

CINEMA'S NEED FOR SPECTACLE

Iulia STOIANOVICI

I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract: *For the film industry, cinema is the first channel of distribution and it is the single one dedicated, almost exclusively, to films. It is so much linked to the artistry of this industry that it borrowed its name after the art itself: cinematography.*

The importance of this distribution channel is indisputable. Economically, it still brings the most revenue for an average movie. Artistically, it's the most controllable environment in which an artist can showcase their work. Since the beginning, the existence of this distribution channel was threatened by various natural or man driven disasters or technological advancements and, in spite of all this, cinema managed to become the favourite source of entertainment only a couple of decades after its birth.

Cinema attendance reached its peak in the 1940's, after that came the downfall. Although the attendance rate seems to be on a descending pattern, in times of crisis, the industry manages to find ways to slow down the descent rate. The problem is obvious, the people are reluctant to go to the cinema, but why and how it can be mended, that's another problem altogether.

In this article I will analyze the solutions that were tested by the industry during the crises and their focus on enhancing one of the aspects of the spectacle of the cinema show. Each solution focused on either making the cinema show more entertaining, worth remembering, unusual, exclusive or live.

Keywords: *entertaining, worth remembering, unusual, exclusive or live, cinema*

The cinema showcasing emerged as part of travelling fair spectacle. Watching a moving picture was unusual and worth

remembering. At first, watching a movie picture wasn't a mundane activity and the setting brought the feeling of live experience. Nowadays, we perceive cinema as the place one goes to, with the sole intent of watching a film, but back then it was a small setting in the middle of other attractions and live performances. It didn't stand on its own and the surroundings were an important part of the spectacle aspect of the cinema show.

When cinema started to grow it inherited the monetizing system from the attraction fair system. Cinemas had to attract audiences and sell as many tickets as they could at affordable prices.

Today, the most commonly used way of business in the film industry is the one set by Hollywood. There are plenty of economic and political reasons why this is the system that worked and they are trend setters in this industry. However, one of the most important aspects of this issue, that helped the American system to prevail, was their decision to treat films as products.

There is no luxury in seeing a movie, there aren't different prices for different films. For this type of system to work, the cinema show experience must be a motivation in itself and selling a large quantity of tickets is the ultimate goal. This is a paradox, because going to the movies has to become a habit for the common person, but a cinema show has to be perceived as a spectacle: as something unusual or exclusive. It was left to the film itself to be highly entertaining, unusual or worth remembering. This is easily seen today as there is nothing unusual about seeing a movie in a cinema theatre, but there are only a few movies that fit the spectacle criteria.

One of the earliest crises that cinema encountered was brought on by safety issues and the people mistrust of the newly born art. The volatile substances used in film stock caught fire easily and often, causing numerous theaters to burn down. One of the ways that this crisis was resolved was by tackling the live experience aspect of a spectacle.

The way films are made, by capturing on film scenery or live action that takes place in front of the camera and then editing it, leaves almost no chance for the live aspect of a spectacle to be a part of film viewing. The live aspect of a spectacle can be produced, but in a limited edition, and is merely an ad-on to the film. In the silent era, the live experience of the film might have consisted in the live performance of a music score that accompanied the film.

In Hollywood, they found an artifice to bring the live experience in films, at a massive scale. They built the star system. This system was borrowed from stage performers and it meant that with the help of mass media, newspapers and radio, they promoted personas, role models, out of the real live actors. The agents and studios had a very tight grip on the way their stars looked, walked and talked. All of these stars' made up lives were subject to recording and people were eager to know everything about them. This way, seeing a movie gave the audience the exclusive chance of encountering these actors, whom they were tracking in real life through mass media.

For cinema to become a habit it needed a constant supply of movies. This resulted in hundreds of films being produced each year. There were a few studios that produced blockbusters and they controlled the whole industry chain. They used this advantage to force exhibitors to program a package of their movies. Some of the films were not even shot at the time this scheduling took place.⁷⁴

In the late 1940's the big studios were subject to prosecution for monopolizing the industry. "The Supreme Court found Paramount guilty of price-fixing in an antitrust lawsuit. It forced all major movie studios to loosen their grip on the theaters"⁷⁵.

⁷⁴ Erin Blakemore, "The Hollywood Extortion Racket That Gave Us Today's Summer Blockbusters", *History*, 2017, <https://www.history.com/>, accessed on 02.11.2020.

⁷⁵ Erin Blakemore, "How TV Killed Hollywood's Golden Age", *History*, published in 2018, <https://www.history.com/>, accessed on 02.11.2020.

However, the biggest concern the studios had was the rise of television. They saw their downfall as a direct result of the mass adoption of television. Cinema attendance dropped by 50 per⁷⁶ cent and it almost seemed that the industry was destroyed. Some studios shut down, and the employees and movie stars shifted toward television. Those who remained active diversified their businesses and started building amusement parks or went into the hospitality industry. Cinema saw television as its enemy and for the next decade it tried to find ways to differentiate from its competitor.

The problem that the studio systems encountered was the new habits that persons developed recovering from war. People moved farther away from towns that had cinemas and they wanted to spend the money they had on commodities. Plenty of households owned a television and the television programs were free. In a short amount of time, television programs provided the main source of entertainment.

Studios and cinema operators needed to find ways to bring people in. Before television was adopted, cinema was the home for films of all shape and sizes. A form of entertainment that mimicked live events was the newsreel. These were presented before a screening and contained depictions of mundane events. In cinema you could watch documentaries or local businesses being advertised. After the television era began, cinema focused mainly on feature films.

The settings, the costumes and all other elements of spectacle are more noticeable in a feature film. This resulted in big productions that spent huge amounts of money on set construction and costumes. One of these films produced in the late 1950's is the notorious *Ben-Hur*. It was one of the largest and most expensive productions of its period and it's also the fastest, highest grossing production and the

⁷⁶ Caterina Cowden, "Movie Attendance Has Been On A Dismal Decline Since The 1940s", *Business Insider*, 06.01.2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/movie-attendance-over-the-years-2015-1>, accessed on 05.11.2020.

most critically acclaimed award winning film of its time. Released in 1959, *Ben-Hur* was so well received by the public that it was number one in the USA's box office for a period of six months. It single handedly saved MGM studios from financial ruin.

The studios and cinema operators seemed to agree that the form suitable for a cinema show is the feature film, but otherwise, it was a time for experimentation, for going back to the drawing board. They experimented with the aspect ratio between the width and the length of the film stock. For years studios standardized 1.33 aspect ratio, but when televisions were built based on this technical aspect, cinema moved towards a widescreen format.

The most elaborate way of using a widescreen is known as Cinerama, showcased for the first time in 1952, in a Broadway Theatre⁷⁷. It required using three cameras, in the production phase, and three projectors and a curved screen, in the showcasing phase. Experiencing a film this way made you feel in the center of the action.

Regarding aspect ratio, one of the most known and still used today, cinemascope, was developed in this period. Cinemascope used special lenses attached to the camera and to the projector, so they produced a panoramic view, with an aspect ratio of 2.55:1. The spectator felt immersed into the film's action. This immersion also occurred due to a specific screen, that was slightly curved, and to stereophonic sound.

Another visual effect that was widely used during this period was stereoscopy, which resulted in the illusion of 3D. Filmmakers saw 3D movies as a form exclusive for cinema. This effect required precision from the camera operator and the projectionist. If the two cameras, used in the filmmaking process, or the two projectors, used in the cinema, weren't carefully calibrated, seeing a movie in 3D

⁷⁷ John L. Berger, "A Brief History of the Widescreen Format.", *Widescreen.org*, 1995, <https://www.widescreen.org>, accessed on 05.11.2020.

gave audiences terrible headaches. Beside the human factor in showcasing this sort of film, there was a problem with the film stock, by reusing it over and over again, it had to be mended, and the two reels composing the movie couldn't be synchronized anymore. The adverse effect of this asynchrony was so widely spread that it became known as the 3D headache.

The 50's were a decade of gimmicks for the film industry. Producers were trying to bring the unusual element into the cinema. The showcasing of this type of films included a lot of elaborated gimmicks, actors and props were used in the actual cinema to create a story around the showing of a film in hopes that it would enrich the spectators' experience. This brought the live experience aspect of a spectacle.

During the 50's anything and everything was thrown in producing and showcasing a movie. For some movies the chairs will start shaking just as the film was depicting an earthquake and, in others, a cocktail of different smells will fill up the cinema theatre, an effect known as Aroma-Rama. Publicity stunts were used to make a newly released movie unusual, the new special effects were mostly old tricks with a new name. The narrative of the films produced in this period is subordinated to the special effects and publicity stunts.

The other way that Hollywood found to make a spectacle out of films was by turning its back on the moral code. In many films women were dressed provocative. This produced a great effect on the audience: church goers were outraged; church officials were pressured to take a stand and all of these resulted in a lot of controversy around them.

Many of the experiments tried in the 50's were short lived. However, the methodical approach of experimenting with form and cinema perception provided future generations with a go-to handbook of things to try in making a cinema show into a spectacle.

After the rise of television, cinema never again recovered the place it had in people's lives. The struggle put on by the industry only managed to slow down the rate of descent.

A problem that the cinema operators are encountering today is the people's need to consume audiovisual programming in a nonlinear way. This is not a new problem. The first device to revolutionise the linear scheduling of the audiovisual industry was the VCR. In the middle of the 1970's, when it was released, the VCR was advertised as a recording device for people's favourite television programs. For the first time, people had the chance to view the television programmes when it suited them. At first, these devices were very expensive, and it slowed down the rate in which they became common household devices. Their mass adoption occurred in the early 1980's.

Even though the people didn't necessarily own a VCR in the late 1970's, the fact that it was possible to have control on the audiovisual programs changed their expectations. From this moment on, people started to fit an audiovisual show in their program and stopped making their plans around the scheduling of the show.

Cinema operators used to exploit the fact that people had the habit of making their plans around the cinema's program. Until the early 1970's, almost all cinemas had only one screen. Like today, people were eager to see a new release, but there weren't enough screens and seats for all of them. The studios and cinema operators took advantage of the matter and marketed the first week of a newly released film as something exclusive. In the first week after its release, the film's tickets were sold at a higher price.

The release of the VCR gave the people the choice of when and where. Cinema operators' solution to the self made logistic problem was the add-on screens in a movie theater and the building of the multiplex. This allowed the same cinema to have more timetables for a single movie. From now on, people had the choice of when they wanted to see a film.

The fact that people were given a third option of where and how to view a movie started this third severe crisis for cinema operators. Solutions that involved making the cinemas more entertaining were out of the question now that so many were built or being built. The spectacle part of the cinema show could only be delivered via content so they had to market every single film as a big production spectacle. The marketing campaign became the most important part of a newly released movie.

One of the most expensive and coordinated marketing campaigns of that time was that of the film *Jaws*, released in 1975. It was one of the first films for which an extensive amount of licensed merchandise was made and sold, thus creating a new revenue stream. From then on it was about highlighting the unusual or the unique aspects of the film.

Another reason why this approach caught on is the fact that film had more distribution channels and feature film wasn't just for cinema anymore. Studios tried to protect the cinemas by giving them priority and exclusivity when releasing a film, the so called release window system.

Since the 1980's, the cinema attendance varied from year to year, mostly due to the public reception of the films released in a year.

In this new millennium there have been two very noteworthy attempts at turning the spotlight back on the cinema: 3D and event cinema. Released in 2009, *Avatar* is the first successful 3D film ever made. With the technological advancements and the release of this film, it made the 3D form a standard exclusive for cinema.

Another recent attempt to bring people to the theatre is event cinema. By marketing the live aspect of the event people can see in cinemas a concert, a Broadway show or a live sport event happening in real time in another part of the world. This kind of cinema started with concerts in 2001 and it may have already reached its peak.

With each new channel of film distribution that is being developed, the existence of cinema is being threatened, because the biggest crisis it has is an identity crisis.

References

McGee, Mark Thomas, *Beyond Ballyhoo: Motion Picture Promotion and Gimmicks*, revised after the original edition published in 1989, North Carolina, McFarland, 2001

Online sources

Berger, John L., "A Brief History of the Widescreen Format.", *Widescreen.org*, published in 1995, <https://www.widescreen.org/>, accessed on 05.11.2020

Blakemore, Erin, "The Hollywood Extortion Racket That Gave Us Today's Summer Blockbusters", *History*, 2017, <https://www.history.com/>, accessed on 02.11.2020

Blakemore, Erin, "How TV Killed Hollywood's Golden Age" *History*, 2018, <https://www.history.com/>, accessed on 02.11.2020.

Calderon, Sarah, and Celia Fumanal, "These Are 5 Keys the Indie Film Industry Could Extract from Event-Cinema.", *The Film Agency*, 2019, <https://thefilmagency.eu/>, accessed on 05.11.2020

Cowden, Caterina, "Movie Attendance Has Been On A Dismal Decline Since The 1940s." *Business Insider*, 2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/movie-attendance-over-the-years-2015-1>, accessed on 05.11.2020

Dirks, Tim, "The History of Film. The 1950s", *Filmsite*, <https://www.filmsite.org/>, accessed on 05.11.2020

Dirks, Tim, "The History of Film The 1970s", *FilmSite*, <https://www.filmsite.org/>, accessed on 06.11.2020

Event Cinema Association, “ECA Annual Report 2018”, *Event Cinema Association*,
<https://eventcinemaassociation.files.wordpress.com/2019/07/eca-annual-report-2018.-2.pdf>, accessed on 05.11.2019

“History of the Fairground.”, *The University of Sheffield*,
<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/nfca/researchandarticles/historyfairs>,
accessed on 03.11.2020

Lodge, Guy, “Ben-Hur at 60: Why the Biblical Blockbuster Doesn’t Hold Up.”, *The Guardian*, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/>,
accessed on 11.11.2020

Nelson, Andrew, “Cinema from Attractions: Story and Synergy in Disney’s Theme Park Movies.”, *Cinephile*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2008, pp. 36-40. *Cinephile.ca*, <http://cinephile.ca>, accessed on 05.11.2020.

Pautz, Michelle, “The Decline in Average Weekly Cinema Attendance: 1930 -2000.”, *Issues in Political Economy*, vol. 11, 2002, *Elon University*, <https://blogs.elon.edu/ipe/>, accessed on 02.11.2020

Pettinger, Tejvan, “Cinema Attendance in UK.”, *Economics Help*, published on 10.01.2017, <https://www.economicshelp.org>, accessed on 02.11.2020

Schepelern, Peter. “An Art and an Industry.”, *A Century of Cinema*, vol. XLVIII, no. July-August, 1995, pp. 5-8, *UNESDOC Digital Library*,
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000100576>,
accessed on 02.11.2020

Turner, Graeme, and Michael F. Duckham, *Film as Social Practice*. 4 ed., Trowbridge, Routledge, 2006, pp. 11,
<https://books.google.ro/books?id=gnQqlj0kl7sC>, accessed on 05.11.2020

Films

Avatar, directed by James Cameron, performances by Sam Worthington, Zoe Saldana, Stephen Lang, Michelle Rodriguez, and Sigourney Weaver, 20th Century Fox, 2009

Ben-Hur, directed by William Wyler, performance by Charlton Heston, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc., 1959

Jaws, directed by Steven Spielberg, performances by Roy Scheider, Robert Shaw, Richard Dreyfuss and Lorraine Gary, Universal Pictures, 1975

***Iulia Stoianovici** is a PhD student at UNATC. She studied film directing, film producing and now for her current studies she is trying to understand the complexity of film distribution and all its current issues. She believes that the first step in solving a problem is to identify the core of the problem. E-mail: iulia.stoianovici@unatc.ro.*