

■ Film form and narrative

INTRODUCING FORM AND NARRATIVE

Films tell stories. Of course, this is not true of all films: documentaries, abstract animation, and early film features such as *cinéma de attractions* (see Tom Gunning in Elsaesser, 190-67) are all types of film which exploit other properties of cinema besides its narrative capabilities. Yet for most of us, our principal experience of cinema is the experience of narrative film. This chapter seeks to analyse how films tell stories, and what kinds of stories they tell.

For a film to be a narrative, it must present us with a series of events in ways that imply connections between one event and the next. Narratives must, therefore, have constituent parts, which are also discernibly related (though the type of relationship may vary greatly). Most commonly we expect a 'cause and effect' relationship: one event has the effect of causing another event, which causes another, and so on. Narratives also require 'narration', or communication. Cinematic narration is arguably the most sophisticated of all narrative media, because it is multi-track: both visual and audio. This enables films to exploit the communicative capabilities of a whole host of other media and forms. For example, films have linguistic communication through the presence of dialogue or voice-over on the soundtrack, or the inclusion of printed text within the image such as intertitles, shots of newspapers, books, letters.

Since moving images also record the three-dimensional physical world, film can incorporate other visual arts, such as painting, still photography, theatre and architecture. Thus the tomb of 'El Khazne' in Petra, Jordan, features in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Steven Spielberg, 1989). Richard Wagner's modernist (novel) house is used as a location for *La Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997), while Albert Camus's Casa Malaparte is the film setting of *Le Nègres* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963). In Grigor' Kozintsev's *Hamlet* (1964), meanwhile, pictures and tapestries that resemble the film itself decorate the walls within the castle of Elmore. Films not only have the potential to photograph the other visual arts, they may also copy their techniques. The techniques developed in theatre, painting and photography in staging, framing and image composition have been highly influential in shaping cinema. We may understand cinematic expression, therefore, as combining a mixture of practices which are unique to narrative cinema with those it has borrowed and developed from other media. In its narration and its narrative structures cinema has also been heavily influenced by the novel.

This chapter will examine both the techniques which make up cinematic narration and the structures which combine to make a narrative. It is concerned with rules (or codes) which shape the production of images and sounds on the small screen, and with rules (or conventions) which shape the depiction of scenes, events and characters on a large screen. The visual codes of cinema may be broadly divided into *mise-en-scène* and *editing*. The audio codes may be divided into *speech*, *music* and *noise*.

For discussion of early cinema and the evolution of film form see pp. 149-50.

mise-en-scène
 Meaning, literally, 'putting into the scene', this term originated in the theatre. Precise critical definitions differ, but it is most simply understood as everything which appears within the frame, including setting, props, costume and make-up, lighting, the behaviour of performers, cinematography and special effects.

editing
 Sometimes also referred to as 'montage' (from the French 'monter', meaning 'to assemble'), this refers to the joining together of different pieces of film stock in post-production.

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CONVENTIONS, HOLLYWOOD, ART AND AVANT-GARDE CINEMA

The notion of 'rules', albeit ones that are fluid and adaptable, is crucial to the study of form and narrative. As with other narrative media, such as novels, theatre, comic books and epic poems, films organize stories according to sets of conventions, which are understood by filmmakers and recognized by film viewers. Thus we respond to films based on not only our experience of the 'real world', but also the expectations we have formed through watching other films. Film narratives only gain meaning through these expectations, which may be met, or else thwarted in ways that reference and influence such expectations.

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classical Hollywood

This term refers both to an historical period within Hollywood cinema (which ended with the decline of the vertically integrated studio system in the 1950s), and to the narrative and formal conventions established and promoted during this time: the terms 'classical narrative' and 'Hollywood narrative' are frequently used interchangeably with the term 'mainstream narrative,' since this constitutes cinema's dominant mode of story-telling.

avant-garde

Meaning literally 'advanced guard' (those who 'march ahead' of the troops in a military campaign), 'avant-garde' has been taken up as an aesthetic term for art (and artists) seeking to challenge, subvert or reinvent artistic tenets and conventions.

Modernism

This refers to a dramatically experimental trend within the arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, music and film) which grew up at the start of the twentieth century, encompassing a wide array of movements: Expressionism, Vorticism, Symbolism, Imagism, Surrealism) along with the innovations of individual artists not directly affiliated with a particular movement. Modernism involved a rejection of nineteenth-century styles, traditions and ideas, and a self-conscious (or 'self-reflexive') approach to aesthetic forms, in which artistic expression was itself explored, questioned and reinvented.

For further discussion of Indian cinema see Chapter 13, pp. 336-62

Russian formalism

A literary theory which developed in Russia in the early 1920s, which sought to establish a scientific basis for the study of literature and literary effects.

The history and evolution of cinematic narrative conventions allows us to distinguish between, on one hand, 'classical Hollywood' or mainstream cinema, and on the other, art cinema, which has traditionally been the province of Europe. In other words, it is possible to identify a series of narrative conventions which emerged out of the imperatives of commercial cinema, in which the project of entertainment for the purpose of profit is paramount, and a series of narrative conventions which emerged in industries where state subsidies, and a tendency towards small-scale independent production, facilitated an emphasis on aesthetic innovation and personal expression.

Obviously such generalizations require qualification. For example, in contemporary Hollywood horizontal integration and increasing conglomeration have brought about the emergence of large independent producers and specialized production and distribution wings within the major companies. This environment has resulted in films such as *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) and *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004) which arguably use a number of art cinema characteristics. Conversely European film industries have consistently produced films, such as comedies and musicals, belonging to genres popularized by Hollywood, while the European propensity for art cinema may also be understood in commercial terms, with aesthetic and national specificity proving a profitable means of product differentiation in a global market. As narrative categories, classical and art cinema are linked, each responding to the methods, creativity and competitive presence of the other. Thus French New Wave cinema pays homage to and parodies film noir (itself indebted to German Expressionism). Hollywood cinema, always particularly adept at cinematic 'borrowing', has tended to adopt art cinema aesthetics and conventions as a means of refreshing its own genres, and the inventiveness of the films listed above may be understood in these terms.

Art cinema is also closely related to a further category, the **avant-garde**. The avant-garde is most readily distinguishable from art cinema in economic and institutional, rather than aesthetic, terms, in that avant-garde films are distributed outside the structures of the film industry (in film clubs, galleries or academic institutions). Art films, though frequently subsidized, are exhibited in commercially run cinemas and their larger production scales demand greater financial success than do avant-garde films. In terms of content and form the two categories are overlapping, and both may be related to the rise of **Modernism**.

Both art cinema and avant-garde cinema may be understood in terms of responses to – and *reactions against* – mainstream cinema. Indeed many critical accounts of art cinema define its conventions as being opposite to Hollywood's, describing it explicitly in terms of what Hollywood is not. As a means of getting to grips with art cinema's conventions this is a useful approach, but it is important to bear in mind that art cinema is not only this. In its relation to Modernism, and in its existence within different national cinemas, art cinema is varied, and has conventions of its own that are not simply 'other' than what Hollywood does.

The above definitions of both 'mainstream' and 'art' in cinema are admittedly Western and 'first-world centric', since the former is conceived in terms of Hollywood and the latter in terms of Europe. This reflects Hollywood's global domination of the film industry, and the powerful influence American and European cinematic traditions have had worldwide. However, there are a number of other powerfully influential national and transcontinental cinemas which offer their own art and commercially orientated conventions (the cinemas of India and Japan most obviously come to mind).

Story and plot

In order to describe the fundamental components of any narrative it is first necessary to make a distinction between a narrative's story and its plot. 'Story' (labelled 'fabula' by Russian formalist literary theorists) refers to the events of the narrative and the actions and responses of characters. 'Plot' (or 'syuzhet') refers to the ways in which the

TV money for film production. For the past few years Channel 4 was the British channel most actively engaged in film production. From its launch in 1982, it participated in well over 300 films including *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986), *Cracking Up* (1992), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). And, like the BBC - its terrestrial rival in film production - it favoured co-production. But in 2002 Channel 4 announced a huge cutback in film finance, partly as a consequence of the failure of its big-budget films at the box office, films such as *Charlotte Gray* (co-produced with Warner, 2001). In the past few years its old rival, BBC Films, has enjoyed a moderate success with films such as *Watch Point* (2006) directed by Woody Allen, and the corporation looks like flipping the script with the announcement, in 2006, of a minimum investment of £100 million in domestic film production over ten years (up from £10 million a year). Many in the UK industry are banking on this, and on the words of BBC creative director Alan Yentob, when he says: 'the relationship between TV and film [in the UK] is a very potent one'.³²

The UK Film Council

This agency, which was set up in May 2000, has replaced the Arts Council as the coordinator of National Lottery funds earmarked for British film. The Film Council puts money into three areas: the production of small-budget innovative film (funded at £5 million per year), the production of big-budget film (funded at £8 million per year). It has also set itself the challenge of overseeing structural changes in the UK industry, by facilitating the exhibition of a broader range of films in UK multiplexes than is normally the case (see 'Exhibition' above).

Wherever the money comes from, many commentators on the British film scene would suggest that what is needed is popular film that is also distinctive and personal. British filmmaking needs to break away from its own, somewhat entrenched position of producing film as either 'cultural' or 'mainstream'. For the Richard Gere romantic epics *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Notting Hill* (1999) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), produced by Working Title Films.

CASE STUDY 2: A US 'BLOCKBUSTER' PRODUCTION, GLADIATOR (2000)

Script development and pre-production

In 1996 David Franzoni (producer-writer) approached Dreamworks SKG with a story about gladiators in ancient Rome. The story was then developed by him in collaboration with head of Dreamworks Pictures Walter Parkes and producer Douglas Wick. In the process they revived the 'ancient epic' genre, one that hadn't really seen the light of day since the mid-1960s, with such films as *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). This older film, in fact, was to share many of the same protagonists as the future production *Gladiator*.

The producers felt that their planned film needed a director who could manage the cinematic spectacle that would feature in it. Hence, they approached Ridley Scott who relished the prospect of re-creating a detailed historical environment that would be realistic. The creation of detailed worlds that were believable on their own terms, irrespective of genre, had been a hallmark of earlier Scott productions such as *Alien* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Someone to Watch Over Me* (1987). Once the great metteur-en-scène agreed to direct, script development began in earnest.

Franzoni produced the first draft of the screenplay, with John Logan and William Nicholson working as collaborators later on. In the process, the games in the Roman arena came to occupy the central focus of the narrative. And for many months before production began, Scott worked on sketches of the key scenes and on storyboards with Sergio Pizzelli and Despretz. This production was to reflect Scott's long-held notion that direction

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For further discussion of Gladiator see Chapter 3, pp. 20-4 and Chapter 10, p. 241



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• Plate 2.6

Still from *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) Maximus (Russell Crowe) and his fellow gladiators – tensile, hard-muscled and armoured – salute the cheering crowds in the Colosseum as they and their Dreamworks/Universal picture enjoy the sweet smell of success

is akin to orchestration, with incident, sound, movement, colour, sets and computer graphics all knitted together under his watchful eye.³⁴

The film would be jointly produced, financed and distributed by Dreamworks and Universal – the former having had a long-standing distribution arrangement with the latter.³⁵

It was decided that location shooting would bring down the cost of the production, rather than trying to construct everything in Hollywood. However, filming on the site of historical monuments was impossible because of the likely damage incurred during filming, and because of the often poor condition of the sites to begin with. Therefore scouting commenced in Europe and North Africa for locations that could accommodate new sets. Such was the scale of the production that individual design departments were assigned to each of the major locations (UK, Morocco and Malta) by Arthur Max, the film's overall production designer. In each location, 'sets, props and costumes were custom-made for the film', or sets were added to existing buildings (Landau 2000: 66).

The biggest set, that of 'ancient Rome', was built at Port Mifsafli, Malta, over nineteen weeks in the winter of 1998–99, immediately prior to filming. The set included a full-scale section of the Roman Colosseum (the rest would be filled in using computer graphics), as well as sets for the emperor's palace, the Forum and the Roman marketplace. This huge complex of sets was built on to disused nineteenth-century barracks on the site to add an air of authenticity to the look of the production. This is a favoured technique of Scott's to add verisimilitude to the world he is creating, as per the sets of *Blade Runner* which were built on to old Warner Brothers' city sets to legitimise the film's noir mise-en-scène.

Production and post-production

From the beginning, the shoot was a very complex affair. The scale of the production – with a mammoth budget of over US\$100 million, scenes involving thousands of extras and a four-month shoot in four countries – necessitated the use of four different crews.

Principal photography commenced at the beginning of February 1999 in Bourne Woods, Farnham, Surrey, after the construction of a Roman encampment, a stake barricade and a forest dwelling. The opening battle scene – set in Germania in the film – was a hugely involved affair incorporating replicas of Roman war machines and an army of 1,000 extras. Shooting was finally wrapped up in the UK on 24 February 1999³⁶ from where the production moved to Morocco.

Morocco was the setting in the movie for the gladiator school. In preparation for filming, the local production crew had been busy for nine weeks, since December, 1998.³⁷ In all, the shoot took three weeks here, after which the production moved to Malta for the 'Rome' scenes.

Again, preparation of the sets had begun long before shooting: because of the scale of the set, construction had begun nineteen weeks earlier. And despite bad storms damaging the set,³⁸ filming commenced around mid-March and was completed by the end of May 1999.³⁹ This part of the shoot involved the large-scale Colosseum scenes incorporating 2,000 extras.

Finally, there followed a two-day shoot in Tuscany, which was the chosen location for the home of Maximus in the film. This work – involving Ridley Scott, the main crew (which travelled from location to location), doubles and stunt doubles – marked the end of the long location schedule.⁴⁰

The film was then completed at Shepperton studios, but not before the extraordinary computer visual effects work of Mill Film (London) was incorporated into the film to create the composite shots of the Colosseum. Computer-graphic imaging (CGI) was used to complete the circumference of the first tier of the stadium and to create the second and third tiers. CGI was also used to increase the number of spectators in the Colosseum from 2,000 to 35,000, and to extend other vistas on the Rome set.⁴¹

The film was edited by Ridley Scott and Pietro Scalia, and scored by Hans Zimmer (head of Dreamworks' film music division) and Lisa Gerrard. With the completion of post-production, Scott delivered the picture to Dreamworks on time and on budget (US\$106 million).⁴²

Distribution and exhibition

For the film's marketing poster, Dreamworks SKG (responsible for marketing the film in the US-Canada territory) and United International Pictures (Universal's marketing arm and responsible for international distribution) promoted a low-angled, medium-long shot of the film's star, Russell Crowe, in costume as Maximus. Here for all to see was the towering presence of a rectilinear, hard, tough male action star with classical adornments of armour and phallic sword. At his feet, literally, lay the Colosseum, across the base of the poster. The powerhouse epic, *Gladiator*, had been launched!

The movie's marketing campaign was the standard one for a blockbuster: saturation booking technique with simultaneous media promotion on a massive scale. The film opened superwide in the US-Canada market on 5 May 2000 in approximately 3,000 screens. With such a big opening, the film caught the imagination of the punters even before the reviews came out – which is of course the purpose of a big opening. But the makers needn't have worried, since the reviews were very favourable. In its opening weekend the film grossed around US\$35 million and went straight to number one at the box office. This success was repeated the following weekend in the UK, where the film opened in around 400 screens and grossed approximately £3.5 million.⁴³

Merchandising was kept to a minimum so as not to undermine the 'quality' message of the marketing campaign. Available to buy were the soundtrack, books on the film's

production and the movie poster – which was soon becoming an iconic image. Tie-ins included Sega games and offers of holidays to Rome.

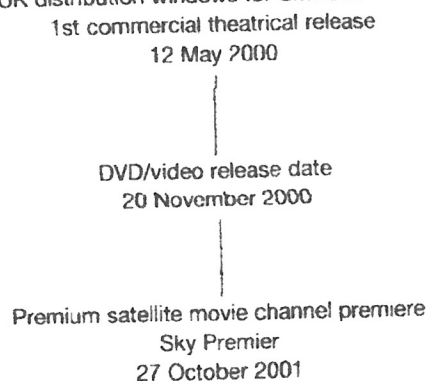
By the end of the film's box-office run, *Gladiator* had grossed around US\$452 million worldwide, with takings of \$188 million in the US market alone.⁴⁴ But the story didn't end there. On 21 November 2000, the DVD and video were released in the US/Canada market. The DVD two-disc set included the following extras: audio commentary by Ridley Scott, eleven deleted scenes from the movie, a behind-the-scenes documentary, a history of gladiatorial games and a theatre trailer, among others.

Evidently, large sales of the DVD were anticipated for the forthcoming holiday season because prior to the release date 2.6 million copies of the DVD were shipped to retail outlets. *Gladiator* sales more than met expectations, since it went on to become the biggest selling DVD in the US. Sales everywhere were remarkable: in the UK too it became the biggest selling DVD. Eventually, worldwide sales clocked in at around 4.5 million units – the biggest selling DVD up until that time.

And so, with the financial and critical momentum afforded the film, nothing could prevent it from being nominated for twelve Oscars or from winning five in March 2001: for best film, best actor (Russell Crowe), best costume design (Janty Yates), best sound and best visual effects.

The film was, of course, distributed to pay-per-view channels, and subsequently to premium cable/satellite movie channels. In the UK, the film debuted on Sky Premier movie channel in October 2001, and announcements were made in 2001 of a deal having been struck for its terrestrial TV debut in 2003. The keenly contested battle among UK broadcasters for the first-run terrestrial rights was further evidence – if indeed further evidence was necessary – of the global distribution phenomenon that *Gladiator* had become.

In summary, the UK distribution windows for *Gladiator* are to date as follows:



Multi-media empires

Today, it is not adequate to consider the film industry in isolation, for it is only one part of a network of media, entertainment and communications industries controlled by vertically and laterally integrated multi-media conglomerates,

Each company controlling a vast empire of media and entertainment properties that amounts to a global distribution system.⁴⁵

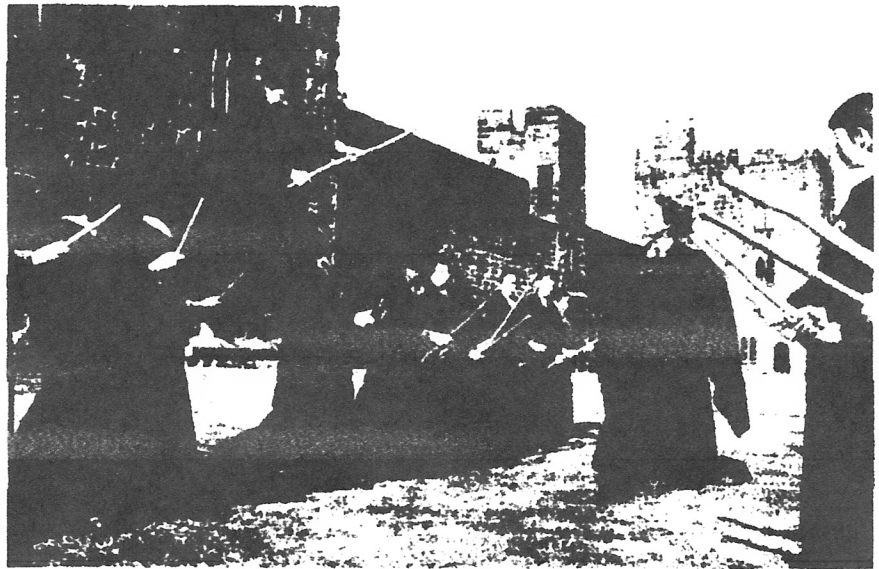
Examples of such organisations are Time Warner, Viacom (owner of Paramount), Sony Corporation of Japan (owner of Columbia Pictures) and News Corporation (owner of Twentieth Century Fox).

Time Warner merged with AOL (America Online) in January 2001. The new global media giant is the largest in the world, and has interests in the internet, film and TV,

synergy strategy
Combined or related action by a group of individuals or corporations towards a common goal, the combined effect of which exceeds the sum of the individual efforts.

• Plate 2.7

Still from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Chris Columbus directs Madam Hooch looks on as Neville Longbottom awkwardly takes to the skies. Box-office and merchandising, on the other hand, had no problem soaring due to the synergy strategy adopted by AOL Time Warner for the film's promotion.



publishing, cable and satellite systems and the music industry. The underlying philosophy behind the merger is to work across the corporation's holdings to create new business opportunities/associations; in other words a **synergy strategy**. A good example of this is the Time Warner 'marketing council' set up in 2001.

AOL Time Warner synergy and marketing

After the merger with AOL, Time Warner set up a 'marketing council' to optimise marketing opportunities across the whole corporation. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (US title, 2001) was the first substantive evidence of this new synergy strategy in operation. Marketing was planned carefully across all media to take into account the fact that a series of films was planned for 'Harry Potter' (anywhere from three to seven films in the series),⁴⁶ and the Corporation didn't want the series to suffer from overkill in the early stages.

As was noted in the *Financial Times* on the film's opening weekend (16–18 November, 2001):⁴⁷ the film was being promoted on the HBO and Warner networks in the USA, the music was being issued on Warner Music's Atlantic Records label, and a series of articles was appearing across the Corporation's print media empire. Of particular note, however, was the promotional activity of AOL itself. The online service was offering merchandising (with ninety licensing partners and 700 products), ticket promotions and giveaways tied in with subscriptions to AOL services.

The coordinated activities of the marketing council paid off, for on the opening weekend the film took approximately \$90 million in the US territory and approximately £16 million in the UK.⁴⁸ (For more examples of building audiences, see 'Film audiences' section below.)

A synergy strategy also lay behind the purchase by Sony Corporation of Japan of Columbia Pictures entertainment in 1989 for \$5 billion.⁴⁹ Sony bought Columbia to boost sales of its home electronics hardware and to achieve synergy between its software and hardware enterprises. Since it acquired Columbia, Sony has used the studio to showcase its electronic high-definition technology such as high-definition TV, 'Blu-ray' DVDs and interactive multi-media video games.

The UK scenario

Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation is the media conglomerate with the highest visibility in the UK. As an example of its synergy strategy we need only look at its UK Sky (satellite) digital service comprising hundreds of TV, CD quality radio and pay-per-view channels, interactive services, e-mail and so on. This service uses press media and film and TV production companies owned by News Corporation across Europe, Asia and America (such as the film company, Twentieth Century Fox and the US terrestrial TV Fox Network) to help promote it and provide programmes for it.

For further discussion of new technology see Chapter 9.

Summary

The communications revolution is being orchestrated by only a handful of global players. Although in the recent past some of these multi-media conglomerates, such as Viacom, have decided to break themselves up (in an attempt to unlock value in some of their divisions), the fact remains that most of them have not. Unless these firms are properly regulated by the international community - an unlikely event given the powers behind global market liberalisation - they stand to enjoy an oligopolistic power not dreamed of in the far-off days of the MPPC and the studio era.

FILM AUDIENCES

Fundamental to the study of cinema as institution is a study of cinema audiences. This section reviews the changes in cinema audience patterns/profiles from the end of the Second World War to the present day and considers their likely causes.

The section ends with a review of how film companies attempt to target audiences for their films.

From the late 1940s onwards

Before the 1950s, cinema-going was a very major recreational activity. According to one official report, it was the number one recreational activity for most people in wartime US. The year 1946 marked the peak in cinema-going in the USA, unsurpassed to this day. In that year, the average weekly attendance in the US was 95 million.⁵¹

Studies of the composition of audiences in the 1940s identify certain key trends. Although men and women registered the same average monthly picture attendance,⁵² a greater percentage of men were very high-frequency cinema-goers.⁵³

Age was the major determinant in the frequency of attendance. All surveys of the 1940s point to the fact that young people attended much more frequently than older persons.⁵⁴

Statistics from the 1940s also indicate that expenditure on motion pictures increased with annual income and that those with higher levels of education (i.e. high school and/or college) were more frequent cinema-goers than those with only a grade school education.⁵⁵

By the 1950s, cinema attendance was in rapid decline. Average weekly attendance figures had dropped in 1950 to 60 million (from their 95 million peak four years earlier), and by 1956 the number had slipped to 40.5 million.⁵⁶ What happened to bring about this sudden decline? Two reasons are most often cited: the first is the change in living patterns of Americans following the Second World War, and the second is the establishment of TV.

'Being at home' explains the drop in cinema attendance after the peak of the mid- to late 1940s. There was a radical change in social trends in the US after the war.

Home ownership, suburbanization of metropolitan areas, traffic difficulties, large families, family-centred leisure time activities, and the do-it-yourself movement.

(Bomstein 1957: 74)