Allied Artists: A Studio for the ‘50s

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In the classical era of Hollywood, the film industry had a relatively stable structure, with the Big Five and the Little Three, and independent studios, and for many years enjoyed great amounts of profit due to this stability.\(^1\) However, with the advent of television and a series of other factors in the late 1940s, Hollywood underwent a major overhaul, and virtually all the studios were put in a position apropos to being an independent, given that theatres, following the Paramount Decision, could now choose which content they would exhibit.\(^2\) A signal example of this phenomenon is the presence of Allied Artists as a contender among the majors in this period. The company began as an independent “Poverty Row” studio, Monogram Pictures, in 1931, releasing B Westerns, comedies and horror films (often with Bela Lugosi, such as *The Invisible Ghost* (1941)).\(^3\) Monogram also made a number of low-grade adaptations of literary classics like *The Moonstone* (1934) from Wilkie Collins’s famous detective novel and an adaptation of *Jane Eyre*\(^4\) in the same year.\(^1\) The studio also supported itself with series, including ‘Bomba the Jungle Boy’, a response to MGM’s Tarzan films and *their* derivative, Johnny Weissmuller’s ‘Jungle Jim’ series made for Columbia.\(^5\) A page of press-book exploitation material from *Adventures of Kitty O’Day* calls attention to the movie’s series status as part of its advertising, proclaiming “It’s the second of this SOCKO series! Cash in with these hard-hitting ad mats!”\(^6\)

All of this highlights the fact that Monogram’s output was intended purely as commercial product, and the series format perfectly embodies the idea of the “programmer”, a descriptor that fits most of Monogram’s product. Programmers, according to Brian Taves, were films that could play in any part of a film program, which used to include newsreels, cartoons, and an “A” and “B” feature, and which neither received the rave press notices of an A nor the critical disdain

\(^{\text{1}}\) This is a testament to Monogram production chief Trem Carr’s business model of churning out as many as twenty low-budget (approximately $25,000) films a year. As will later become clear, Allied Artists head Steve Broidy probably would have devoted special attention to such prestigious literary titles and film one of them at a large budget as a marquee film for it’s year (as he eventually did with 1962’s Melville story *Billy Budd*). (from *Grand Design*, p. 321-22)
justly heaped on movies from even less reputable studios than Monogram.\(^7\) The flexibility of the programmer is also exemplified by the fact that Monogram often remade their own films, such as making two versions of the story 16 Fathoms Deep, in 1934 and 1948, both with Lon Chaney Jr.\(^8\) Relying on practices such as series and remakes (much as studios do today, incidentally), Monogram was essentially a very conservative operation, and when the market for B movies evaporated in the early fifties they were put in a difficult position.

In 1948, the Paramount Decision was reached to divest studios of their theatres and with the advent of the fifties TV was becoming a greater force in the communications and entertainment industries.\(^9\) For example, an article about television in the *Film Daily Yearbook* in 1949 stated: “the FCC has approximately 150 applications for television stations. Couple the mushrooming of stations with the manufacturing of home receiving sets…then there is some reason to believe theatres may be affected.”\(^10\) These factors contributed to theatres becoming more selective in their bookings, and relate to the decision made by Monogram to create Allied Artists in 1946.\(^11\) An extremely interesting notice in *Variety* in January of 1948 highlights the reasons behind that decision. The one-page advertisement is shown as a type-written letter from Allied Artists executive Steve Broidy that to exhibitors. The letter and accompanying indicia on the advertisement encapsulate in one source virtually every important aspect of the transition from Monogram to Allied Artists in the late 1940s. Broidy’s letter acknowledges that “Everybody’s talking” about the trust suits and decrees imposed by the Paramount Decision and that studios are limiting their new production, then says that “The throttle is wide open for full speed ahead at Allied Artists”, and that “We have a solid line-up of top “A” product ready for release”. However, he then makes the concession that “Every dollar spent at Allied Artists is delivered on your screen.” Below the letter there is a list of Allied releases and below this the
sentence “Allied Artists Pictures are distributed through Monogram Exchanges”. The ad speaks to the fact that AA was an attempt to disassociate from Monogram’s unexceptional but lucrative programmers in the promise of “A” product, but still retains ties to a B ethic of stripped-down, efficient production that puts “every dollar on the screen”.

Perhaps the most prophetic aspect of Broidy’s ringing in of his new company in this way are the titles that appear in the ad, representing Broidy’s prediction of “A” picture success in Allied’s future, which later would actually be the case. To take one as an example, Black Gold (1947) was directed by Phil Karlson and starred Anthony Quinn, whose first starring role this was after co-starring roles in 46 previous films. The movie also used the cheap color process Cinecolor, and runs 89 minutes, two features that while not achieving the true prestige of contemporary A films still represent a valiant attempt at doing so. According to David Bordwell, the B film was low-budget, ran to only 60-80 minutes, and showcased lesser-known players, a description corresponding to Taves’ for programmers. Black Gold and the other fledgling A films Allied made prior to the fifties do not fit this description entirely, while still maintaining a relationship to the B film in their use of a cheap color process like Cinecolor. Take any random thirties Monogram film, however, and it fits the description perfectly: Lost in the Stratosphere (1934) runs 64 minutes, and stars unknowns William Cagney and Edward Nugent, and was made during the aforementioned period where Trem Carr was making films for about $25,000. So while still under the Monogram banner, Allied Artists Productions, Inc. in 1948 represents the embryonic beginnings a major shift for the company.

In analysing this shift in the remainder of this essay I will take up several issues. Firstly, how can the almost-As and eventual A films produced by Allied Artists be accounted for, and more importantly, how can their continued production of B product be understood, particularly
in genres like the science fiction film, which Allied became somewhat of a specialist in later in the 1950s. My proposition for resolving these questions ties into the changing landscape of the film industry and American culture at large as Allied Artists replaced Monogram completely as a corporate entity in 1953. AA, a studio barely remembered today, functions as a microcosmic example of the ways the industry had to adapt to the sweep of changes it faced in the fifties. Interestingly though, the studio did not abandon production of short, low-budget films in this decade, and my analysis of some of their science fiction output will attempt to explain this important fact.

As I mentioned before, the Paramount Decree and the development of television levelled the playing field to some degree in terms of putting studios in competition to present the best individual features possible to exhibitors, hence the overall tone of Broidy’s letter. The significant impact of this for a B studio like Monogram was that low-quality product the likes of which Monogram made would not be up to snuff for wide release. An additional reason that programmers (and their corresponding programs, which included newsreels) were no longer viable was the onslaught of television. In the forties film companies were toying with devoting resources to TV stations instead of supplementary theatrical items like shorts. *Film Daily*, expounding the developments in the television field in 1946, reported that NBC was going to schedule broadcasts of plays from Broadway live on television, and mentioned the unusual situation of WBKB in Chicago being owned by a motion picture exhibitor, quoting executive John Balaban as saying “what is good for show business is good for motion pictures”, or in other words, television as a form of entertainment can and should work hand-in-hand with theatrical
movies. It is telling that the parent company of WBKB was Balaban and Katz, a Paramount-affiliated group of exhibitors who began experimenting in TV broadcasting in 1946, as the Film Daily article mentions. The fact that John Balaban, descending from a generation of traditional theatre-owners in Chicago, would be so willing to incorporate TV into his company indicates both the changing of business practices with the demise of block-booking and the increasing prevalence of TV occupying a secondary wing of studio production as opposed to a B unit, a trend that would continue. But where does Allied fit into all this?

Firstly, like other studios, the chief guiding principle for the company's productions, differentiating it from TV, became a newfound emphasis on prestige, production values and star power. This is epitomized by the company's most well-remembered title from the fifties, Friendly Persuasion, featuring Gary Cooper. The Film Daily Yearbook reported Monogram's earnings rising by 2 million dollars to $8.1 million in gross box-office earnings from 1946 to 1947, the year in which Allied began handling higher-profile releases, a greater jump than any in the previous three years. Conversely, according to Variety, in the mid-'50s Allied Artists saw improved grosses, making $8,290,681 in 1954, roughly a million dollars more than the previous year and its start as its own company, 1953. The Variety article also mentions the success of Riot in Cell Block 11, a film that like Black Gold, was violent and lurid to some degree but also featured an up-and-coming star, Neville Brand, and more importantly was helmed by Don Siegel, who later became a specialist in classy, well-edited action. The movie exemplifies production of a violent but innovative and competent melodrama under the AA banner during this period, and the main point here is that the business practice of putting more resources into fewer but better near-“A” action films allowed Allied the financial returns for a true “A” prestige

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2 Barney Balaban and Sam Katz were the owners of this namesake collection of Paramount theatres for years prior to the forties developments. (online: “Chicago Television”)
film. The result, Friendly Persuasion, became one of Allied’s biggest fifties successes and paved the way for other prestige films and epics like Cabaret and The Man Who Would Be King, both AA releases from the 1970s. With the demise of the true B films and TV occupying their spot in the entertainment industry at this mid-fifties juncture, the strategy of bankrolling mostly modest “A”s and the occasional blockbuster proved successful for Allied in the fifties. This is indication that the B ethic was too profitable to abandon but also of the inevitable change it underwent in the 1950s, filtering into other forms of filmmaking, including shot-in-Europe soft-core sex films and co-productions between lower and higher-tier studios, which I will discuss next, along with a larger survey of Allied’s contribution to the late fifties renaissance of the B film in its second wave: science fiction/horror films. This production of both large-scale films and the late fifties equivalent of the thirties and forties programmers would prove influential, and a discussion of this phenomenon will make up the last part of my essay.

Many of the larger AA productions were co-productions, representing a tendency of studios to work together in mounting films and sharing profits in this era. The previous Variety article about Allied’s increased income mentions the enthusiasm Broidy and his company had for co-productions, particularly with 20th-Century Fox, a major they partnered with to make The Adventures of Haji Baba. Another article said Allied was beginning to offer “stock options, financing, and other inducements” to “lure indie names” like director John Huston to make films for Allied Artists, another indication that with the collapse of the conventional structure of Hollywood, the idea of a prestigious director working for a small outfit was acceptable (so long as they were given the promised perks). This was the case for Friendly Persuasion, whose

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3 AA itself later dabbled in releasing a few of these as imports, including The Blood Rose, a French import it advertised as “the first sex-horror film made”, and Ways of Women, a 1971 import of a 1969 Danish sex romp. (Martin, p. 18, 153)
director was the esteemed William Wyler. The fact Allied Artists was so eager to work with other studios and their talent is an interesting example of increased interplay between the competitive corporate entities of this era, and the fact investors put money into Allied stocks around the time Broidy was most aggressively doing co-productions represents a spontaneous move, and a less stable industry situation than the pre-WWII model.

The other effective method of distribution that Allied used was to engage in scouting for European imports and exports, another staple of the post-war industry. A *Variety* article from 1954 details that Norton V. Richey, and executive from Allied, had completed talks with “key circuit heads and distributors in France, Germany and Holland, Portugal and the Scandinavian countries” about joint ventures. The article also mentions the potential collaboration with Fox and *Human Jungle*, an Allied Artists film, appears among *Variety*’s Golden Dozen (the 12 best boxoffice performers), indicating the kind of foothold that the prescient business moves made by Allied in the fifties allowed them among the industry majors.

There is one more digression to be made about television, which is that Allied Artists itself eventually began investing in TV production, creating a division called Interstate Television in 1951 but getting more serious about TV’s lucrative potential later in the decade. An ad for an Interstate show from 1958 called *Public Defender* in *Variety* highlights the combination of pragmatism and a promise of quality that Allied Artists had been using to sell their product since their inception as a film company, suggesting that “It’s a family-type show, no gore, no bodies”, that ladies love its star Reed Hadley, and that it’s a quality production that appeals to “all ages, all sexes”. In some ways the ad recalls the earlier promotional ballyhoo of Monogram press-books, such as their trumping up the “all-star cast” of Kay Francis, Paul Kelly and Otto Kruger in a film called Allotment Wives. The luridness of a film like Allotment Wives,
which has a plot about “The bigamy racket exposed” with “Heartless women marrying wantonly and often!” stands in stark contrast to the TV ads promise of family-friendly fare, which is fully certified by the show’s title itself, Public Defender. So what has been carried over is over-promotion of minor stars (Reed Hadley had appeared mainly as a supporting player in modest Allied films like Kansas Pacific and Highway Dragnet outside of TV), and what is different is a clear emphasis on the importance of attracting a wide audience with material appropriate for all ages, a move that coincides with the new popularity of TV in the suburban sphere among the atomic family unit. This ad is indicative of conventionalization of the practice of having a TV studio as part of a film company, which had its precedent in the aforementioned WBKB example, but which Allied was a pioneer of making practicable; the smaller studio’s TV wing allowed them to maintain competition with the majors. Another ad, from 1964, shows the Allied TV unit, now called Allied Artists Television, becoming interested in selling their own films to TV, including hits Al Capone and Friendly Persuasion. This contradicts an earlier decision, reported in Variety in the fifties, that Allied Artists wouldn’t sell their post-1948 productions to TV. This ad, however, says “You’ve got it!” and gives listings for films packages for two “Groups” of titles. Variety later reported that WOR-TV in New York picked up the first package for TV showing, indicating the degree to which studios were cooperating with TV stations into the 60s and anticipating the growing of the trend of studios relying on selling their films to TV to supplement their profits. The WOR-TV development is part of an article in Variety that alerted studios to the availability of a bundle of science fiction films including The Bat (1959) and Queen of Outer Space (1958) for sale to TV. These two films and much of the other science fiction output of Allied in the late 1950s represent the fifties equivalent of the thirties and forties Monogram programmers, and the innovations they present will make up the
rest of this writing, rounding out my assertion that Allied Artists stands in for the era’s response to the lack of a traditional market for B movies, the trickling of the B film into mainstream taste, and how Allied Artists business tactic of bankrolling only a few prestige films amidst reliable, competent less expensive films both mimicked and influenced post-war studio filmmaking. A look at a horror film from Monogram and then an Allied Artists late fifties science fiction counterpart will provide a synthesis of some of the issues I’ve been discussing in trying to isolate how Monogram’s programmer Bs segued into higher-grade Allied Artists product and what this meant for the industry as a whole: a new emphasis on standardized quality, the presence of young talent, and a lessening of ballyhoo advertising tactics in favor of sheer business pragmatism.⁴

An exemplary Monogram horror film from the period is Jean Yarbrough’s 61-minute, black and white King of the Zombies (1941), a typically tame zombie film of the period that is nonetheless competently made from a technical standpoint and features good editing, particularly in a scene where the comic relief character played by Mantan Moreland zips back and forth between zombies in one room and other characters who deny their existence in another, where cutting on the movement of the camera during tracking shots accelerates the action.⁵ The pressbook material for the film has all the usual embellishments, including touting the film as a “super-horror story” as “timely as today’s newspaper headlines”, and emphasizing the skill little-known character actor Henry Victor had at portraying “general nastiness” in a few Nazi roles in other films. In another headline “Even in movies it can’t happen”, the press for the film rather

⁴ Of course, things like late fifties science fiction posters are still great examples of “ballyhoo”. My point is that the practice of selling films through the use of overtly sensationalistic promotions was starting to die out around this point.
⁵ I add this description to give a flavour for the technical competence that Monogram, the most well-known B studio according to Taves, applied to filmmaking (for the most part), which (for the most part) continued with the AA films.
shamelessly mentions a shooting incident where the film’s director had to correct a tombstone that read “James Hall, 1853-1826”. All of this, plus the pervasive presence in the film of wide-eyed black comic Mantan Moreland in his usual stereotyped supporting role, underlines the film as a typical, unexceptional Monogram product with a supposedly fresh plot and whose advertising of its star in relation to their previous work in similar product adds to the assembly-line ethos of Monogram. The anecdote about the tombstone is instructive because it underlines the outlandish lengths the studio would go to in order to drum up interest for the film—it’s an embarrassing incident, but also memorable, and the sensational, punchy advertising Monogram used capitalized on this.

The seriousness of the later genre output of Allied (probably influenced by the studio’s overall policy of making putatively high-quality films even in the melodrama and action category in the fifties) stands in marked contrast to this. Roger Corman, the legendary producer, had his first credit with the aforementioned Highway Dragnet, and made a series of science fiction films in the late fifties for AA. Variety reviews for the 1957 Corman double bill of Attack of the Crab Monsters and Not of this Earth are positive towards both, suggesting “promising ballyhoo” for the latter. The reviews focus on technical aspects, denoting the efficacy of Floyd Crosby’s “good lensing” of Crab Monsters and the photography by John Mescall for Not of this Earth. Variety reviews a contemporaneous horror film Voodoo Woman as a programmer, and industry parlance that is what these films were, and were also known within the industry as duallers. They represent a different kind of lower-tier product however in their emphasis on space-age technology, technical competence and lack ominous tone, as well as young stars like Jonathan Haze and Beverly Garland. The British science fiction film The Giant

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6 Again, a title like Attack of the Crab Monsters would seem to lack seriousness entirely, but the actual film is grim in tone and has little of the comic relief previously germane to horror and science fiction.
Behemoth (1959) adds import status to these qualities and can be thought of as the penultimate high-class genre import from AA. It got a positive review in Variety and the British Monthly Film Bulletin called it “better than many recent essays in monster science-fiction”. The film stars the up-and-coming British thesp Andre Morell and has effects by Willis H. O’Brien, the revered Hollywood effects man behind the original King Kong, and steady direction from European art director Eugene Lourie. A science fiction footnote today, the movie represents AA’s shifting of the science fiction film towards a higher pedigree in touting the talent behind the film and science (albeit usually pseudoscience) behind the story instead of promising lurid thrills. The fact that the studio made so many of these science fiction melodramas foreshadows a new kind of (now forgotten) B product—films made with TV-quality actors and directors that, according to one modern reviewer, saved the likes of Twentieth Century Fox after the disastrous Cleopatra and aborted Something’s Got to Give: Lippert Productions made series of films in 1964 for Fox such as Raiders from Beneath the Sea, that brought a modest but guaranteed profit and saved the studio from bankruptcy. AA’s continued production of science fiction amidst their big films like Friendly Persuasion offers a modification to the suggestion that the traditional B market had completed disappeared. Instead, its diluted remnant had evolved into fifties science fiction (especially in the double bill format, which effectively replaced the series format I mentioned earlier in the beginning of this essay), another pragmatic type of film that AA pioneered and would influence in its tone everything from Star Trek to Alien to the SyFy Channel.

This practice predates the emphasis for credibility in B genres and makes up the last effect Allied Artists had on the film industry and last example of how it evolved away from its Poverty Row origins as Monogram. The company would continue to mount expensive epics and
eventually exhaust its resources as it couldn’t keep up production of the lower-tier product mentioned above as genre filmmaking was becoming increasingly mainstreamed and expensive and/or absorbed by television. Allied Artists filed for bankruptcy in the late 1970s, but can be remembered as an initial, microcosmic burst of corporate and artistic creativity after the collapse of the studio system. The reliance on fewer, more prestigious films, the expending of greater energy and serious effort on second-tier projects, the presence of youthful talent and the emphasis on the importance of co-productions and the European market all mark AA as an exemplary small studio. The brief flourishing of their operation in the mid-fifties betrays the democratisation of the industry financially as studios scrambled for new, effective business tactics in the face of TV developments and after the Paramount Decision. So in looking at Allied Artists I have strived to provide a case study of how the B film was absorbed by the industry as whole. Furthermore, it could be argued that Allied quietly paved the way, in its dignified presentation of action and science fiction films, for today’s market, occupied as it is by conventional but very slick and well-made genre vehicles. This speaks to the larger shift of the B ethic to the mainstream that I alluded to earlier, and as a concluding thought, it is interesting to think that as cutting-edge as today’s filmmaking may be, it can still be linked by not that many degrees to the conservative but competent output of Monogram Pictures and Allied Artists.

6 Like United Artists, the company made too few and too expensive films to survive, and was absorbed by Lorimar Productions in 1980. (Martin, p. x, Film History p. 487)
7 Taves, p. 317-318.
8 Okuda, p. 36.
9 Bordwell and Thompson, p. 300-301.
10 “Television Developments”, in “The 1949 Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures” (Wid’s Films and Film Folk, 1949; Woodbridge CT: Primary Source Media, n.d.): 739.
11 Martin, p. ix.
13 Martin, p. 16.
15 Okuda, p. 47.
16 Martin, p. ix.
17 “Television Developments”, in “The 1946 Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures” (Wid’s Films and Film Folk, 1949; Woodbridge CT: Primary Source Media, n.d.): 741.
19 Martin, p. 52.
20 “Financial”, in “The 1947 Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures” (Wid’s Films and Film Folk, 1949; Woodbridge CT: Primary Source Media, n.d.): 1001.
22 Martin, p. ix.
24 Ibid.
26 Martin, p. ix.
29 Martin, p. 61, 75.
33 Martin, p. 61.
35 Ibid., p. 142.
36 BEHEMOTH THE SEA MONSTER (film review) Monthly Film Bulletin, 26: 300/311 (1959) p. 157
37 Martin, p. 54.
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