

Screen Time Paradigm

Technology puts us in charge of what we watch, where we watch it and with whom we watch it

By David Bossert
Illustrations by Lincoln Agnew



I can remember seeing a re-release of Disney's *Pinocchio* in a local movie theater with a few neighborhood friends when I was a kid.

I didn't know it then, but it made an indelible mark on my career choice to become an animator in later life. Seeing that film was one of those moments where my imagination was captivated by the images playing before my eyes. Those gee-whiz, how'd-they-do-that screen moments when fantasy and reality blend, creating a sense of awe and wonder. It was a social experience, too. Talking with my friends about what might happen in the film and then afterward giving our own assessment of what was cool, scary or hilarious was as much a part of seeing the movie as was "seeing" the movie.

The way we watch media has changed over the decades, with technology shifting the social experience from theaters and the home to the anywhere/everywhere afforded by mobile devices. Our watching habits are being driven as much by technological innovations as they are by our changing tastes as we decide when and where we want to watch movies as well as our favorite TV shows and sitcoms. It is, after all, all about choices — isn't it?

GOLDEN VARIETY

Today, we're lucky. Options for how we digest media and entertainment abound. In the 1920s, there were far fewer choices for information and entertainment. Newspapers were filled with yesterday's news, opinions and comics. Radio did offer a variety, albeit limited, of entertaining serials and music shows. And then there was the cinema.

In the early days of theater, movies were presented in black and white in a squarer format. Plus, they were silent. Eventually, with technological innovation, synchronized sound was added to films. It was the beginning of the golden age of movie palaces — those opulent single-screen theaters that held large audiences.

By the mid-20th century, movie theater audiences commonly anticipated the preshow newsreel footage of important events going on in the country and around the world. Each week, a compilation of news, current events and entertainment projected on the theater screen was par for the course before the feature film began. Seated spectators would see firsthand film footage from the frontlines of battles in the Pacific and Europe during World War II — the harsh realities of war. Theaters also played commercials for local businesses and public service announcements for buying war bonds, volunteering and recycling for war efforts. Shorts such as Disney's *Out of the Frying Pan Into the Firing Line* (1942) advocated saving meat drippings in a can to be turned in at the local butcher shop in exchange for ration coupons. Glycerin, distilled from these drippings, was used in the manufacture of munitions.

Theater audiences were also treated to several short cartoons and serials, known as one-reelers, which were about 10 minutes long. The cartoons reflected the mood and tone of popular culture. In 1928, for example, theatergoers raved over



DID YOU KNOW? / In the early 1950s, movie theaters started dropping newsreels and serial short subjects, opting to have more screenings per day of feature films. Ironically, while the production of those short cartoons began to decline, Disney released its short *Susie the Little Blue Coupe* (1952). More than 50 years later, it was *Susie* who helped inspire the hit Disney/Pixar animated film *Cars*.

WATCH *Mary Poppins*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), *The Little Mermaid* and *The Jungle Book* (1967), to see how xerography is used to create their imagery and effects ▶

RESEARCH Barco Escape, a new immersive cinema experience ready2escape.com ▶

RESEARCH CinemaScope, a filming process that gives the illusion of three-dimensional images without the need for wearing special 3-D eyewear ▶

RESEARCH Appointment television, the practice of scheduling your life around what's on TV ▶

Disney's *Plane Crazy*, which starred Mickey Mouse as a wannabe Charles Lindbergh and paid homage to Lindbergh's 1927 first transatlantic solo flight. In similar fashion, Disney released its *Barnyard Olympics* to coincide with the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles; *Mickey's Service Station* in 1935 to piggyback on the popularity of the automobile; and, in 1937, the short *Modern Inventions* to reflect on the world's ever-increasing technological advances.

Movie theaters were undeniably a, if not the, primary and premier hub for social experiences across America.

But the theater's dominance as a social, informational and entertainment mecca didn't last long. Enter the television. By the mid-1950s, the television set had penetrated enough households that it was impacting how audiences consumed entertainment and news. Major networks were broadcasting nightly news shows and a variety of entertaining programming into the home. Thousands of families across the nation hunkered down weekly in the comfort of their own living rooms to laugh together at the comedic genius of Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* and root for the gun-toting hero in classic western adventure shows such as *Gunsmoke*. It was the dawn of appointment television.

Theater owners and movie studios didn't silently relent to TV's growing popularity, however, responding in kind by changing to a wider-screen format (rectangular or an elongated rectangular image as in CinemaScope) and experimenting with 3-D movies. Disney's 1955 film *Lady and the Tramp*, for instance,

started out in the squarer format and midway through production was converted to CinemaScope to try and satisfy the changing tastes of movie-going audiences.

The postwar baby boom coupled with the mobility of the automobile added another interesting facet to movie-watching habits as people started to make the exodus from city living to the suburbs. While the first drive-in movie theater opened in Camden, New Jersey, in 1933, its popularity (for the social scene as much as the big screen) peaked in the late 1950s with more than 4,000 drive-ins sprinkled across the United States (see sidebar at right).

FIGHTING FOR ATTENTION

As television expanded and added color programming, movie studios responded with epic films, including wide-screen spectacles such as *Lawrence of Arabia* in the early 1960s. The technology of moviemaking saw continued innovations such as the xerography process used at Disney for *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, which reduced the labor-intensive hand-ink-and-paint process of cel animation. The process later helped proliferate inexpensive animation for television, most notably from the Hanna-Barbera Studios, which dominated TV with shows such as *The Flintstones*, *The Jetsons* and *The Huckleberry Hound Show*.

By the 1970s, cable TV and the video home system (VHS) were introduced, providing yet more watching options. The VHS format took off in the 1980s with video rental stores popping up on every other street corner, from local one-off mom-and-pop shops to the eventual takeover of mega-chains such as Blockbuster. ▶

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DID YOU KNOW? / The first movie palace, Regent Theatre, opened in 1913 in New York City.

DRIVE-IN DIVERSION

MOVIES-ON-THE-GO LOVE AFFAIR SOON FIZZLED

After World War II, the timing was perfect for a new market of families and teenagers to enjoy drive-in theaters. For both of these groups, going to the drive-in meant much more than simply seeing a movie. It was an evening out, full of fun and entertainment. Families arrived early to play a round of miniature golf, ride the miniature train or take the kids to the playground. Some drive-in theater owners even warmed baby bottles, put up the family dog in a kennel for the evening or did laundry "while you wait."

Teenagers, of course, flocked to the drive-in to get away from parents, hang out with friends or pursue their latest romance in the dark and comfortable privacy of their cars. In response, drive-in films were increasingly geared to this previously largely untapped audience.

Undoubtedly, the real cash cow for drive-in theater owners was the concession stand, where hot dogs, french fries, sodas, popcorn and candy bars were eagerly purchased at considerable markups. Colorful intermission films — featuring dancing hot dogs, clocks counting down and upbeat music — tempted moviegoers to leave their cars and catch a quick bite before the second film started.

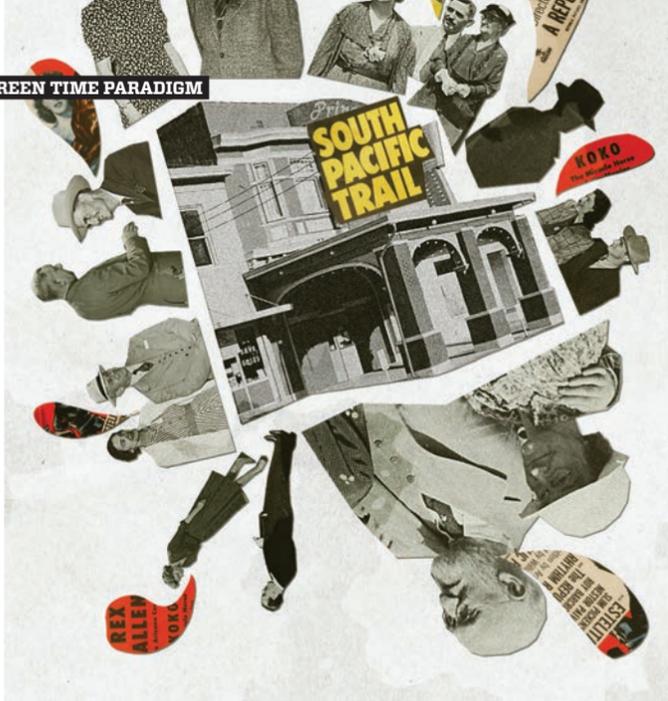
After peaking in 1958, drive-in theaters quickly declined. Not only did the novelty wear off, but the seasonal business hurt theater owners, maintenance was expensive and land values started to increase as the suburbs expanded.

Fortunately, the fun of the drive-in theater can still be experienced today at a scattered group of survivors across the country.

— Donna Braden, curator of public life, *The Henry Ford*



PHOTO BY GETTY IMAGES/ NEW YORK TIMES CO.



VHS was pivotal to our evolving movie-watching habits, representing an exchange of power, if you will. No longer were we forced to watch only what the movie studios released, the theaters showed and the TV networks broadcast at a particular time. We could go to a video store seven days a week and select the movie or movies (both newer releases and favorite classics) we wanted to watch. Plus, we could watch them where we wanted to — the living room, den, garage, bedroom — at a time of our choosing with whomever we wanted. No individual tickets or overpriced buttered popcorn required.

Of course, the release window, or the time between when a film was in the theater and released on VHS tape for home viewing, was sometimes long. Back in the day, we had to wait patiently for four to five months or more before a movie advertised on the theater marquee made it to the shelf at the neighborhood video store.

While the VHS was replaced in the 1990s by digital video disc (DVD), which has since been replaced by HD-DVD and Blu-ray disc formats during the 2000s, all of these formats act in the same vein, as ready-made escapes for children — and a lot of adults too, — who can, at their convenience, repeatedly watch their favorite feel-

good films like *The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast* while wearing their PJs and covered up on the couch.

SOCIAL SHIFT

Since the introduction of home-viewing formats, movie theater attendance has steadily declined. In 1930, more than 70 percent of the U.S. population went to a movie theater weekly. That figure has dwindled to below 10 percent today. As theaters continue to raise ticket prices and more digital streaming platforms are created, theater audiences will likely continue to erode.

The social experience has also shifted from taking in a flick in a theater full of strangers to watching it at home with friends and family. It's a trend that will only continue to grow with the availability of premium home theater systems and on-demand viewing or streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon and Hulu that are focused on convenience and customer service — basically your best-imagined neighborhood video store gone virtual. This homebound trend has also greatly impacted the release window of movies. Forget that four- or five-month wait time we had to put up with in the '90s. Today, films are often released simultaneously for theater and home viewing. ▶

DID YOU KNOW? /

In a scientific study posted on nature.com, researchers reported that movie audiences smell (and it's not like popcorn or perfume). The study monitored the levels of CO₂ and volatile organic compounds in theaters while films were playing and discovered that particular kinds of films elicit a particular type of overall audience odor. Moviegoers watching a comedy together, for example, will smell differently than the group watching a suspense next door.



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Theater owners have responded slowly to these changes because of a myopic view of the evolution of the audience. Some upstart theaters are trying to differentiate themselves by offering reserved seating with premium food and beverage services but at ridiculous cost. Staying in the comfort of your own home to watch a movie or even binge-watch a full season of a television show has become the new entertainment normal.

Personally, I think the local movie multiplex is an endangered species because of the increasing competition from other available entertainment platforms. For me and many other film fanatics, 80 percent of the movies being made by studios can be fully appreciated on a great home entertainment system. But there is that remaining 20 percent — those epic or tentpole movies that really need to be viewed on a larger screen to achieve the full experience. Take Christopher Nolan's 2017 war film *Dunkirk*, for example. I believe this one should only be seen on an IMAX or other custom high-resolution, reflective giant screen. It's the only way to fully grasp the scope of the subject matter, which would be diminished if consumed on a small screen, computer or mobile device.

While it's possible the movie theater will come full circle, with some multiplexes being converted into movie palaces to truly accommodate epic films and create a more immersive audience experience, only time will tell as the art of film watching continues to transform with our evolving tastes and innovations. ●

ONLINE Visit author and former Disney animator David Bossert's website davidbossert.com ►

GIANT SCREEN CAN'T BE BEAT

"We think coming to the Giant Screen Experience at The Henry Ford is always better than staying home," said Amy Louise Liedel, senior director of guest operations at The Henry Ford, when asked about the growing trend among moviegoers to stay put rather than venture out to the theater.

What gives the Giant Screen Experience an upper hand in this home vs. theater war, according to Liedel, is a focus on offering content and encounters with films that only institutions like The Henry Ford can. "To escape the churn and burn of day-and-date Hollywood entertainment, Giant Screen Experience specializes in unique content in a unique setting," she added.

Come to the Giant Screen Experience on a Throwback Thursday Night, for example, and you'll have the opportunity to rediscover popular classics and cult films from the '70s, '80s and '90s like *The Sandlot* (1993) or *Jaws* (1975) with added social interactions thanks to Alex Gojkov, Giant Screen Experience theater manager turned trivia boss. Gojkov has creatively embedded trivia competitions into a popular preshow event. Theatergoers play via their mobile devices courtesy of a free game-based learning platform called Kahoot. The live competitions are all the rage, with guests sometimes vying for prizes but, more importantly, the bragging rights.

For the latest list of feature films, showtimes and special programming events at The Henry Ford's Giant Screen Experience, please visit thehenryford.org.



Video On Demand

Subscription video-on-demand (SVOD), which is dominated by Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime, is the streaming media service that is the latest challenge to traditional movie theaters and network television. Streaming services have surpassed the use of physical home video, i.e. HD-DVD and Blu-ray, which has been in a precipitous free fall for the last several years.

SVOD allows for streaming anytime, anywhere, on any device, and that has put added pressure on appointment television, which is a specific day and time to watch a show. Now we can download shows to a tablet or mobile device and watch them when we want to, where we want to, and we can even binge-watch an entire season in a weekend.

As the SVOD services mature, we can expect to see further impact on network television and movie theaters, especially as each service produces exclusive content.

SOCIAL MEDIA MATTERS

The rise of social media has allowed for far-flung communities of fans to interact with one another in online chat rooms. Friends can text one another or use Instagram or Snap Chat while they watch a favorite show in their respective homes as well as share half-crazed or intelligent fan theories bound to solicit hundreds of comments. In fact, in recent years some TV shows such as NBC's *Friday Night Lights* and *Community* have been saved from cancellation because of social media campaigns. Even the super-popular TV show *Scandal*, which got off to a shaky first season, can give credit to Twitter for its solid finish in the ratings. And make no mistake, fans today have a major impact on how films are being marketed, and the studios are super keen on leveraging the power of these fan bases to their advantage.

Studios are now regularly tapping into Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other social media platforms to drive demand for films to enter wider releases and for screenings in specific locations. They are also using these platforms to create viral marketing campaigns encouraging fans to spread the word with friends.

Many of the most successful films and film franchises today (think *The Hunger Games* and *Transformers*) have had strong social media campaigns, a trend we can all expect to continue as movie studios further embrace these platforms in the future.

