

Who Killed Hollywood?

If it were a movie, it would go like this: Hollywood is a fabulous city of dreams that dazzles the nation with its mighty studios and marvelous movies, its handsome stars and smashing starlets, its glitz and incomparable glamor. But then TV comes along and, like some cheap hood in a B movie, leaves our dream town dead in an alley. That is hokum in the grandest Hollywood tradition, argues film historian Douglas Gomery. Here he tells what really happened to Tinseltown.

by Douglas Gomery

There are two images from my youth that I shall never be able to shake. There was that clear Saturday afternoon in October when I rode my bicycle downtown to see a show at the Rialto, only to look up at the marquee and see the chilling announcement, "20 lanes of bowling." No movie I have ever seen has jolted me more.

The thousands of hours I spent in Allentown, Pennsylvania's wondrous Rialto Theatre formed the core of my adolescent education. I learned "lessons" in proper teen rebellion from the experts, James Dean, Sal Mineo, and Natalie Wood in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). From the master, Alfred Hitchcock, I learned the true nature of panic in *Rear Window* (1954). How could my beloved baroque movie palace become just another bowling barn, of which Allentown already had more than a dozen?

The second jolt came a few years later, in the summer of 1960, when I spied spread across a page of *Life* a photograph of a crumbled Roxy Theatre, with silent film star Gloria Swanson standing amid the ru-

ins. My mother had taken me to that mecca of movie palaces as a special treat during infrequent trips to New York City. Now even that 5,000-seat, gilded, festooned "wonder theater" at the corner of 51st Street and Sixth Avenue had been torn down. None of it seemed to make sense. Or did it?

Even in isolated Allentown I could stare across the living room and guess the answer. During the 1950s television hit the United States with a force unmatched by any other technical innovation of this century. When my family moved to Allentown in 1950, few of my friends had a set. I would race over to Dave Gearhart's house to watch; his father was a doctor and rich enough to pay the \$500 a new set cost—about \$2,000 in today's inflated dollars. A decade later, when my teachers forced me to watch the Nixon-Kennedy presidential debates (the very year that the Roxy was torn down), everybody had a TV set.

If the death of the glamorous Hollywood these palaces represented is viewed as a kind of *film noir* murder mystery, the identity of the killer seems all too obvious.

Scholars have tended to agree: TV killed Hollywood. After all, the “murder” happened right before their eyes, as it did before mine. And TV already had a criminal record, having helped undermine the habit of reading and the academic vigor of America’s children. In his encyclopedic *Movies and Society* (1970), I. C. Jarvie of Canada’s York University writes: “Until the advent of television in the late forties Hollywood was peerless. Then television began to eat into film audiences, cinemas began to close in America, and the production figures fell seriously.” This is one of the great dividing lines in film history. Before TV we had Hollywood’s Golden Age; after TV, a Tarnished Age.

Moviegoing in America reached a statistical peak in 1946: Attendance at America’s 20,000 movie houses roughly equaled the total national population, 79.4 million. Seventeen years later, attendance had been cut in half, and then cut in half again—all while the population was growing to historical highs.

Going to the picture show ceased to be a regular habit. Cinema buffs only attended recommended films, after pondering a number of serious reviews. Otherwise, it took a blockbuster on the order of a *Godfather* (1972) or *M*A*S*H* (1970) to lure the average couch potato to a theater. In its heyday Hollywood released nearly 500 features annually, plus 1,000 short subjects and newsreels. As the 1960s turned into the 1970s, the American movie industry was lucky to turn out 200 features in a year. The average studio went from producing a new feature each week to one each month by 1970. The age of Hollywood movie factories masterminded by legendary moguls like Nicholas M. Schenck gave way to an era of blockbusters “packaged” by fast-talking agents. A part of American mass culture had been lost forever.

The movies as kitsch had been transformed into cinema as art. Directors be-



Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho (1960). A darling of the critics who was also a box-office success, a film master who also worked in TV, Hitchcock showed Hollywood how to survive after its Golden Age.

came “filmmakers,” with framed graduate degrees in film from places like UCLA and NYU hanging on their office walls. It became possible to major in film studies at Harvard and the University of Michigan. The *New York Times* treated film as a meaningful form of art. And commentators seeking to gauge the national mood could be counted on to take some bearings from the relative popularity of Rambo and Jane Fonda.

Could all of this change have been caused by the coming of television? Could the Rialto and Roxy have disappeared for some other reason?

Apart from simple observation, the “blame TV” argument rests on a straightforward principle of microeconomics known as the substitution effect. If we use a good or service for a certain purpose and a cheaper substitute comes along, we ought to abandon the former and adopt the latter. No one ever considered the flickering black-and-white images on television a perfect substitute for a movie show, but even as a child I could appreciate that no one charged you admission to see “The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis” or “The Untouchables.”

But in applying any theory—economic or not—one must square the logic with the

facts. And the basic figures for movie attendance do not square with the "blame TV" explanation. Simply put, attendance at America's movie houses began to drop in 1946 and slid most steeply in the late 1940s, long before most American families even had a set. Indeed, before 1950 only a tiny minority of U.S. citizens had even laid eyes on a television. By 1950, there were still only one million TV sets in use in the country, most of them in the Northeast. New Yorkers and Chicagoans had TV, but to their cousins in Wichita and Green Bay it was as exotic as a skyscraper or subway.

The technology was ready, but because of a four-year freeze on the licensing of new stations that the Federal Communications Commission imposed while it pondered the best way to divide the TV spectrum, most communities in the heartland of the nation did not have TV stations until 1954. It was not until that year and the next that large numbers of TV sets began appearing in America's living rooms. But these very TV-less folks had quit going out to the movies years earlier.

Perhaps they switched to something else, something that historians and others have since, unaccountably, failed to recognize. If, during the late 1940s, growing families in the suburbs abandoned the movies, they should have begun to look for something in the way of cheap, mass entertainment that would be available at home while caring for young children. Like radio.

In fact, there was a brief surge in the radio business in the years immediately after World War II. Radio advertising and profits increased, cresting in 1952. For stockholders, at least, the late 1940s were radio's true Golden Age. CBS and NBC made millions programming to new suburbanites. Probably the best manifestation of that forgotten prosperity was the famous talent raids conducted by CBS in 1948 and 1949. CBS founder William Paley was making so much money in radio that he could bid millions to lure away "Jack Benny" and "Amos 'n' Andy" from NBC. Paley's rival at NBC, David Sarnoff, believed that TV was

right around the corner, so he let Paley steal his best radio talent. Upstart CBS made a killing, and with its big earnings from radio was able to catch up to NBC. When TV did emerge in the mid-1950s CBS was ahead, and it would continue to win TV's prime-time ratings race for an entire generation.

So Hollywood lost out to radio, not television. And the best way to understand what happened to Hollywood, it turns out, is not in terms of the mesmerizing effects of that brilliant new technology in a box but in terms of a far more elemental restructuring of American life that occurred during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

During World War II, most Americans had earned more than they had since the heady days of the Roaring '20s. But there was precious little to buy. Auto factories were turning out tanks, not Fords, and lumber was used to build barracks, not houses. At the urging of film stars and other famous Americans, people put their money in savings bonds. As soon as the war was over, refrigerators and autos began to appear—and then rapidly disappear—in record numbers as Americans cashed in their bonds for all the things that promised to make life fun again.

This spending spree focused on home buying. Americans accelerated a trek which they had begun at the turn-of-the-century, the movement to single-family dwellings in the suburbs. To appreciate the scope of this internal migration one should compare it to the transatlantic pilgrimage from Europe around the turn of the century. In 1907, when that migration was at its peak, more than one million Europeans landed in the United States. This also was precisely the yearly magnitude of the great suburban migration of the late 1940s. Underwritten by Veterans Administration mortgages, home ownership in the United States increased by nearly 50 percent between 1945 and '50. Ten years later, for the first time in history, more Americans owned houses than rented.

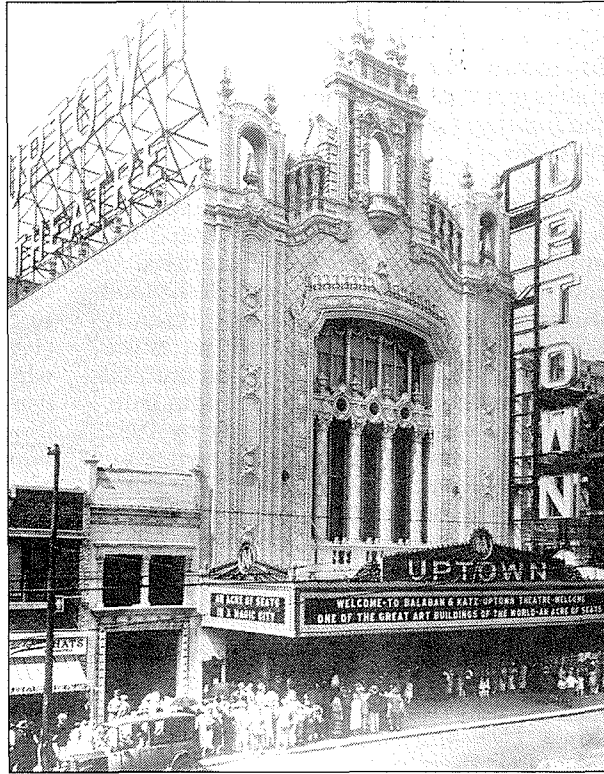
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Coupled with this massive move to the suburbs was another historically important change. Two-child households, so common since the turn of the century, gave way to the large families of the Baby Boom.

This overpowering demand for suburban life is, I think, the only plausible explanation for the abandonment of the moviegoing habit. Virtually overnight, the core of the movie audience vanished. After the war, Americans married at younger and younger ages; the average age of first wedlock fell from 24 to 19. There were few singles left to go on dates to the movies, and young couples were in no position to go: They were having more children, and having them sooner, than their elders had. In the Great Depression (and today) young couples got themselves "established" before they thought of starting a family. But in 1950 a typical 18-year-old bride and her 20-year-old husband were having their first child before either could vote. The new domesticity left little time or money to catch a show.

In a stunning reversal of another long-term demographic trend, well-off and well-educated Americans had more children than any other portion of the population. Lawyers, doctors, and executives contributed proportionally more to the Baby Boom than did factory and farm workers. And who since the age of the nickelodeon had been Hollywood's best customers? As Robert Sklar writes in *Movie-Made America* (1975): "The more education a person had, the more often he or she went to the movies; people at higher income levels attended movies more frequently than people in lower brackets."

Cutting out the weekly picture show made sense when one had to worry about inflated mortgage payments. The move to the suburbs also made it vastly more difficult simply to get to a show. The matrix of movie houses that had served Hollywood so well prior to 1945 was centered at the heart of the American city. Downtown movie palaces had run the best Hollywood could offer. My beloved Rialto and Roxy



The main attraction: When Chicago's Uptown Theatre opened its doors in 1924, crowds lined up at 9 A.M. for a peek. As late as the 1960s, the great big-city movie palaces still enjoyed a virtual monopoly on first-run movies.

were located in central shopping districts, positioned for easy access by streetcar. After its première run downtown, a Hollywood feature of the 1930s snaked its way through a network of neighborhood theaters. For a year (or more), it would appear as part of the packages at the network of more than 10,000 neighborhood theaters that served up double features, Saturday afternoon matinees of "B" serials and westerns, and newsreels and cartoons for the whole family. People generally walked to their local Paradise and Uptown, often without bothering to check what was playing beforehand.

The postwar suburbs were built miles from downtown; no one could (or wanted to) walk back to the old neighborhood Bijou. No streetcars ran from Levittown, New York or Greendale, Wisconsin to the old downtown. Walking was passé; suburbanites piled the family into the new Olds '88

or Hudson Hornet and rode in style. Besides, everyone knew there was no parking downtown. Gone were the days of simply grabbing a coat on the spur of the moment and heading for the neighborhood Egyptian or Rialto.

Of course, the Hollywood movie moguls did not simply sit still and watch the suburbs steal away their best customers. At first they reined in costs. Any Hollywood studio employee who was not actually working on a feature was fired; an entire special effects unit might be wiped out and only a single guard left at the studio gate. Even stars were let go. Suddenly by 1952 Hollywood seemed like a ghost town.

The new studio bosses also cut the number of films released. Increasingly, each motion picture had to be a potential blockbuster, able to stand on its own as a media event. Studio units making "B" movies, never-ending serials, animated cartoons, and newsreels—all regular movie palace fare during the 1930s and 1940s (and now seen in perpetual rerun on cable television's TNT and American Movie Channel)—saw their production slowed from weekly editions to special attractions and finally to nothing. All disappeared from the American movie industry by the mid-1960s. Hollywood, which had released a new feature every day of the year, was reduced to producing and releasing but a handful of new feature films each month.



A helicopter fancifully included in *Life's Dream Home* of 1946 showed Hollywood's problem: suburbanites' distance from downtown theaters.

Studio bosses returned to their bag of tricks for strategies they had scoffed at less than a decade before. In the late 1940s, Hollywood began for the first time to regularly offer feature films that catered to an audience serious about its cinema. If young men and women were staying home to raise families, perhaps the "older" folks—for Hollywood, people aged 30 and above—might venture to the movie house to see film art. So Andy Hardy and Roy Rogers gave way to *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), an Academy Award-winning tale in which Gregory Peck discovers anti-Semitism; *The Snake Pit* (1948), a tale of mental illness starring Olivia de Havilland; and *Pinky* (1949), a pioneer drama about a black woman passing for white. Oscar honored the adult film when *On the Waterfront* (1954), a grim, realistic tale of union corruption on the New York docks, won eight statues. Films such as *Marty* (1955), with Ernest Borgnine's portrayal of a lonely, alienated man, and *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), a complex examination of the guilt and shame associated with World War II, became intellectual reference points for a generation.

Before the late 1940s, studio executives shunned serious movies that dealt with complex subjects. Jack L. Warner is reputed to have told one producer: "If I want to send a message, I'll use Western Union."

Many a theater owner, seeing increasing red ink and wanting to rescue his investment, began to program "art" films, which were flowing into the United States from abroad. By the mid-1950s, even Allentown had its Nineteenth Street art theater. Roberto Rossellini's *Open City* (1946) and Vittorio De Sica's *Shoeshine* (1946), masterful, grim, Italian neo-realism at its best, proclaimed the coming of film as art. For a time, Hollywood even tried to capture the mood and tone of the best of the European filmmakers by making a number of features abroad.

Serious films showed that they could make money; Brigitte Bardot's *... And God Created Woman* (1957) kept many a neighborhood theater in business. Moreover it set new standards for portraying sexuality on the American movie screen. (Today it can be shown on cable television's Arts & Entertainment channel without provoking

any comment or objection.) It became possible for Hollywood to deal frankly with sexual mores and with relationships that were not innocent and pure and which did not always come to a happy ending. Among the best-known products of the new Hollywood were *Peyton Place* (1957), *Butterfield 8* (1960), and *Lolita* (1962).

But Hollywood executives generally remained far more comfortable with variations on the “sell the sizzle not the steak” formula. Beginning with Cinerama in 1952, they rolled out new technology after new technology to wow the public. As promised, film fans of all ages were thrilled by the famous roller coaster ride in the original Cinerama. For a time during the last months of 1953, “3-D” added another dimension to films, from George Sidney’s *Kiss Me Kate* (1953) to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Dial M for Murder* (1954). But the required cardboard glasses and frequently out-of-focus images doomed “3-D.”

CinemaScope and VistaVision offered clear images of a size and range unmatched in movie history—not to mention by those little boxes in American living rooms that Hollywood was blaming for its troubles. Roman gladiators appeared 10 feet tall in Twentieth Century Fox’s *CinemaScoped The Robe* (1953). John Wayne was never more towering than when he roamed Monument Valley in John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), shot in VistaVision.

With this surge of wide-screen systems came stereo sound. Music and dialogue were now expected to wash over the spectator from all sides. Movie theaters were remodeled and refitted and new, larger screens were installed, but few new theaters were built. The core problem, the suburban audience, was never addressed.

Moreover, buying a new screen and installing stereo sound meant less money for other amenities. Splendid service with an usher in every aisle gave way to a single teenager taking tickets. What space remained in lobbies was transformed into cafeterias, filled with the smell of popcorn, stray candy wrappers, and trash cans overflowing with cups and wrappers. Luxurious carpets and ornate chandeliers faded into frayed floor coverings and dingy lighting.

There were a few changes for the better.

After 1960 all major Hollywood films glowed in reds, yellows, and blues that made their predecessors seem grimy and dark. Producers selected from a multitude of color processes, from the highbrow Technicolor to the lesser lights of Cinecolor and Pathe Color. In films such as Douglas Sirk’s *Written on the Wind* (1956) and Vincente Minnelli’s *Gigi* (1958) filmmakers stunned spectators of the day with vivid colors. Soon after, movies in color became the industry standard, and have remained so to this day.

By the late 1960s, the movie industry had found itself. The fad of multiple “Scopes” and added “Dimensions” ended; features were shot in Eastman Color with Panavision cameras in some wide-screen ratio larger than the four-by-three images that set the industry standard before 1952, yet smaller than CinemaScope. No one could mistake these theatrical films for television images.

Hollywood slowly came to recognize that it must take its new films to the suburbs. First came the drive-in. Across the country, shrewd entrepreneurs began clearing cornfields, putting up massive screens, and installing speakers in semicircular rows. Admission was just a dollar a carload. While mom and dad enjoyed the show, the kids could sleep in the back seat—or at least pretend to. In 1946, there were fewer than 100 drive-ins; 10 years later there were more than 3,000 and they were still spreading. Families from the suburbs flocked to the new auto theaters, and by 1960 one of every four exhibition dollars was coming from these “ozoners” (to use industry lingo).

But even the drive-in’s ardent proponents agreed that viewing a CinemaScope film from the back seat through a dirty windshield could not provide the basis for a new mass entertainment industry. The ultimate theatrical solution was, like one of those grand old Hollywood extravaganzas, many years in the making: the suburban shopping-center movie complex. The movie industry followed the department store as it searched out its lost customers. As late as 1967, one still had to go downtown to see a first-run movie. By the early 1970s, the anonymous multiplexes, located near highway crossroads, were becoming

the new locus for moviegoing. Today, the movie theater is just one more outlet among the Sears and Waldenbooks.

But the 'plexes did bring back the theatrical movie audience. Theatrical revenues picked up and surged into the billions of dollars per year. The young Baby Boomers, though weaned on TV, became a faithful teenage movie audience. The movie season came to consist of summer and the Christmas and Easter holiday seasons, when these young people were not in school. This new moviegoing audience made the blockbusters, *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), and *E. T.* (1981) possible. The overwhelming success of these films confirmed the new dominance of the suburban multiplex theaters—and also meant the end of my beloved Rialto and Roxy.

Simple explanations developed while events are unfolding seldom turn out to be as neat and clean as we would like. Blaming TV for Hollywood's fate is like saying the butler did it. The argument was developed in the 1950s and has stuck. But just because one thing seems to happen at the same time as another (the fall of movie attendance and the rise of TV viewing) does not mean that one caused the other. We ought to keep our historical thinking clear and systematic, even when something as fun as the movies is involved.

There is another lesson. We ought to stop blaming television for everything. It was not so long ago, in fact, that movies were seen as the source of all evil in American society. One influential academic study of the movies' baneful influence was titled *Our Movie Made Children* (1933). By 1960 television had replaced the movies as the cause of all that was bad in society. Although no scientist has ever proved a direct connection between the ills of society and watching too much TV (or too many movies), it is easy to find fault with the Boob Tube. TV is just too seductive, too much fun. Not being able to shake the puritanical spirit of our forebears, we can't resist fingering it for everything from declining SAT

scores to an increasing crime rate.

TV and movies certainly influence our lives, but so do our changing lifestyles affect the development of these mass media. The movie audience after World War II was "lost" not because of anything the movies or television did, but because those institutions, like all others in American society and culture, were transformed by a wholesale, radical break in social and economic history. No aspect of life in the United States escaped the forces of suburbanization and the Baby Boom. Universities were turned from institutions for the wealthy few into instruments for mass education of an advanced society. Cities declined. Could we have imagined the enormous popularity of rhythm-and-blues repackaged for teen suburban audiences before the arrival of the Beatles? All of this—and more—happened because of the vast changes in American lifestyle after World War II.

But not all has been lost. The audience for movies has never been larger. True, few of today's viewers are trekking to the neighborhood movie house, but millions stare at the unspooling of Hollywood's past glories and the continual rerunning of contemporary blockbusters—on television. And with a VCR anyone can become the "house manager" of his or her own home theater. It is a wonder that any contemporary movie buff ever ventures outside. Hollywood has benefited and has never been more healthy. The Japanese paid \$4 billion for Columbia Pictures in 1989 and twice that for Universal Pictures because they knew there was only one Hollywood. Even with their billions they could not fabricate their own Tinseltown in Tokyo. Not accidentally, movies are one of the nation's most popular exports. Movie stars advise members of Congress and often become the centers of presidential campaigns. One of them even became president.

So TV did not kill Hollywood. In the great Hollywood whodunit there is, after all, not even a corpse. The film industry never died. Only where we enjoy its latest products has changed, forever.