THE OUTDOOR ECONOMY: A STUDY OF THE CONTEMPORARY DRIVE-IN
Author(s): DENNIS GILES
Source: *Journal of the University Film and Video Association*, Vol. 35, No. 2, INDEPENDENT AMERICAN NARRATIVE FILMMAKING (Spring 1983), pp. 66-76
Published by: University of Illinois Press on behalf of the University Film & Video Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20686944
Accessed: 29-04-2016 16:31 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://about.jstor.org/terms

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

University of Illinois Press, University Film & Video Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the University Film and Video Association*

This content downloaded from 137.148.11.31 on Fri, 29 Apr 2016 16:31:50 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

THE OUTDOOR ECONOMY: A STUDY OF THE CONTEMPORARY DRIVE-IN

DENNIS GILES

In 1982, two articles in the national press effectively wrote-off the drive-in as a viable form of exhibition. *Newsweek* pegged a story on "The Disappearing Drive-In" in an interview with an aging Long Island projectionist, who remembered the golden years of the Copiaque Drive-In. In the evening of the interview, "two recycled comedies" were being screened to occupants of only fifty cars in "a pot-holed lot" originally built for 2000 automobiles. Of course, the Copiaque ferris wheel had been torn down years ago. The dominant tone of the story was elegaic, mourning the past glories of "America's playpen." "There is a sense of desperation in the business," *Newsweek* claimed, "and a feeling that part of America's post-war landscape may soon be dismantled." In his capacity as trade spokesman, Sumner Redstone, president of U.S. Northeast Theater Corporation, was quoted as saying, " 'Drive-ins are rapidly becoming part of our nostalgic past.' "[1]

Some months later, a nationally syndicated newspaper story reported "The First Annual Drive-In Movie Festival, Custom-Car Rally and Miss Custom Body Contest" in Dallas, Texas, with amused prose sensitive to the nostalgia of the occasion. Promoted by a local film reviewer with the pen-name of Joe Bob Briggs, the festival was sponsored by the USA Film Festival in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the drive-in theater. To men and women in their thirties, attending with their children, "the event conjured up teen-age memories of steamed-up car windows and forbidden six-packs," according to the reporter. The festival was less a celebration of the contemporary drive-in than a ritualized remembrance of the car culture of the 1950's and 1960's and the low-budget genre films of the period. Although contemporary terror films were screened to establish the continuity of the drive-in experience, the festival was centered on such "cult classics" as *High School Confidential* (1958), *Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), and *The Wild Angels* (1966). Roger Corman, the former prodigy of American International Pictures, addressed the crowd from the concession-stand roof. Thanks to his phenomenal production output in the fifties, Corman had been annointed as "King of Drive-In Movies" by Joe Bob Briggs.[2]

According to the terms of each article, the drive-in is economically and culturally obsolete. While *Newsweek* forecast the "extinction" of the outdoor theater by the end of the decade, the Dallas festival utilized the contemporary drive-in to resurrect the

DENNIS GILES (Ph.D., Northwestern University) teaches film history and theory in the Department of Communication, Cleveland State University. He has published articles on film economics, genres (the musical, pornography), and television reception in *Film Reader, Cinema Journal, The Velvet Light Trap,* the Italian psychoanalytical journal *Spirali,* and the BFI Reader in Film Studies, *Genre: The Musical.*

Copyright © 1983 by Dennis Giles

This content downloaded from 137.148.11.31 on Fri, 29 Apr 2016 16:31:50 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

images, sounds and smells of an experience twenty years removed from the lives of the majority of those attending. This "First Annual" ritual established a temporary community of believers who could re-enact public and private memories within a space at once *sacred* (i.e., set apart) and pervaded with the excess of carnival. In short, the festival characterized the drive-in as the site of vanished pleasures — no longer the site of on-going experience, but of fond *re*-experience. It is tempting to suspect that whenever a cultural form reaches camp or "cult" status, supported primarily by aficionados during occasional, well-defined periods of celebration, that it has lost its social function—and its cultural vitality. Is the drive-in, then dying? This study explores the economics of the question.

In the course of researching the changes in national and local exhibition patterns since the peak year of movie attendance in 1946, I had long assumed that the drive-in was a disappearing form of exhibition. I was therefore surprised when a Master's candidate writing her thesis on postwar exhibition patterns in Cleveland informed me that over the past decade, (1971–1981) the number of drive-in screens in the metropolitan area had actually increased.[3] That same month, I conducted a telephone interview with Robert W. Selig, an executive of Pacific Theaters, Inc., "the world's largest drive-in theater circuit," in order to gain more insight into the economic situation of the contemporary drive-in. Selig informed me bluntly that it was simply "a misconception" that drive-in operations were no longer profitable, at least in the California market. Although he allowed that drive-ins in Northern regions of the country were engaged in a difficult competition with indoor multi-cinemas, Pacific's West Coast drive-ins remained highly prosperous. When asked the reasons for the relative health of the California drive-in market compared with the frost-belt states, Selig said that he could only venture a "guess" that weather was a factor and that California lifestyles were more involved in "car culture" than other regions of the country.[4] These "guesses", derived from Selig's experience as an exhibitor, seemed to be reasonable, common-sense assumptions which could be tested by research. Because the question of the quantity and/or quality of "car-culture" in any given state would involve much quasi-sociological speculation, I decided to first investigate the extent to which climate affects the relative prosperity of drive-ins, from region to region.

Preliminary research indicated that, apart from unpopulated, rural areas, trends in indoor theater ("hardtops", as they are often called in the industry) have been much the same, nationwide. Almost everywhere, from the early 1960's into the eighties, neighborhood and downtown theatres were closing, while the larger exhibition circuits constructed or leased clusters of small-screen theaters in suburban shopping malls. By the late 1970's, the circuits compensated for the slackening pace of theater (and mall) construction, by subdividing existing installations into multiplex units. From 1970 to 1980 the number of hardtop installations in operation fell by 11%, while the number of screens housed by these installations increased by approximately 40%. During this same period, the number of drive-ins fell by 17%, but drive-in *screens* remained relatively constant, declining 5% at the most.[5] In the Cleveland market, although both the central city and then the county were losing population in the 1960's and 1970's, the number of drive-in screens in operation increased from 10, in 1961, to 18 in 1981.[6]

These statistics, when combined with Selig's comments in the interview, alerted me to the possibility that: 1) reports of the

This content downloaded from 137.148.11.31 on Fri, 29 Apr 2016 16:31:50 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

impending death of the drive-in were greatly exaggerated and, 2) in contrast to relatively ubiquitous *national* trends in indoor exhibition patterns, the drive-in economy has become highly regional and local in character. This is not to suggest that there are no nationwide trends in outdoor exhibitoin, or that drive-ins are thriving in comparison to the newer walk-in screens, but rather that regional differences in the prosperity and operating philosophy of drive-in circuits are simply too significant to be ignored.

Financial statistics on drive-in theater operations are difficult to obtain. Although Pacific Theaters, Inc., the largest circuit, operates some 125 outdoor screens, as a privately held corporation, its financial records are unavailable to the public.[7] With the exception of Pacific's circuit, drive-in chains tend to be smaller than their indoor counterparts and, in many cases, are the last refuge of the independent exhibitor. The major source for information on drive-in receipts is the *Census of Selected Service Industries,* published every five years by the U.S. Department of Commerce. The *Census* compiles figures for total receipts, receipts from admissions and revenues from refreshment sales for both drive-ins and indoor theaters in state by state compilations, thus providing a basis for comparing the two forms of exhibition. Unfortunately, the data are published fully two years after collection; statistics for the 1982 Census will not be reported until 1984. I was therefore forced to establish distinctions between "strong" and "weak" drive-in regions from the 1979 report of 1977 exhibition figures. Comparison of this *Census* with the previous reports, however, assured me that, over a five-year period, outdoor theaters in strong drive-in states retained their comparatively superior health, and *vice versa*.[8] Presumably, these gross distinctions are still in force in 1983.

My first priority was to check Selig's assertion that drive-ins were successfully competing with walk-ins in the California market. The second task was to evaluate the *weather factor;* i.e., the extent to which climatic conditions affected the number and prosperity of drive-ins in various regions of the country. The degree of urbanization of a regional economy, as well as differences in exhibitors' operating philosophies, audience composition and types of films screened could then be researched to determine what other factors are associated with successful drive-in operations.

In 1977, according to the Department of Commerce, drive-ins constituted 26.9% of the total number of U.S. theaters, but gained only 17.1% of the total receipts from customers. This figure lends credibility to the notion that nationwide, the outdoor theaters form the weaker sector of exhibition. In California, however, drive-ins composed only 18.8% of all theaters, but won 24.8% of the receipts. *In no state except California* did drive-ins gather more receipts, per average theaters, than their walk-in competitors.[9] One could easily assume, with Pacific Theaters' Selig, that the relatively benign California climate is one of the primary reasons why the state's drive-ins outgross its indoor theaters. Overall, those states which suffer harsh winters could be expected to have less prosperous drive-ins, on a full-year basis, than those states whose climate permitted year-round operations.

The comparison of receipts, however, proved this assumption to be false. Despite the fact that Northern Drive-ins are often closed from 20% to 50% of the exhibition year, their share of the gross receipts for all theaters is often greater than that of drive-ins in the states of the so-called Sunbelt. Although Texans have proclaimed their state the unofficial capital

This content downloaded from 137.148.11.31 on Fri, 29 Apr 2016 16:31:50 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

of drive-in culture by creating the First Annual Drive-In Festival, Texas outdoor theaters gained only 19% of the state's total theatrical receipts in 1977, far below the 27% national average. By contrast, outdoor theaters in Vermont accounted for 35% of gross receipts, while those in the frigid state of Maine won 25% of the total. Comparison of other Sunbelt states with those located in the Frostbelt clearly demonstrates that climate is not the major determinant of the prosperity and/or poverty of the drive-in economy in any given region.[10]

Although the weather factor has little explanatory power, several loose geographical patterns of drive-in strength and weakness (relative to indoor theatres) can be discerned in the maze of 1977 exhibition statistics. When both the number of outdoor theaters and their proportion of total receipts are compared to indoor theaters, the most extensive region of drive-in strength can be seen to embrace the Border states and the Lower Midwest. From Oklahoma, this "drive-in belt" extends east through Missouri, Tennessee, Kentucky and West Virginia, widening at the center to include Indiana, Ohio and (probably) Southern Illinois. Kentucky and West Virginia have almost one drive-in for every walk-in theater.[11] The traditional culture of much of the population of these states could be termed "Appalachian"; e.g. rural, white, fundamentalist Protestant, displaying a hill-country car-culture (stock-car racing, etc.). Although, at first glance, Indiana, Illinois and Ohio would be classified as industrial states with a culture distinct from that of the back-roads of Kentucky, West Virginia, or Missouri, these states have, since the early 1960's, received large numbers of residents from their Appalachian neighbors. The connection between drive-in and hill-country culture, if any, lies beyond the bounds of this economic study, yet the association is an intriguing one.

Outside of California and the East-Central drive-in belt, I could find no large geographical areas of drive-in strength. Drive-ins in the Deep South (from Texas through Georgia and South Carolina) tend to be fewer in numbers and weaker in their percentage of theatrical receipts than outdoor theaters in most sections of the country. The Rocky Mountain states form a "stronger" drive-in region than the Great Plains states, while two Scandinavian states of the Upper Midwest—Wisconsin and Minnesota—display "weakness" in outdoor theaters. Neither Alaska nor Hawaii—states with completely opposed climatic conditions—evidenced any significant drive-in strength. With the exception of the surprising pockets of strength in Vermont and Maine, the Northeast could be classified as one of the areas in which drive-ins were fewest in number and lowest in relative prosperity. In New Jersey, the weakest drive-in state, only one of every ten theaters is an open-air installation, while in New York, drive-ins account for only 5% of total theatrical receipts. As opposed to Maine and Vermont, the weak drive-in states of the Northeast are highly urbanized.

An examination of the statistics for all fifty states revealed that, in general, a high degree of urbanization does negatively affect drive-in strength. In Houston, Texas, a city experiencing rapid growth, the number of drive-ins reported in the Service Industry Census fell from 31, in 1972, to 18 only five years later, while walk-in theaters increased from 57 to 67. A similar precipitious decline in drive-ins occured in the expanding metropolitan area of Orlando, Florida, during the period.[12] Although urbanization probably affects the drive-in economy far more than climatic conditions, many states in the Great Plains and Deep South regions have large rural populations, yet they are not areas of significant drive-in strength. Furthermore,

This content downloaded from 137.148.11.31 on Fri, 29 Apr 2016 16:31:50 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

urbanization differs not only in degree, but in kind. California, the strongest drive-in state, has become highly urban in character, yet in the Southern portion of the state, where drive-ins are most dominant, urban areas are notoriously sprawling, including open, undeveloped parcels of land. By contrast, the urban areas of the Northeast were congested by the 1960's, drive-in construction around the Eastern cities was effectively finished after the first boom period of the late 1940's-early 1950's.[13]

Drive-in exhibitors can adapt to such givens as climate, land-use patterns and local economic conditions, but they cannot control them. In the second phase of my attempt to determine why drive-ins are more prosperous in some sections of the country than in others, I decided to examine differences in business practice—the ways in which exhibitors create or control their own destinies. Of course, motion picture exhibition is far from being an arena of totally free competition. Distributors often favor certain exhibitors in bidding terms and/or picture availability. Exhibition circuits in a given market may decide among themselves which company will bid on a certain picture; by such informal working agreements exhibitors can hold down the cost of product. In addition, the same circuit often operates indoor threaters as well as outdoor installations, with the effect that the drive-in manager may not directly compete with walk-ins, but rather, with other drive-ins in the same market. Finally, some drive-ins are apparently regarded as real-estate holdings expected to bring in only a minimal cash flow. The owner keeps the theater in operation only to pay the property taxes while waiting to dispose of the property. In such cases, no real attempt is made to succeed in the picture business.

But although competition in film exhibition may deviate greatly from the free market ideal, the fact remains that the more prosperous California drive-ins have, in many cases, adopted an operating philosophy distinct from most outdoor theaters in the weaker drive-in states. This "philosophy" might more correctly be called a competitive strategy of picture selection aimed at an older target audience. In the concluding part of this study, I compare the operations of drive-ins in the Cleveland metropolitan area to the business practices of the Pacific Theaters drive-in circuit in an attempt to make some rough regional distinctions between the *exceptional* drive-in market of California and a market which appears more representative of national trends. Of course, Cleveland is not the nation, but random surveys of newspapers ads, informal interviews and personal experience leads me to hypothesize that drive-ins in many urban areas of the Northeast, Midwest and Texas screen much the same film selection, and court a similar audience, as Cleveland outdoor theaters.

In the 1981 interview, Pacific Theaters' Robert W. Selig cited an in-house audience survey to state that "75% of our drive-in audience today is composed of young married couples with two or more children."[14] More recently, U.S. government economists have asserted that "drive-ins will remain in business, mainly because their lower admission prices . . . attract young families."[15] Rather than pay a babysitter while they attend a walk-in theater, parents take the children with them to the movies. At the drive-in, the snack bar supplies a wide range of food and drink, children are free to talk and play without disturbing other patrons—some drive-ins provide playgrounds.

But outside California, unmarried youth usually outnumber the family audience. In their study of a Rochester, New York, drive-in audience during the summers of

This content downloaded from 137.148.11.31 on Fri, 29 Apr 2016 16:31:50 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

1981–82, Bruce Austin and his students found that only 17% of the patrons attended with their families. 41% of the audience attended with an "opposite-sex friend," and a significant proportion of the attendees reported that they came to the drive-in primarily to "have fun (e.g., party, drink, smoke)."[16] My students report that a similar audience dominates Cleveland area drive-ins. Apparently, Northeastern-Midwestern drive-in experience provides more of a dating, socializing or relaxed "party" context for youth than a source of inexpensive family entertainment, reinforcing the reputation of the outdoor theater as a site of sensual indulgence (sex, junk food, alcohol, drugs) and relatively "wild" behavior.

The types of films screened at drive-ins are obviously keyed to the attendance history, composition and expectations of the local audience. In order to compare picture selection at Cleveland drive-ins with that of, 1) local walk-in theaters and 2) Pacific Theaters drive-ins, I compiled charts of programs at all eighteen drive-in screens in the Cleveland metropolitan area during two "peak" exhibition periods of 1981 and 1982. The 1981 study covered a total of twenty weeks (May 29–October 3); in 1982 17 weeks were charted (June 4–September 22). At least two films were paired in the weekly program of each theater, occasionally more. One weekend, six films were screened in a "dawn-to-dusk" program at one drive-in; several theaters sometimes offered triple and quadruple-feature programs. In the following analysis, I count all films screened together (on one bill) during a single week at a theater as *a single program*. All theaters studied changed the composition of their programs once a week (usually Friday); although one film of a program was, in rare cases, held over for an additional week on a screen, it was always paired with a different feature, thus counting as a "new" program. In total, the study embraced 666 programs; eighteen screens × thirty-seven weeks of exhibition.

In the accompanying chart, I have broken down the number of outdoor and indoor programs on Cleveland screens into rough generic distinctions. Complete figures for indoor screens were gathered solely for the 1982 period, and include "mainstream" theaters only (no foreign art, "classic" repertory or hard-core porn.),

CHART 1

Program Types: Drive-In and Walk-In Theaters
Cleveland, Ohio
Summer 1981, '82

Type/Genre	Walk-In, 1982		Drive-In, 1982		Drive-In, 1981	
	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%
General Audience Action/Adventure/Drama	1	31.2%	1	23.7%	2	19.3%
Comedy	2	24.2%	2	22.9%	1	28.9%
Science Fiction/Fantasy	3	20.9%	3	17.3%	4	15.6%
Horror/Terror	4	12.2%	4	15.4%	3	19.0%
Musical, including Rock	5	6.4%	7	1.5%	7	.20%
Martial Arts	6	2.5%	6	2.6%	8	.6%
Disney/G-Rated Family	7	1.6%	8	1.3%	6	3.4%
Pornography: R and X-Rated	8	1.0%	5	15.0%	5	10.8%
Black Action/Drama	–	0%	9	.3%	9	.4%
		100½				

This content downloaded from 137.148.11.31 on Fri, 29 Apr 2016 16:31:50 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

since the intention was to compare how the two types of theaters compete for the general movie-going audience. If a drive-in program consisted of one horror film and one comedy, each film is listed as ½ program in its genre. The large "General Audience" category includes action-adventure and drama offerings ranging from *Atlantic City* through *Blue Lagoon* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark;* films such as *Excalibur, Outland* and *Superman II* are classified as Science Fiction/Fantasy.[17]

In general, Cleveland drive-ins screened a lower proportion of general audience pictures than indoor theaters in the area, replacing them with a greater percentage of pictures from two "disreputable" genres—pornography and horror/terror. Consisting primarily of soft-core titles such as *Locker Room Girls* and *Hot to Trot,* pornography was the fifth-ranking generic category at drive-in theaters, but these films were almost absent from the screens of mainstream indoor houses. Although the percentage of horror/terror films at walk-ins and drive-ins was nearly equal by 1982, outdoor screens played a greater number of reissues, including some terror films five to ten years old. Comedy was one of the highest ranking genres for both forms of exhibition, but drive-in programs were weighted more heavily with teenage comedies. Cheech and Chong were the comic stars who dominated the drive-in screen, with Bill Murray running a distant second; adult comedies such as *Author, Author* and *Victor/Victoria* played more often at walk-ins than drive-ins. Science-fiction/fantasy films and musicals were somewhat under-represented at drive-ins, perhaps because these major releases are often for higher terms than the drive-in exhibitors are willing to pay.

Few drive-ins played first run product, with the significant exception of films in the comedy and terror categories. Although the drive-ins played a much greater proportion of films from small, independent distributors than the indoor theaters (lower-budget fantasy, terror, comedy and soft-core pornography), most of the films playing at walk-ins for runs of several weeks were eventually screened, briefly, on drive-in screens. At any given time, many of the same titles playing at second-run $2.00 indoor houses were also offered by drive-ins.

In film genres, drive-in and walk-in houses are comparable; the contrasts were less than I had expected before I began the study. When the *ratings* of films at each type of theater are classified, however, a quite different picture emerges:

CHART 2

Film Ratings: Cleveland Walk-In and Drive-In Programs 1982 % of Program Total

	Walk-Ins*	Drive-Ins
G	3.9%	2.0%
PG	56.8%	32.3%
R	39.3%	63.6%
X	0%	2.1%

*Excluding Hard-Core Pornography Theaters

The overwhelming emphasis on R-rated pictures at the drive-in is a clear indication that Cleveland outdoor theater operators do not view their business as one of providing "family entertainment." R-ratings signal a youthful audience in search of stimulation—not comfort—from the movies.

In sum, the exhibition study indicates that while there is no major difference *in kind* between the major genres or types of films screened in Cleveland area drive-ins and those of the local walk-ins, drive-in films tend to be more explicit than those on indoor screens, and are aimed at a younger target audience. The dominance of certain *sub-genres* at the drive-in, such as sexploitation (*Teenage Tramps,* etc.), and

This content downloaded from 137.148.11.31 on Fri, 29 Apr 2016 16:31:50 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

drug comedy (Cheech and Chong) reinforces this conclusion.

As one might expect, Pacific Theaters uses an entirely different strategy of picture selection for their "young family" audience than the Cleveland drive-ins. In California, according to Selig, Pacific bids for the "top" films—general audience releases from the major distributors. Rather than trying to obtain a special "type" of film for its drive-ins, the company places the outdoor theaters on the same level of first-run competition as the shopping mall theaters. Weather and car-culture aside, Selig credits Pacific Theaters first-run policy as being the major factor in the success of their drive-in. Families are guaranteed that they can enjoy the same pictures they would see at indoor theaters, but can view them in the more comfortable, casual context of the drive-ins. Selig firmly rejects the notion that only certain types of pictures are appropriate for drive-ins:

> Generally speaking, a picture that is successful in walk-in theaters will be successful in drive-ins, just as a picture that is successful in New York City will be successful in the rest of the country. There are no 'Wyoming' pictures.[18]

From Pacific Theaters' point of view, the United States is a single movie-going culture.

When asked why drive-in circuits in the Midwest and Northeast screen so often screen genre pictures from minor distributors rather than adopting Pacific Theaters general audience strategy, Selig offered the reasonable argument that drive-ins operated by small independents lack the financial muscle to compete in the bidding wars with large indoor circuits for major, first-run releases. When the founder of Pacific Theaters, William R. Forman, opened the first drive-ins in Southern California, the only pictures he could obtain were "junk."[19] Apparently, like Forman some thirty years ago, many of independent exhibitors today must select from a range of product more limited than that available to the indoor circuits. According to a 1978 *Variety* article, many of the major distributors have historically refused to rent first run films to drive-in exhibitors because outdoor operators are unable to guarantee the four to six week run offered by the walk-ins. Major distributors do not want to risk a fast playoff of the ten to twelve major films they offer per year, yet drive-ins are said to exhaust the market for first-run products much faster than indoor theaters. A spokesman for M & R Amusements, a Chicago drive-in chain, was quoted as saying that when a large drive-in plays a popular film, the lot is filled with cars averaging 2.5 people each. "Consequently, the picture uses up its audience in a few weeks." In 1977, however, M & R successfully offered *The Deep* (four week run) and *Star Wars* (twelve week run) to Chicago viewers, thereby proving to distributors that the "legs" of a major release were not negatively affected by drive-in exhibition.[20]

Despite the M & R experience, the practice of offering first run films for extended runs on a drive-in screen remains uncommon outside of California, as far as I know. During the period of the 1981–1982 Cleveland study, *no* drive-ins displayed this exhibition policy. The study indicated that many outdoor theaters were mixing *some* first-run releases from major distributors in with the more typical films and product from independent distributors, but that no run on a single screen extended beyond a single week for these "major" releases. Thus there is evidence that the range of films available to the larger, well-financed drive-ins has increased since the late 1970's, at least in some large urban markets, yet overall, there is still an ap-

This content downloaded from 137.148.11.31 on Fri, 29 Apr 2016 16:31:50 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

preciable gap between the exhibition policy of Pacific Theaters and that of Cleveland area drive-ins.

The Cleveland drive-ins are apparently profitable, but they have either *chosen* not to directly compete with first-run indoor theaters for the general audience or have been *forced* to court the youth audience with more specialized programs of lower cost films. The reality probably lies somewhere between these two extremes.

Whatever the reason, when compared with the prosperous California drive-ins of Pacific Theaters, it appears that the independent drive-ins of Cleveland—and other sections of the country—are locked into a vicious cycle of low profitability: they screen drug comedies, low budget action-adventure and soft-core pornography product because their customer base is the youth audience, but at the same time it is the special character of the films which draws this particular audience. Pacific Theaters, Inc. may run the most prosperous drive-in operation precisely because the company does *not* feature the "drive-in" films celebrated by the Dallas Drive-In Movie Festival, but it is open to question whether independent circuits in other markets could afford mainstream first-run films, let alone obtain them.

According to the Department of Commerce, "Motion picture receipts have exhibited steady growth since 1972, averaging 7.8% annually," and continued growth at similar rates is projected for the next five years.[21] Yet in the two years from 1979 to 1981, the number of drive-in screens decreased by nearly 13%.[22] Clearly, some drive-ins are in trouble, but others are closing because exhibitors cannot resist the high prices developers are willing to pay for their land. In an article entitled "Ozoners in Bay State Closing," *Variety* reported that owners of drive-in theaters in Massachusetts "are getting the kind of offers they can't refuse," for their ten to twenty acres of property.[23] "The drive-in business is still good," according to another exhibitor, "but you can often make more money selling the property. A drive-in, with its single screen, must have a picture doing very well every week."[24] Most drive-ins serving major metropolitan areas are now surrounded by housing tracts or commercial property, rather than farmland, and it is probably only a matter of time until most owners sell or convert their real estate to other uses. If Ohio is typical, northern drive-in operations are only able to achieve productive use of their land some 60% of the year. During the winter months the drive-in sits vacant, yielding zero return on investment. Southern drive-ins can operate year-round, but the Sunbelt suburban rings are increasing most rapidly, giving the owners more reason to sell or redevelop their properties.

Faced with rising taxes on their land, many drive-in operators on the fringe of large Northeastern and Midwestern urban centers have been searching for ways to obtain a return on investment during those times in which movies are not being screened in the theaters. In the summer of 1981, nearly one half (six out of fourteen) of the Cleveland area installations were advertising Saturday or Sunday flea-markets. By 1982, some of these flea-markets had expanded into weekday events, and most began operation several weeks before the drive-in in question started its films for the season. *Variety* has stated that cash flow from flea-markets in the Boston area has been steadily increasing. Car spaces are rented to dealers for as much as $20 per market-day, while patrons are charged $1 per carload or 50¢ per person if they walk in. Concession stands sell food and drink all day long. One Massachusetts operator claims that

This content downloaded from 137.148.11.31 on Fri, 29 Apr 2016 16:31:50 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

Sunday revenues sometimes reach $10,000, more than the gross on an average film for an entire week.[25]

The future of the drive-in is in question, due to rising land-values, higher taxes and the operator's inability to obtain first-run films on a limited budget. Yet it is too early to announce, with *Newsweek,* the death of this exhibition form or, with the Dallas Festival, to consign the outdoor theater to the trash can of a nostalgia cult. The Pacific Theaters example demonstrates that highly prosperous modes of drive-in operations are possible, providing the owner is well-financed. But precisely because most drive-in operations, however profitable, are run by independents with a limited bank-roll and little "clout" with the major distributors, the Pacific model may be inappropriate for drive-in exhibition as a whole. No doubt the small rural drive-in will continue its decline, with little opportunity to make more productive use of the property.

In metropolitan areas outside California, however, one can project that those drive-ins which will be profitably able to survive (as *Theaters*) will be high-volume, multi-screen operations, and/or those which court specialized audiences. In the Cleveland area, for example, three single-screen operations have closed since 1971 (leaving fourteen installations) but, as previously noted, the total number of screens has increased.[26] Two of the apparently most successful outdoor theaters in this market are closed only three months of the year, compared to the average four and a half months. One of these, the Memphis, is Cleveland's only triple-screen operation, supplementing the film gross with a Saturday flea market. The other cold-weather drive-in, a single-screen operation, often plays X-rated pornography. A check of the newspaper ads for Texas drive-ins on February 6, 1982, revealed that five of the seven single-screen operations in Dallas and Houston were playing hard-core pornography, while the general audience films were playing predominantly at double, triple and quadruple screen drive-ins.[27]

Instead of trying to compete, head for head, for the mass audience of the new multicinemas, drive-ins throughout the nation appear to be groping for an audience which does not feel itself to be well-served by the exhibition of mainstream films in the sometimes claustrophobic confines of the small screen shopping mall theater. At the drive-in, the spectator is allowed a greater range of response and action than at indoor screenings. The social controls of the walk-in experience are lifted, while the films themselves offer relatively deviant visions which may undercut the values—the ideology—promoted by the more "respectable" products of the Hollywood culture industry. As long as some spectators attend the movies in search of at least an illusion of freedom, the drive-in alternative should remain a part—however minor—of the exhibition economy.

Notes

1 Lynn Langway with Susan Agrest, "The Disappearing Drive-In," *Newsweek,* August 9, 1982, p. 65.

2 Julia Cass, "A Festival for Drive-in Fanatics," Knight-Ridder Newspapers, in *Des Moines Sunday Register,* November 14, 1982, Section H, p. 1.

3 Nirith Wysenbeck, "Cleveland Film Exhibition: 1946–1981," unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Communication, Cleveland State University, 1982.

4 Author's telephone interview with Robert W. Selig, November 2, 1981.

5 Motion Picture Association of America statistics, reported most conveniently in Cobbett Steinberg, *Reel Facts* (New York: Vintage, 1982).

6 Wysenbeck's Cuyahoga County count with my addition of one metropolitan area drive-in outside the county which advertises in Cleveland newspapers.

This content downloaded from 137.148.11.31 on Fri, 29 Apr 2016 16:31:50 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

[7] Selig interview.

[8] U.S. Department of Commerce, "Motion Picture Theaters," *1977 Census of Selected Service Industries* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1979), Vol. 1; hereafter abbreviated *SSI;* 1972 *SSI;* 1967 *SSI.*

[9] 1977 *SSI,* pp. 4-1 to 4-32.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] The 1972 edition of *The International Motion Picture Almanac* (New York: Quigley, 1982), p. 43A, reports that from 1963–1969, "drive-in theaters increased by an average of 21½%.

[14] Selig interview.

[15] U.S. Department of Commerce, "Motion Pictures," *1983 U.S. Industrial Outlook for 250 Industries with Projections for 1987,* (Washington: Government Printing Office, Jan., 1983), p. 52-15.

[16] Bruce A. Austin, "Portrait of a Contemporary Drive-In Movie Theatre Audience," unpublished 1982 study, page 12, Table 1, Table 4. (Rochester Institute of Technology).

[17] Drive-in programs were determined from movie listings in *The Cleveland Press* (1981) and *The Plain Dealer* (1982). Two graduate assistants, Joanne Cambosi and George Pursey, helped compile the data. The assignment of generic category was difficult in the case of certain films, so the classifications are necessarily rough. Whenever possible, the generic stress of the advertising guided assignment of type, but all such distinctions are, ultimately, subjective "judgment calls."

[18] Selig interview.

[19] Selig interview.

[20] Steven Ginsberg, "Drive-Ins Rate First Run; Hardtop Sites Re-Valued," *Variety,* April 26, 1978, p. 23.

[21] *1983 U.S. Industrial Outlook,* p. 52-16.

[22] Ibid., compared to *1981 U.S. Industrial Outlook* figures.

[23] "Ozoners in Bay State Closing; Can't Spurn Land-Value Offers," *Variety,* June 28, 1978, p. 7.

[24] "Land Values, Short Year, Single Screen All Hamper Drive-Ins," *Variety,* April 7, 1982.

[25] "New England's Surviving Few Drive-Ins In Flea Marts Boom," *Variety,* August 26, 1981.

[26] Wysenbeck thesis.

[27] Ads provided by Donna Kellogg.

This content downloaded from 137.148.11.31 on Fri, 29 Apr 2016 16:31:50 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms