wouldn't have made a difference." Viewers of *The Greatest Places* noted and admired the change in musical themes with the

change in places. The attraction of a giant screen film must be carried by more than a famous narrator or composer.

In summary, giant film audiences are attracted mainly to the format by their expectations of vicarious experiences, vertigo feelings, exquisite cinematography and learning new and unusual information. These educated audiences also expect more from the format in the way of information and storyline than is typically provided.