Assignment Number Two: A History of Drive-In Theatre Expansion, 1948-1955

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This report aims to provide an account of the rise to prominence drive-in movie theatres experienced in the post-war era, that existed from the late 1940s, until the 1970s, although this paper will only examine the period up until the mid-1950s. This paper defines a drive-in theatre as any form of cinematic exhibition that features outdoor screening, facilitated by a motor vehicle. This narrative account will draw parallels between the external factors that surround the proliferation of drive-in theatres, the ways in which distributors attempted to limit the financial potential of drive-ins, and finally, the ways drive-ins managed to succeed despite the financial limitations placed upon them by the distributors.

The first drive-in theatre was located in Camden, New Jersey, and opened in 1933, one year after the creator, and owner, Richard M. Hollingshead Jr. applied for a patent for an outdoor projection system. The set-up of the system was crude, but simple: a field, fitting approximately 400 hundred cars featured a large screen, speakers affixed to poles throughout the field, and individual parking spaces that featured small ramps that would place the cars at a small incline, similar seats in conventional theatres. The theatre featured a Kodak projector, and RCA speakers. The first drive-in experienced limited financial success for a number of reasons: firstly, the theatre, if you wish to call it that, faced technical limitations, insofar that sound and picture quality (with particular regards to lighting) were poor; and secondly, the theatre was located in a relatively uninhabited, industrialised area of New Jersey. Residents of nearby townships were not inclined to travel to a suburb when a picture palace found in Atlantic City or

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3 Ibid
4 Ibid
5 Ibid
Newark. However, the conditions that were a hindrance in the 1930s, would become the main selling platform of drive-ins in the 1940s through the 1960s.

The expansion of drive-in theatres is closely related to increased car ownership in the post-war era, which boomed after stalled car production and gasoline rationing that were imposed during the war ended in 1945. In 1933, when the first drive-in was opened, there were approximately 24 million cars registering in the United States; 6 in contrast, in 1950 there were 49 million cars registered in the United States; 7 and, in 1961, there were 75 million cars registered in the United States. 8 The expansion of car culture coincides with the financial and popular success of drive-ins - in 1959, during the last week of August, 82, 300,000 people attended the movies, with 52,100,000 of those patrons attending drive-in theatres, 9 while in 1959, a total of 71,000,000 cars were registered in the United States. 10 Car culture, and consumer culture, became prominent forces in the post-war era, and as new cars were designed, created, and purchased by Americans, the love of the car as an institution and, as an integral part of American living, grew. Consequently, the allure of the drive-in was in part its novelty - individuals could enjoy films, and enjoy automobiles simultaneously.

Technical limitations were overcome in the post war era. The introduction of in-car speakers that functioned by sending the on-screen sound to the audience through the car’s radio system 11 allowed for sound clarity and fidelity, both of which became increasingly important with the proliferation of “dialogue” films which relied upon conversation to initiate action.

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6 "Highway Statistics Summary to 1995" April 04, 2011
7 "Highway Statistics Summary to 1995" April 04, 2011
8 "Highway Statistics Summary to 1995" April 04, 2011
Furthermore, drive-in owners understood the need for clear and even lighting for drive-in theatres, and consequently, were able to provide the necessary blue and orange lamps that would ensure screen readability.\(^{12}\)

The major socio-economic shifts that occurred after the war greatly influenced the increased number of drive-in theatres built - specifically, the geographical shift from urban centres to suburban centres.\(^{13}\) This rapid and widespread move away from urban cores diminished the audiences who would attend picture palaces in two major ways: firstly, as veterans returned home from the war, and married stateside, the couplings would begin families, and significantly, many of the couples moved to the cheaper suburban areas surrounding cities, and urban picture palaces would be neither a convenient, nor an affordable form of entertainment.\(^{14}\) Families would spend any savings instead on houses, appliances, cars, and other concrete commodities, rather than metaphorical entertainment (entertainment that could not be physically owned, such as films, theatre) which was popular when inflation was high and people could not afford to make large investments, but instead made many smaller purchases.\(^ {15}\) Furthermore, suburban families quickly began purchasing televisions, which subsequently became a major form of entertainment, primarily for the convenience of having entertainment within the home. While suburbanisation, and the introduction of television hurt the film industry as a whole, drive-ins only existed in great quantities in suburban areas, and thus, were aided by

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\(^{14}\) Rodney Luther, "Drive-Ins: Rags to Riches in Five Years," *Hollywood Quarterly*, 5, no. 4 (1951): 408.

\(^{15}\) Rodney Luther, "Television and the Future of Motion Picture Exhibition," *Hollywood Quarterly*, 5, no. 2 (1950): 171
the decentralised population, the increased interstate infrastructure, and the proliferation of car ownership necessary for suburbanites to travel to and from work in urban areas.\textsuperscript{16}

However, the drive-in faced opposition from the 8 major distribution chains (Loew’s of MGM, Paramount, Twentieth Century Fox, RKO, Warner Brothers, Universal, United Artists, and Columbia) that regulated the flow of films to theatres. Consistently, drive-in theatres were denied first run rights to films at the outset of the proliferation of drive-in chains. Individuals, such as David Milgram of the Boulevard Drive-In of Allentown, Pennsylvania, sought legal action against the distributors in the Milgram v. Loew’s et. al. trial in 1950.\textsuperscript{17} The trial sought to provide the Boulevard Drive-In with, at the very least, the right to bid for first run films.\textsuperscript{18} The proceeding Judge Kirkpatrick ruled in favour of the plaintiff, David Milgram, on the basis that the actions of the distributors perpetuated cartelisation, and disregarded anti-trust law, as emphasised in the U.S. v. Paramount Pictures Inc. et al trial of 1948.\textsuperscript{19} Subsequently, the decision of the Milgram v. Loew’s et al. trial was appealed by Loew’s et al in 1952, with the same verdict as the prior trial.\textsuperscript{20} This action on behalf of the distributors demonstrates a desire to refuse competitive rights to the newer, less established drive-in exhibitors, and to protect the distributors from independent exhibitors gaining the same competitive rights as exhibitors that existed in chains (albeit no longer vertically integrated). Distributors cite the seasonal restrictions of drive-ins, and the inability of unestablished theatres to guarantee profits from when compared to picture palaces, in the appeal as reasons to refuse drive-ins first run rights.\textsuperscript{21} Nevertheless, these reasons, albeit logical, did not warrant the distributors the right to decrease competition,

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\item \textsuperscript{16} Rodney Luther, "Drive-Ins: Rags to Riches in Five Years," \textit{Hollywood Quarterly}, 5, no. 4 (1951): 406.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Milgram v. Loew’s, Inc., 94 F. Supp. 416 (Dist. Court, ED Pennsylvania 1950).
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid
\item \textsuperscript{20} Milgram v. Loew’s, Inc., 192 F. 2d 579 (Court of Appeals, 3rd Circuit 1951).
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid
\end{itemize}
and were ultimately viewed as self-interested, and harmful to the market. The second appeal failed.

Additionally, in 1950, the Skyline Drive-In Theatre Corporation and the Hollywood Drive-In Theatre Corporation received an out-of-court settlement from 7 of the major distributors, amounting to $1,758,500, for the violation of anti-trust laws. This case represents one of the first times sums were paid to drive-in theatres in recognition of actions that violate anti-trust law rulings. This case, which occurred around the same time as the Milgram v. Loew’s et. al. demonstrates the speed with which individual exhibitors sought retribution for the perceived lowering of competition.

Through the 1950s, individual drive-in theatres continued to seek first-run rights, as demonstrated by the Basle Theatres Inc. v. Warner Brothers Pictures Distribution Corp trial of 1954. Consistently, the independent theatres were awarded access to first run rights, illustrated by the verdict brought forth by Judge McIlvaine. It is notable that the adherence to anti-trust law is visible in other industries, particularly, mining, construction, and vehicle manufacturing, all of which were cited in the Milgram v. Loew’s et al appeal. Moreover, it is also pertinent that the drive-in theatres did not have the support of a centralised body to create widespread change within the market, and to guarantee first run rights to all theatres. Thus, the types of films shown at drive-in theatres varied greatly depending on the area, and the actions of the individual exhibitor to achieve greater rights.

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23 Ibid
25 Ibid
26 Milgram v. Loew’s, Inc., 192 F. 2d 579 (Court of Appeals, 3rd Circuit 1951).
Despite the limited access that forced drive-in theatre owners to play second and third run films, as well as a number of “B” pictures, drive-ins not only became popular, with more than 1000 theatres in operation in 1949, and 3500-4000 in operation by 1954, but incredibly profitable, with many 1000 seat theatres earning $20,000 per week. Although drive ins were expensive to build, with average start-up costs of around $300,000 and required large plots of land to accommodate audiences, drive-ins drew not only large amounts of revenue from ticket sales, but also the sale of concessions, which accounted for sometimes half of the revenue of drive-in theatres. Drive-ins created sophisticated menus that went beyond popcorn and soda, and included items like “Chinese shrimp rolls to French fries, pizza, frankfurters, and ice cream.” Moreover, the food attractions were designed to be accessed easily by visitors, and the snackbars would often be located centrally within the drive-in field itself, or each theatre would employ small trolleys to travel between cars during screenings.

Drive-ins also began attracting patrons with attractions that had little to do with cinema, or the films onscreen, but everything to do with convenience. Services such as bottle warming for infants, playgrounds and pony rides for children, dance hall spaces for teenagers, and laundry services for parents made drive-ins places not only for movies, but socialising in general.

Drive-ins became spaces that were both private, insofar that you watched films from enclosed

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28 Ibid
30 Ibid
31 Ibid
vehicles, but also public, insofar that people could interact with other individuals before or after the movie screening. It is significant that drive-ins appealed to domestic sensibilities, and many of the services offered functioned to either distract, or care for the children of adult patrons, which made drive-ins spaces that tried to fulfill multiple purposes within suburbia. While picture palaces filled one function, and only needed to fill one function, drive-ins could provide needed infrastructure to the suburbs; while a metropolitan area may have multiple restaurants, a dance hall, a laundromat, and park, all within a few blocks of one another, the suburbs would have few institutions established at the beginning on the 1950s. Suburbia instituted a broadening of the space between people and the infrastructure that existed in urban areas. The drive-in tried to accord for the weakened ties that plagued the suburbs by creating social spaces that did not impose sociality onto their patrons.

Thus, drive-ins attracted audiences who may have been neglected by traditional picture palaces: parents with young children, the elderly, youths who wished to act boisterously during films, disabled individuals who would not have been able to access traditional theatres, individuals of colour who would otherwise be segregated in traditional theatres, and industrial workers, who may not wish to conform to the standards of cleanliness imposed onto patrons by picture palaces. Drive-ins were an especially cheap option for families, since most drive-ins charged for adults, but not children. In some cases, drive-ins charged simply by the car; therefore, many individuals could be squeezed into one automobile for a reasonable price. These tactics coincidentally attracted teenage patrons, who had limited cash, large friend groups, and

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37 Rodney Luther, "Drive-Ins: Rags to Riches in Five Years," Hollywood Quarterly, 5, no. 4 (1951): 407
abundant access to their parent’s cars.\textsuperscript{38} Drive-ins would in turn appeal to returning veterans, and other individuals who had disabilities because of the privacy, as well as the accessibility drive-ins,\textsuperscript{39} which could provide entertainment, comfort, and protection from judgement. The drive-in fulfilled needs for privacy, as demonstrated by youths who used drive-ins as hook-up spots, leading to the appropriate nickname “passion pits.”\textsuperscript{40} The assumed corrupt nature of drive-ins became the major source of stigma to be attached to the institution for the proceeding decades, as people believed drive-ins harboured great social ills, such as illicit sex, drinking, and drug use.\textsuperscript{41} Drive-in owners consequently fought this stereotype by hiring security guards to patrol theatres,\textsuperscript{42} and enforced fines if individuals were caught in the act.\textsuperscript{43} These measures protected the integrity of drive-ins for family audiences with small children.

Many of the problems that plagued the drive-ins in the 1950s are not new issues, but reiterations of old problems. In its base, the drive-in is not a new idea: outdoor exhibition prevailed in the pre-cinematic, and early cinema eras, as did the attraction of audiences that were thought to deviate from societal norms. Furthermore, the disputes between drive-in owners and film distributors in the 1950s are simply a continuation of the troubles independent exhibitors faced in the classical studio era, where the major studios used vertical integration to create market hegemony.\textsuperscript{44} However, the drive-in received support from the judicial system unlike the early independents, many of whom could not survive the pressure of the Big Five, and the Little Three. Instead, drive-ins were supported by established anti-trust precedents, particularly the US

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid
\textsuperscript{40} Yannis Tzioumakis, \textit{American independent Cinema: An Introduction}, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 141-142.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid
\textsuperscript{44} Bernard R. Sorkin, “Conscious Parallelism,” \textit{Antitrust Bulletin} 2 (1957): 286.
v. Paramount Pictures Inc Et Al. trial of 1948, which abolished vertical integration of the major eight companies previously discussed because cartelisation reduced competition, and damaged the market\textsuperscript{45}. While the abolishment of trust practises proved disastrous for independent production companies, and many picture palaces that were not part of pre-existing chain systems\textsuperscript{46}, the changes in the structure of the film industry helped drive-in theatres to thrive as a result of lessened control from the major companies that created and distributed films.

Drive-in theatres changed drastically from the 1930s, to the 1950s, while still remaining faithful to older cinematic traditions. While the traditional picture palaces failed to acclimate to the new human living patterns, drive-ins managed to fulfill the need for human interaction, and human privacy. However, the drive-in differs most greatly from other forms of exhibition insofar that it is a truly independent form of cinematic exhibition, where the cinematic experience differed greatly from theatre to theatre, with no regulatory body to govern the output of such theatres, nor horizontal integration of theatres to strengthen the front of the independent owners against the major and minor distributors. The success of the drive-in theatre lies in the diverse appeal of the drive-in, primarily achieved through principles that do not relate to films themselves, but to the movie-going experience, and the sociality of the theatres.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{45} United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc., 334 US 131 (Supreme Court 1948).}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{46} Ibid}
Bibliography


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