**Video Script**

Lecture 20 – Film Fights Back

Fall 2020

**Welcome**

Over the last few weeks, we’ve learned how our broadcast industries—radio, and then television—came to be. They evolved in a media ecosystem where film was dominant, but they developed their own characteristics based on what made them different. They were consumed in the home, not in public theaters surrounded by strangers. They had broadcast days designed for preferred listeners at particular times. They told serial stories using intimate, authentic stars—and those stories *constantly* tried to sell us things. And, unlike the film industry, broadcast media were highly regulated by the government.

**Hollywood**

But all the while, as radio and television were moving into our homes, film was chugging along. Let’s check back in to see what the movie business was doing while radio and television were stealing the spotlight.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for today.

**Vertical Integration**

So, when we last left the film industry, Will Hays had formed the Production Code Administration, the film industry was regulating itself according to those rules, and the big Hollywood studios were structured like this. They were vertically integrated. This meant they owned and operated the production, distribution, and exhibition aspects of the motion picture business.

**Paramount Decree**

At least, they were structured this way until 1948. **[ANIMATION]** That was the year of a Supreme Court decision known variously as the United States v. Paramount Pictures, the Paramount Decree, the Paramount Decision, or the Paramount Case. I’ll call it the Paramount Decree.

**[ANIMATION]** The case was actually the culmination of years of investigation of the movie industry by the U.S. Department of Justice, who had been critical for a long time about how much control the big studios exercised.

**[ANIMATION]** In 1938, the Department of Justice filed an anti-trust suit against the studio/theater businesses. This was the same kind of litigation that took down the Edison Trust 23 years earlier. The DOJ says big studios like Paramount are operating in monopolistic ways.

**[ANIMATION]** In 1940, that case is settled through a consent decree, which is basically just an agreement that if the movie industry complies with certain changes, the government won’t continue prosecuting the case. The studios are given set of rules that are intended to break up their vertical integration—the crux of the consent decree is that studios can’t control both production and exhibition. They have to get rid of their theaters.

**[ANIMATION]** But, surprise! The studios love making money and are reticent to relinquish that capacity. Meaning, they keep right on operating studios and theaters.

**[ANIMATION]** The result is that in 1948, the case is taken up by the Supreme Court and the court rules in favor of the Department of Justice. The studios lose.

**Goodbye/hello**

What does that mean in practicality? **[ANIMATION]** It means saying goodbye to a lot of old-school studio era practices like block-booking and blind-bidding. It means goodbye to a related practice called circuit dealing, which meant licensing a film into all theaters in a chain, as opposed to negotiating on a theater-by-theater basis. And, most importantly, it *actually* meant goodbye to studios owning their own theaters.

**[ANIMATION]** It also ushers in some new business practices. The Paramount Decree results in studios making fewer pictures. They don’t need to push out 52 projects per year to make sure their theaters are stocked with new films, and there’s no financial incentive to churn out cheaper, sub-par fare if they can’t force theaters to book them. As a result, the era of stars being signed to long term contracts with one studio more or less comes to a close—no reason to keep stars on retainer if they’re investing in fewer pictures. Studios also have to make the case for every picture they make, pitching it to theaters and movie-goers alike.

**Graph**

So, that’s the lay of the land for the film industry as we enter the 1950s. The Paramount Decree fundamentally changes the shape of the business. How are things going from the perspective of audiences?

Well, this graph shows the percentage of the U.S. population going to the movies at least once a week from 1930 to 2000. So, very regular moviegoers. You can see that there’s a dip during the Great Depression, which makes sense—people had much less money to spend on leisure, and that’s when we get the pre-Code era of trying to lure people back in with nurses in their nighties and tommy-gun-wielding gangsters.

Things creep back up through the early 1940s, but after 1946, it declines sharply, and it never recovers. Why?

**Suburbanization**

A big reason is exactly what we were talking about last week: suburbanization means people are moving into newly constructed neighborhoods. These driver-friendly, single-family-home neighborhoods do *not,* for the most part, have big movie palaces in them. Those theaters were costly for the studios to build in the 20s and 30s, and they were mostly located in cities where there were population centers to support them.

**Television**

The other big reason is that people in the suburbs already have an alternative form of entertainment suited to their lifestyle, and that’s television.

**Pause and think**

So, here’s the point where I ask you to pause the lecture and brainstorm for a minute, or chat with someone. Based on everything you know about television so far, what might be some of the advantages to watching moving images on television in the 1950s? And what are some of the drawbacks?

**Advantages/disadvantages**

Here are some of the ones I can think of. **[ANIMATION]** In terms of advantages, the television sitting smack dab in the middle of your living room is certainly more convenient than piling into your car and driving to the nearest movie theater. It’s also “free,” though that’s in quotation marks for two reasons. One, you have to buy a television set. But two—and more importantly—you allow yourself to be advertised to whenever you watch it. You pay for programs with the time and attention you pay to commercials.

Another advantage of television is that even though it’s a visual medium in addition to an audio one, you can still multitask and chat while you watch. That’s not something you can do in a movie theater. And finally, if you have multiple sets you can watch multiple programs under one roof. There’s potentially something for everyone.

**[ANIMATION]** In terms of disadvantages, programming is somewhat limited at first. There’s only a few networks and it took time to roll those out across the nation, too. You can’t see very elite movie stars on television, even though you might get an occasional guest appearance from second-tier film personalities. And in terms of the actual technology, 1950s televisions have a small screen, poor sound, and they’re black and white.

Film studios try to fight back in the 1950s by taking advantage of *all of the things television can’t do.* Movies get bigger, louder, more epic, and more colorful.

Take the 1959 historical epic *Ben Hur*. The most famous scene from this film is a thrilling chariot race where Charleton Heston is racing around the track, all of these horse hooves thundering by. Doesn’t that sound like an extravagant, bombastic feat of filmmaking? It *is*. Now, let’s approximate what that would look like on a 1950s television.

**[Play clip.]** Not exactly thrilling, right?

**Ten Commandments**

That scene was meant to be on a big screen with loud, booming speakers, and the film industry knows it. Biblical and historical epics like *Ben Hur* or *The Ten Commandments* are one way the film industry tries to lure people back to theaters in the 1950s. They’re enormous and action-packed and loud and colorful and thrilling, but they’re also kind of moral, too. Remember, the Hays code is still in effect!

**War films**

Hollywood also puts out a spate of war films, which are epic and action-packed in their own way. They’re also quite patriotic, and they honor the sacrifices of all those WWII and Korean War veterans. What you see here is a still from *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, from 1957, but you also get films like *From Here to Eternity*, *Sayonara,* and *The Caine Mutiny*.

**Disney**

There’s also a continuous stream of bright, colorful, fun-for-the-whole-family Disney features. Here, you see a still from *Lady and the Tramp* from 1955, but the decade also saw the release of animated classics like *Cinderella, Alice in Wonderland, Peter Pan,* and *Sleeping Beauty*, in addition to live-action films like *Old Yeller* or *The Shaggy Dog.*

**Cinerama**

But perhaps more than any of these genres, the experiment that was Cinerama tried to highlight all of the things the big screen could do that the small screen simply couldn’t. Cinerama was like an early IMAX, and the format was a popular attraction in the 1950s and 1960s. Cinerama movies were shot on large format film and shown on a curved screen—you can see that in the photo here, of a recent Cinerama screening in Seattle.

In most places, Cinerama films were distributed and exhibited like special events because they required the temporary construction of that special curved surface to project onto.

**Venice**

The films were shot so as to make the viewer feel like they were in the scene, and the large format and curved screen only made them seem more immersive. Here, you can see there was a scene where the viewer was meant to feel like they were traveling the canals of Venice in a gondola.

**Waterskiing**

Here, the viewer was supposed to feel like they were in the speedboat towing a bunch of champion waterskiiers. And Cinerama films—which were nothing more than a collection of vignettes filmed through these point of view shots—were *really profitable*, in the 50s and 60s. The film *This Is Cinerama* from 1952 made $41.6 million dollars back then, which is almost half a billion dollars today.

**Cinerama Dome**

Here’s an image of the fabulously mid-century Cinerama Dome in Hollywood, one of the few theaters ever build dedicated specifically to Cinerama films. What I find fascinating is that in trying to differentiate itself from television, film kind of took itself back to its very earliest days. What is Cinerama but a recycled “cinema of attractions,” a spectacle rather than a story?

**[ANIMATION]** In 1952, *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther went to his first Cinerama film. Here’s what he had to say about the experience.

*“the shrill screams of the ladies and the pop-eyed amazement of the men when the huge screen was opened to its full size and a thrillingly realistic ride on a roller-coaster was pictured upon it, attested to the shock of the surprise. People sat back in spellbound wonder as the scenic program flowed across the screen. It was really as though most of them were seeing motion pictures for the first time.... the effect of Cinerama in this its initial display is frankly and exclusively "sensational," in the literal sense of that word.”*

What he means is that Cinerama was turning film from a storytelling medium back into a sensational spectacle that worked on your body and served only to dazzle your eyes. Television can’t do that, but then again, television in the 1950s doesn’t have to.

**Drive-in**

The 1950s also saw a big experiment in film exhibition: the drive-in theater. This was how exhibitors thought they might be able to bring film to the suburbs. Drive-in theaters took advantage of suburban car culture as well as the availability of undeveloped land in these new neighborhoods. They could also be constructed pretty quickly, since they just required a screen, the speaker system, a big, paved lot.

**Drive-in (continued)**

Your reading for this lecture by Mary Morley Cohen points out that most drive-ins did a lot more than just show films, however. In addition to the movie, she says that drive-ins also offered attractions like

*a playground, pony rides, a dancefloor, shuffleboard and horseshoe tournaments, carnivals, midnight “spook shows,” baby parades* [whatever that is??], *beautiful child contests, daredevil car rides, circus acts, high-tower dives, anniversary and birthday celebrations, fireworks, a picnic and play area for use by the community during the day…*

..and also, hilariously, *television*! If you can’t beat ‘em, I suppose, join ‘em. Drive-ins combined the spectacle of film with the distracted viewing practices of home. Many people who went to drive-ins didn’t even know or care what film was playing.

Drive-ins were an odd combination of private and public space—you were out, but you were also in your car, which was something of a bubble. Because people took advantage of that privacy—wink wink, horny teens, nudge nudge—drive-ins had a little bit of an unsavory reputation, and the movie business was ambivalent about them.

However, drive-ins also had some unexpected advantages for populations that were so frequently underserved by the amenities of the suburbs. Disabled people could watch from the comfort of their vehicle as opposed to the standard theater seat; the hearing impaired could turn up the volume as loud as they needed. Moms could bring their kids to the drive in and not worry about how loud they were being. And drive-ins were often desegregated spaces, since cars were considered “private.” This gave non-White Americans access to motion pictures that might have previously been denied or at least constrained.

**Life Magazine**

As usual, I went poking around in popular magazines of the era to see what I could turn up on drive-ins, and this article from the September 24, 1951 issue of *Life* magazine does not disappoint. I’m going to read this excerpt this to you and while I realize it’s long for a quote, it perfectly encapsulates almost everything we’ve been learning about media in the 1950s:

*Showmen toting up figures at summers’ end have discovered at least one streak of silver in the lining of movieland’s clouds. Out in the open spaces, in potato field and prairie, cars were being parked by the thousand, bumper to bumper, in drive-in theaters. In barely three years’ time the drive-in, which was invented in 1933 but considered something of a freak in the early days, has become a pillar of the business. There were 295 of them in early 1948. There are 3,580 operating in the U.S. today, and almost all of them seem to be making money.*

*The drive-ins have proved a unique means for bringing back some of the “lost audience”—above the age of 35—which stopped going to movie theaters long ago. Admission is low, especially when you pay by the carload. There is no parking problem. You are not distracted by the love-makers behind you, and you can do your own love-making in privacy.* [I should note that the term “love-making” has migrated in meaning a bit since the 1950s…they aren’t talking about having sex.] *The kids can come along, generally for free, and if they don’t like the movie there are playgrounds for them. Anyway, there is no baby sitter to pay.*

*For the owner the drive-in furnishes considerable economic advantages. It costs little to build, less to operate. There are no seats to be ripped up by vandals or covered with gum. By serving meals to the audience in their cars, the proprietor can add restaurant profits to his box office intake. For the audience the drive-in has many of the conveniences of television. It offers entertainment for the whole family in cozy quarters. In addition it sometimes provides carhop service, washing machines, even beauty parlors, and is somewhat more likely than TV to provide a show worth looking at.*

**Bottle-warmer & planes**

Now, the best part about this article is that it included photographs of drive-ins from around the country. I want to show you the two best pictures. **[ANIMATION]** First, here’s a photo of a bottle-warming table. The caption says it is provided free by the theater and lets mothers heat up their formulas, thus enabling them to attend shows with infants in their arms. This is kind of a remarkable accommodation for mothers, don’t you think? The seats at the Alamo Drafthouse might recline and they might bring queso right to your seat, but even they don’t encourage moms to bring crying babies (except for a few limited screenings) nor do they offer a place to warm up their bottles.

**[ANIMATION]** Second, here’s a picture of a drive-in theater in Belmar, New Jersey, which is on the shore. It was located next to a civilian airfield and it included *plane parking* spots, available for 65 cents per passenger. Pilots could taxi their aircraft right over and watch the latest feature. I mean, how cool is that? That’s a date so amazing I can’t believe *The Bachelor* producers didn’t come up with it during Pilot Pete’s season.

**William Castle**

Okay, moving on from drive-ins, there’s one last way that this man, William Castle, and a handful of others tried to lure audiences back into movie theaters in the 1950s. And that’s through marketing gimmicks.

William Castle was a film producer and director, and he was known for churning out low-budget films, usually some kind of thriller, really quickly. His films were shlocky—titles included *Macabre, The Tingler, 13 Frightened Girls,* and *Mr. Sardonicus*, and they often show up in the Alamo Drafthouse pre-show reel for horror films.

**Rosemary’s Baby**

Because it’s spooky October, I will mention that he did produce one A-picture, and that’s 1968’s *Rosemary’s Baby*. He also has a quick cameo in it as this weird possible Satanist standing outside the phonebooth.

**Smell-o-vision**

But what William Castle was known for more than anything else was his marketing gimmicks. He was able to convince audiences that his sub-par horror films were worth coming to the theater for purely on the basis of stunts, commercials, ads, and tricks. You’ll hear about him and other 1950s marketing schemes in the video essay linked in this module.

**Family in car**

So, in summary, the 1948 Paramount Decree abolished the ways of the old studio system. Television posed a unique threat to the film industry and tanked moviegoing as people moved out to the suburbs. The studios fought back by playing to film’s strengths: size, sound, color, and thrill. The 1950s also saw a number of fads like drive-ins, Cinerama, and wacky marketing stunts, too—and as short-lived as they were, for the most part, they were trying to solve the same problem as the studios. They were trying to get butts back in seats. They were trying to get people to go to the movies.

Now, that’s where this lecture used to end.

But due to recent actions by the Department of Justice, I have to add an important a post script!

**Justice Department Files…**

The Paramount Decree stood in place for more than 70 years. Do we still need it?

**[ANIMATION]** According the DOJ, the answer is *no*. They reopened the case for consideration in 2018, and in 2019 filed a motion to overturn it, saying that “since the district court entered the Paramount Decrees, the motion picture industry has undergone considerable change.”

**DOJ**

Here’s the outline of their argument. The Department of Justice said, firstly, **[ANIMATION]** that none of the Paramount defendants own a significant number of movie theaters anymore. **[ANIMATION]** They said that most metropolitan areas have more than one movie theater and that those theaters are multiplexes, which show films from different distributors, so there is more competition.

**[ANIMATION]** Finally, they made an argument about technology. They said that new methods of film distribution developed over the last 70 years (like cable, VOD, DVD, and streaming) have made strict regulation of movie theaters a moot point. People have more choices, so even if studios owned theaters it might not constitute a monopolistic business practice anymore.

**Hollywood Reporter**

And indeed, the DOJ prevailed. The Paramount Decree was overturned in August. It no longer applies. What this will mean for the movie business is unclear.

**Grauman’s**

**[ANIMATION]** First, the Department of Justice argues that the Paramount Decree no longer applied because the old studios no longer held and were not trying to acquire theaters. And I think that’s true, but what about players like Amazon or Netflix, the latter of which has already begun buying theaters. Is that cause for concern?

**[ANIMATION]** Second, will we see the return of block booking? Will it make financial sense for Disney to package high-budget Marvel films with much cheaper ones?

**[ANIMATION]** And finally, in an age where Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and other streaming services distribute their own content to their own proprietary platforms, can we meaningfully differentiate production, exhibition, and distribution anymore? What do monopolistic *streaming* practices look like?

These are just a few of the questions that come to mind for me as we enter a new media landscape without the ruling that had governed it for 70 years. Keep them in mind when you hear about entertainment news and keep an eye out for how corporations respond.