THE END? FAR FROM IT

Once upon a time, films would open, close, appear on video, be shown on television, then vanish. Now with dozens of television channels to fill and rentals going postal, some never go away. Ed Cumming looks at the new afterlife of a movie ...

From INTELLIGENT LIFE Magazine, Winter 2010
http://moreintelligentlife.com/content/arts/ed-cumming/end-far-it?page=0%2C0

For all its themes of inspiration and triumph, "The Shawshank Redemption" was a rather uninspiring and un-triumphant film when it was first released in 1994. Though critically well received, it did terribly at the box office, taking only $18m in America against a budget of $35m. Though nominated for several awards, it won none. This prison drama, starring Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman, looked as if it would slide quietly into obscurity, like so many movies.

But it didn't. Through word-of-mouth recommendations it gathered momentum after it left the box office, gaining a loyal following on video (VHS) and continuing on to cable television and then DVD when it came along. Now it is ever-present, repeated on channels around the world and still watched in droves (though some might have thought its French title, "Les Evadés" or "The Escapers", rather gives the plot away). Like the gross-out teen comedy "American Pie", or the James Bond films, "Shawshank" has found a tireless audience. In America, channels will air it before a new series, in the hope that its many fans keep watching afterwards. In Britain the story is similar. Steve Jenkins, the BBC's head of acquisitions, says, "When we ask viewers what they value, movies still score highly, usually just behind news."

"Shawshank" was not just a sleeper hit commercially. As its popularity has grown, so has consensus about its quality: it now has an average rating of 9.2 on the movie buff's website imdb, and tussles with "The Godfather" at the top of lists of the all-time best films. Yet for all its delayed success, "The Shawshank Redemption" was the high-water mark of what might be called the traditional afterlife of a movie. It was released theatrically, given a short rest period, was released on VHS rental, then VHS purchase, then given another rest period, then paid-for television, then repackaged again and sent around the world to re-appear for ever more on free-to-air TV. Its releases on each format were meticulously controlled and measured, and it became a television hit on the cusp of the DVD era, when television movies were still a bonding event—an occasion on which many people looked forward to seeing a movie for the first time, and a natural conclusion to a film's life-cycle.

Just 15 years later, the landscape is much altered, and the familiar afterlife of a movie is disintegrating. Families who gather round their television this Christmas will be observing a dying ritual. In Britain, where 23.25m people watched the first television showing of "Jaws" in 1981—almost as many as watched the news of JFK's assassination—broadcasters are now happy with half that number, even for a blockbuster premiere. Though this is happening all over the world, in Britain it is felt more acutely as there is no tradition of going to the cinema as a family to see a big movie released on Christmas Day, as there is in America. As Sukhdev Sandhu, film critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, puts it: "Cinema in Britain is a figure of speech: TV is the cinema. Most of the movies we watch, we watch on TV. The average Briton goes to the cinema three times a year. We look to the TV to give us our sense of festive community."

In Britain, where there were only three channels until 1982, there are now over 30 on Freeview alone, and America and most countries in Europe have even more. Step into the world of subscription cable or satellite, and that figure goes into the hundreds. There is more television than ever, and viewers have an increasingly bewildering choice of what to watch. The physical rental market has all but evaporated: in September,

Blockbuster went bankrupt in America. Under pressure from internet pirates, production and distribution companies are finding that their traditional post-cinema windows are being squeezed.

Cameron McCracken, the managing director of Pathé UK, produced the most-shown film on the BBC over the past five years, Nick Park's "Chicken Run". He says that where a film used to get four months in the cinema, there is increasing pressure to go down to three, and the DVD window is shrinking too. "The rule of thumb is that 25% of the total revenue is from theatrical release, 50% from DVD rights and 25% from TV. But DVD sales are falling, TV revenues are falling. We're in a difficult transition period. There is a switchover to new forms like on-demand, but they're nowhere near mass mediums yet." The changing mood has brought controversy; this year Disney squabbled with Britain's Odeon cinemas, after insisting that the theatrical release of Tim Burton's 3D animated "Alice in Wonderland" be cut to 13 weeks from 17, to minimise piracy and allow the DVD to appear before the World Cup in South Africa. Odeon eventually crumbled before the might of Mickey Mouse.

It's not bad business for everyone, however. In America the demise of Blockbuster was hastened by the arrival of Netflix, a mail-order subscription DVD service. It is a curiously analogue service in an increasingly digital world—users go online, select films they'd like to watch, and then for a fixed fee (varying on how many movies they want at any given moment) are posted one of their selections. The choice is almost unlimited, and there are none of the late fees. Helen Cowley, the editor of the British equivalent, Lovefilm, says that the flexibility has broadened people's tastes: "70% of our rentals are back-catalogue. People can take more of a risk." She cites "The Last King of Scotland" and "The Hurt Locker" as recent films with average box-office takings which were able to develop great post-theatrical momentum, like "The Shawshank Redemption", but faster. From 13 employees when it began six years ago, Lovefilm now employs 150, and has become the single biggest user of the first-class post, sending out 4.5m DVDs every month.

The speed of change is such that even as they control a lucrative newish market, these companies are already preparing for a DVD-free future. Lovefilm now streams movies from its website, and has begun to offer them direct to the PlayStation 3. These new avenues don't merely increase the opportunities for movies that have already been successful; they offer new possibilities for movies that might otherwise be forgotten. This year Lovefilm used its clout to promote a high-concept horror film, "Frozen", which got a cinematic release where previously it might have gone straight to video. Boundaries are similarly being blurred across media: when the Lovefilm site was promoting the popular Wild West videogame "Red Dead Redemption", it took the opportunity to resuscitate Nick Cave's western noir "The Proposition".

All this innovation may look as if it's changing the afterlife of movies for the better—more choice for the audience, less control for the billion-dollar distributors. But McCracken is more circumspect. "There's still a lot of debate about the reality of the long tail, whether it will be good news for indie films and the like," he says. "It may not exist. If you have a lot of marketing muscle you can get your title up to the front page. The BBC did some research recently which showed that the number of people who get past the front page of iPlayer [its online catch-up service for viewers in Britain] is terrifyingly small." But he says there's still reason to be cheerful. "Either you have a movie people want or you have no value at all," he says. "There's a certain amount of exhilaration in that." The famous motto from "The Shawshank Redemption" may need rewriting for the modern movie. While the cinema can hold it prisoner, the internet can set it free.