



Butler University Digital Commons @ Butler University

Scholarship and Professional Work -
Communication

College of Communication

1-1-2002

The Multiplex: The Modern American Motion Picture Theatre as Message

Gary Edgerton

Butler University, gedgerto@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ccom_papers

 Part of the [Broadcast and Video Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Mass Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Edgerton, Gary, "The Multiplex: The Modern American Motion Picture Theatre as Message" (2002). *Scholarship and Professional Work - Communication*. Paper 57.

http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ccom_papers/57

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Communication at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - Communication by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact fgaede@butler.edu.

Butler University

From the SelectedWorks of Gary R. Edgerton

January 2002

"The Multiplex: The Modern American Motion Picture Theatre as Message."

Contact
Author

Start Your Own
SelectedWorks

Notify Me
of New Work



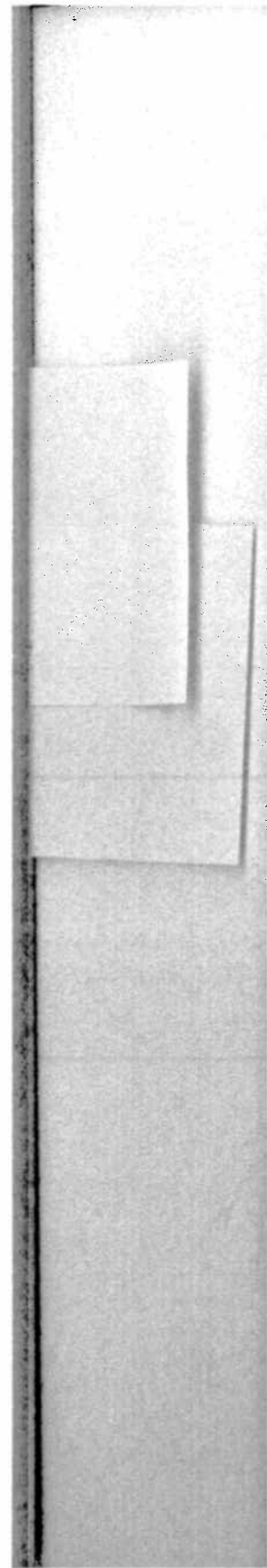
Available at: http://works.bepress.com/gary_edgerton/13

EXHIBITION, THE FILM READER

Edited by Ina Rae Hark



London and New York



The Multiplex

13

The Modern American Motion Picture Theater as Message

GARY EDGERTON

The shift in emphasis from merchandising feature films to selling concessions shows up in contemporary motion picture theater design. The message implicit in the decor and surroundings of the modern theater is no longer "to dream." Its function, color and design communicate to the movie-goer an entirely different signal. Today, the most progressive type of theater, and the most characteristic of its era, the multiplex,¹ tells its occupants it is time "to buy."

The first multiplex in America was built in Kansas City by the American Multi-Cinema Corporation in 1963. Multiplexing has since proven itself to be a major stimulant, enabling a handful of chains to grow gradually at first, then meteorically over the subsequent two decades.² Table I suggests the industry-wide growth of multiplexing during the decade of the 1970s. Back during the 1963 national Theater Owners of America (TOA) Convention, however, Drew Eberson, whose family had been in the business of constructing domestic theaters for over forty years, accurately forecasted the future of theater design in a speech entitled, "A Look Ahead at Theater Trends."

During the 1920s the boom was on. We were designing and opening at least one theater a month. The seating capacities were between 2,000 and 5,000 seats. The "golden age" of the motion picture palace was with us. Cost budgets were not too important—get it done—have it bigger, grander, more ornate and more palacelike.

Then came the depression and from then on there were peaks and valleys in theater construction. During the 30s and 40s . . . the watchword was economy. High cost of certain types of labor ruled out ornamental plaster, iron work and bronze. We then created a theater by using extremely simple lines and a great deal of color splashes—so-called "modernistic".

And now the boom is on again! But what a different theater! The modern design of course has eliminated the heavy ornamentation, the rising orchestra pit and the elaborate playrooms of the past. The theaters of the 30s with their loud, crass, vulgar colors are gone.

Table 1. U.S. motion picture theaters (end of year)

	1939 (Census)	1948 (Census)		
Indoor	n.a.	17,811		
Drive-In	n.a.	820		
Total	15,115	18,631		
	1954 (Census)	1958 (Census)	1963 (Census)	1967 (Census)
Indoor	14,716	12,291	9,150	8,803
Drive-In	3,775	4,063	3,502	3,384
Total	18,491	16,354	12,652	12,187
	1972 (Census) Est. Screens		1974 (Census) Est. Screens	
Indoor	9,209	10,694	9,645	11,612
Drive-In	3,490	3,734	3,519	3,772
Total	12,699	14,428	13,164	15,384
	1975 (Census) Est. Screens		1979 (Census) Est. Screens	
Indoor	9,857	12,168	9,021	13,331
Drive-In	3,535	3,801	3,197	3,570
Total	13,392	15,969	12,218	16,901

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, *Bureau of Census*, and MPA Statistics.

My theme is the theater of tomorrow, an auditorium functional in design, a comfortable seat with plenty of leg room and sufficient lighting to prevent groping and tripping; a lobby and foyer with attractive eye appeal, colors harmoniously blended to soothe and yet be admired and a sales area with a head-on shot and equipment which blends with the architectural design and with no unsightly bulges.³

This ability to "blend with the architectural design . . . with no unsightly bulges" is exactly what sets the multiplex apart from older theater models and makes it the characteristic movie-house of today. In 1965, theater architect Robert W. Kahn put it another way when explaining the appeal of the shopping center theater. "In recent decades motion picture theaters have gone from wild rococo to dullest soap box. Today good design calls for a practical, economical theater that is comfortable and pleasurable to attend, and that will stay attractive beyond the life of any fad or current style."⁴ In other words, Kahn is alluding to the fact that in being "beyond . . . any fad," theater design today is either a style for all seasons, or no fashion at all depending upon one's perspective. The atomism of the 1920s which set the Roxy in New York City apart from the Midland in Kansas City, or Radio City Music Hall, has given way to an unprecedented move toward homogeneity where an AMC theater in Missouri looks much the same as one does in New York. In addition, an AMC multiplex anywhere strikingly resembles a respective General Cinema complex, which both conjure up hints of recognition when comparing design, format and color scheme to the neighborhood mall stores and fast food outlets.

The entrepreneurial spirit which enlivened the movie palace of yesterday and was reflected in the individuality and audacity of its design has now been replaced by the efficiency and corporate rationality which, in turn, invigorates the decor of the multiplex. As a result, the dream palace way of doing business has today been grounded in the dollar and cents realities of streamlining and increasing profitability to equity invested. Put another way, the exhibitor as merchant has won out over those psycho-social regions of the mind that are usually exercised by the exhibitor as shaman or showman. Consequently, the contemporary movie theater is no longer an exclusive showcase for dreams, but a combination projector/screen and retail outlet. In like manner, an exhibitor's role today has about as much to do with promoting movies as art, or pop art, as a manager at McDonald's concerns himself with nutrition and dietetics. The decor for each of these establishments reflects their common intent of transmitting a simple, yet effective message to the prospective consumer. The evolving language of American commerciaese communicates: bright colors, vinyl and laminated covered furnishings, plastic panel art, sloping wall and ceiling design and glaring lights highlighting a centrally located concession area, and an imitation brick linoleum walkway leading to air conditioned auditoriums I, II, III and IV.

Services that immediately gratify are the modes of making money today, and motion picture exhibition is no different than any other sector of the American marketplace. Let the customer relax, make him both responsive and compliant, and above all manipulate the environment so it will be easy for him to spend money. After all, a comfortable consumer is an uncritical buyer, a message implicit in Phillip Lowe's explanation of the advantages of a circular, centrally located concession area as opposed to the traditional a backbar, freestanding counter.

They have the capacity of having more people. If you look at the circumference of that circle versus the front space at a counter, you can just get more people around that circle, and they all think they're going to be next. If you're the third person in line, or the third row of persons waiting to be served, it takes a lot more patience. So we can get more people around a circular stand than you could three or four deep in a back-bar stand.⁵

Therefore, the evolution of theater design from movie palace to multiplex is a switch in emphasis from consumer dreaming to buying. No longer is the imagination meant to be titillated, as much as the senses soothed. Robert L. Beacher, president of the Forest Bay Construction, comments on these strategies.

The primary objective of the designer is to create an innovative lobby effect by removing the standee wall and enclosing the inner lobby for a friendly living room atmosphere . . . the secret in effective redesign and twinning of existing theaters depends upon the utilization and retention of a portion of the "old look" to allow the more conservative film-goer a sense of both newness and familiarity. At the same time a mood of comfort and warmth is created.⁶

Ultimately, the relationship between the exhibitor/theatrical environment and the movie-goer has always been a vital supplement to the more obvious dynamic between the audience and the filmmakers in determining what the movie-going experience means to those who attend films. Today, movie theater architects are fundamentally concerned with establishing

"a mood of comfort and warmth." In turn, contemporary motion picture theater design both maintains and reflects this ever growing stress on tactile concerns, quite unlike the movie palace's emphasis on the imagination. On a practical level, this switch is consistent with the fact that developments in the contemporary movie business now make it essential that today's exhibitors increasingly earn their livelihoods from the sale of goods in their concession areas, rather than from box-office receipts. Consequently, American theater owners must exert maximum effort in order to corner the captive movie audience before it retreats into the darkened auditorium. These exhibitors hope to soothe, calm, mollify and placate the senses of as many compliant customers as possible. After all, that is what their retail and environmental stratagems are designed to accomplish.

On the other hand, many American movie-goers today do, in fact, go to the movies to be viscerally manipulated. Although beyond the scope of this particular essay, both Pauline Kael⁷ and James Monaco⁸ have recently argued that this manipulator/manipulated paradigm is also the characteristic relationship between contemporary filmmakers and the American audience. Monaco calls the blockbuster films of the 1970s, "entertainment machines." He notes that America is now in an era of filmmaking when "visceral action sells best."⁹ Likewise, Kael makes reference to "feelies," which are movies that are "more gripping than entertaining. . . . It [*Alien*] reached out, grabbed you, and squeezed your stomach."¹⁰ Again, tactile effects appear to take precedence. Still, drawing connections between the modern American motion picture theater on one hand, and the evolving nature of contemporary film form on the other, is certainly an elusive pursuit. Nevertheless, it can be firmly established that both film content and the environment in which the movie is seen always affect one another in some way. How, and to what extent these factors work in tandem, however, must for the time being at least, remain the concern of future research.

Notes

1 Multiplexing is the practice of housing two or more screens under one roof, thus maximizing audience size while essentially paying building and management overhead costs, employees' salaries, etc., for only one structure.

2 By early 1980, the top four theater circuits boasted 2,719 screens, a concentration of 16 percent of the domestic total. Since 1970, the General Cinema Corporation has grown from 233 screens to 894; the United Artists Theater Circuit from 390 to 773; and the American Multi-Cinema Corporation from 147 to 552. In addition, Plitt, a circuit that increased its size substantially when it bought ABC Theaters, had grown to 530 screens by early 1980.

During the past two decades these four circuits also did substantial multiplexing, which along with the easing of corporate emphasis on the drive-in theater, a willingness to diversify into other business pursuits, a corporate policy of centralization and persistent growth, and an exploitation of the suburban market, were the major policy positions that separated the successful motion picture theater circuits in America from the also-rans.

Computed from data in the 1965 *International Motion Picture Almanac* (ed.) Charles S. Aaronson (New York: Quigley Publications, 1965), pp. 510-522 and the 1980 *International Motion Picture Almanac* (ed.) Richard Gertner (New York: Quigley Publications, 1980), pp. 497-523, the General Cinema Corporation increased the number of sites it multiplexed

from 5.4 percent in 1963 to 81.9 percent in 1978. Over that same time period, the United Artists Theater Circuit increased the percentage of sites it multiplexed from 0 to 43.1 percent, while the American Multi-Cinema went from 8.3 percent to 97.7 percent. Comparable data on Plitt and ABC Theaters is not available.

- 3 Drew Eberson, excerpts from the speech, "A Look Ahead at Theater Trends," 1963 *Theater Owners of America Convention Program*, p. Speech 13.
- 4 Robert W. Kahn, "What's Playing at the Shopping Center?" 1965 *Theater Owners of America Convention Program*, p. 41.
- 5 Interview with Phillip M. Lowe, July 30, 1980.
- 6 Robert L. Beacher, "A New Look in Twin Theater Design," in the National Association of Theater Owners, *Encyclopedia of Exhibition*, 1976, p. 110.
- 7 Pauline Kael, "Why Are Movies So Bad? or the Numbers," *The New Yorker*, June 23, 1980, pp. 82-93.
- 8 James Monaco, *American Film Now* (New York: New American Library, 1979) pp. 49-80.
- 9 Monaco, p. 52.
- 10 Kael, p. 93.