

### The Film Industry in the 1950s

The film industry believed that the greatest threat to its continued success was posed by television, especially in light of the Paramount decrees. The studios seemed to be losing their control of the nation's theatres at the same time that exhibitors were losing their audiences to television. The studios therefore attempted to diminish television's appeal by exploiting the two obvious advantages that film enjoyed over the new medium—the size of its images and, at a time when all television broadcasting was in black and white, the ability to produce photographic colour. (In the 1952–53 season, the ability to produce multiple-track stereophonic sound joined this list.)

In the late 1940s, fewer than 12 percent of Hollywood features were produced in colour, primarily because of the expense of three-strip Technicolor filming. In 1950, however, a federal consent decree dissolved the Technicolor Corporation's de facto monopoly on the process, and Kodak simultaneously introduced a new multilayered film stock in which emulsions sensitive to the red, green, and blue parts of the spectrum were bonded together on a single roll. Patented as Eastmancolor, this “**integral tri-pack**” process offered excellent colour resolution at a low cost because it could be used with conventional cameras. Its availability hastened the industry's conversion to full colour production. By 1954 more than 50 percent of American features were made in colour, and the figure reached 94 percent by 1970.

The aspect ratio (the ratio of width to height) of the projected motion-picture image had been standardized at 1.33 to 1 since 1932, but, as television eroded the film industry's domestic audience, the studios increased screen size as a way of attracting audiences back into theatres. For both optical and architectural reasons this change in size usually meant increased width, not increased height. Early experiments with multiple-camera wide-screen (Cinerama, 1952) and stereoscopic 3-D Natural Vision, 1952) provoked audience interest, but it was an anamorphic process called CinemaScope that prompted the wide-screen revolution.

Introduced by Twentieth Century-Fox in the biblical epic “*The Robe*” (1953), CinemaScope used an anamorphic lens to squeeze a wide-angle image onto conventional 35-mm film stock and a similar lens to restore the image's original width in projection. CinemaScope's aspect ratio was 2.55 to 1, and the system had the great advantage of requiring no special cameras, film stock, or projectors. By the end of 1954, every Hollywood studio but Paramount had leased a version of the process from Fox (Paramount adopted a non-anamorphic process called

“VistaVision” that exposed double-frame images by running film through special cameras and projectors horizontally rather than vertically), and many studios were experimenting with wide-gauge film systems (Todd-AO 1955; Panavision-70, 1960) that required special equipment but eliminated the distortion inherent in the anamorphic process.

Like the coming of sound, the conversion to wide-screen formats produced an initial regression as filmmakers learned how to compose and edit their images for the new elongated frame. Sound had promoted the rise of aurally intensive genres such as the musical and the gangster film, and the wide-screen format similarly created a bias in favour of visually spectacular subjects and epic scale. Given the political paranoia of the times, few subjects could be treated seriously, and the studios concentrated on presenting traditional genre fare—westerns, musicals, comedies, and blockbusters—suitable for wide-screen treatment. Only a director like Hitchcock, whose style was oblique and imagist, could prosper in such a climate.

In spite of the major film companies’ elaborate strategies of defense, they continued to decline throughout the 1950s and ’60s. Because they could no longer dominate the exhibition sector, they faced serious competition for the first time from independent and foreign filmmakers. “Runaway” productions (films made away from the studios, frequently abroad, to take advantage of lower costs) became common, and the Production Code was dissolved as a series of federal court decisions between 1952 and 1958 extended First Amendment protection to motion pictures. As their incomes shrank, the major companies’ vast studios and backlots became liabilities that ultimately crippled them. The minor companies, however, owned modest studio facilities and had lost nothing by the Paramount decrees because they controlled no theatres. They were thus able to prosper during this era, eventually becoming major companies themselves in the 1970s.