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Panic at the Drive-In: Affordance, Moral Panic, and Drive-In Theatres

Maria Chatzifilalithis

In May of 1933, the drive-in theatre was born. Richard Hollingshead, inventor of the drive-in, describes his invention as an outdoor theatre in which a film “may be seen and heard from a series of automobiles so arranged in relation to the stage or screen, that the successive cars behind each other will not obstruct the view” (Segrave 203). The drive-in was a novelty during its early years, but began to thrive after World War II. While the drive-in has since declined in popularity, it has also been memorialised as a symbol of the 1950s, particularly as a symbol of teenage romance. Much like Nickelodeons, the drive-in theatre developed a reputation as a ‘site of sin’ during its early years (Aronson 159). By the 1940s, the drive-in’s sinful reputation had developed into a full-fledged moral panic; the panic subsided after the 1950s, only to reappear again in the 1970s.

When examining a moral panic, it is apt to cite Stanley Cohen’s definition from his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or groups of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved (or more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (9)

Drawing from Cohen, I examine public discourse about drive-in theatres in the United States. The drive-in theatre emerged as a ‘folk devil’ that was defined as a threat to moral norms, such as abstinence from premarital sex. The drive-in was presented in the media as a ‘passion pit’ where adolescents took advantage of the privacy afforded by their automobiles and the nighttime sky. Panic ranged from concerns about the behaviour at the theatre to concerns about the appropriateness of the films being

shown; these concerns were taken up in the Supreme Court by Senators and in religious institutions by pastors.

The aim of this article is to explore concerns surrounding youth and romance at the drive-in. While similar to traditional theatres in its goal to entertain, the drive-in theatre is fundamentally different in design. Although moral panic about the drive-in was partially due to the cultural mores of 1940s and 1970s America, I argue that the panic was also dependent on structural characteristics of the drive-in theatre as a medium.

I. Affordance and the Drive-in

In his book *The Design of Everyday Things*, Donald Norman describes an issue that arose during the construction of train shelters for the British Rail. The problem was that local vandals would smash the glass panels that were part of the shelters. To combat this issue, plywood panels were substituted for glass panels. Instead of breaking the wood, which would not have taken much more force than breaking glass, vandals wrote on and carved into the wood. The purpose of this anecdote serves to explain that there is a “psychology of materials and things” that affords certain practices (Norman 9). There exists a cultural understanding that flat surfaces such as wood are for writing on, whereas glass is delicate and can be easily broken (Norman 9). While Norman’s example illustrates how cultural understandings of objects cause actors to engage with certain affordances, this is not to say that the wood could not have been broken or the glass written upon. Affordance has to do with the materiality of an object and what an object’s make-up permits. What we can further take from Norman’s example is that objects are often used in activities that are not prescribed; while the prescribed use of plywood was to offer shelter, vandals used it as a medium for writing. Affordance accounts for the fact that there are certain ways an object can be used; as long as an object affords it, humans can enact their will within the material boundaries of an object.

Affordance speaks to both the intended and non-intended uses of a medium. In the case of the drive-in, cultural responses to the medium as a site of moral panic were not prescribed, but significant nonetheless. Historian David Nye notes that designers of a technology often have a concentrated range of predicted uses for their technology. Once the technology enters the public sphere, however, the public’s desires and intentions often open up new possibilities for the technology (Nye 170). Nye suggests that technologies are not “‘things’ that came outside of society and had an ‘impact’; rather, each was an internal development shaped by its social context. No technology is a thing in isolation. Each is an open-ended set of problems and possibilities” (171). The social climate in which a technology is embedded is crucial to understanding the rise of the drive-in culture and why the meaning of the theatre changed from a place of wholesome family fun to a ‘passion-pit’. The prescribed use of the theatre was advertised and intended as a family environment for

film watching. Young people, however, worked within the physical boundaries of the medium, created their own meanings, and transformed the drive-in into a space for adolescent romance.

In his history of the drive-in, Kerry Segrave explores the culture out of which the drive-in grew. Segrave suggests that drive-ins, along with shopping malls, were pioneers in the post-WWII shift to the suburbs (vii). The drive-in provided a form of entertainment for suburban families that did not require driving to the city in the evening (Segrave vii). Moreover, the drive-in could not have been a success if people were not inclined to spend time in their cars. The drive-in boomed during the era of American car culture, which valued consumption and extravagance (Segrave x).

While Segrave's history is useful for a social history of the drive-in, he states "I have tried to strike a balance in this book between the technical aspects of the drive-in – which didn't fuel its rise but did contribute to its decline – and the sociocultural ones" (vii). Segrave, however, overlooks the importance of the technical aspects of the drive-in that contributed to its popularity. Segrave claims that drive-ins rose in popularity due to the consumerism culture of 1950s America – a culture that had a love affair with their cars. The drive-in gave people the opportunity to be entertained in their cars. While this is a cultural understanding of drive-ins, it is also technical because cars function as seats at drive-in theatres. In this way, cars can be interpreted as reflective of American culture, but also as a distinct part of the materiality of the drive-in – a materiality around which cultural discourses about sexuality would develop. It is the materiality of the theatre, or the "technical aspects" to use Segrave's words, that fuelled the rise of drive-ins for the adolescent audience.

While it is important to highlight the technical aspect of the drive-in, it is equally important not to fall into the trap of technological determinism. Nye argues that the adoption of a technology is not easy to predict because a technology does not enter culture from the outside. Instead, the development of a technology largely depends on social context. While Nye's theory is relevant to the discourse of the drive-in, it is just as easy to adopt a cultural determinist view and assume that certain cultures necessarily produce certain technologies. The problem with attributing causality in this way is that it primarily shines the spotlight on either technology or culture and "in so doing, it deflects vision away from the interdependent relations among the living and nonliving within which these things are given form" (Slack and Wise 96). In an attempt to avoid determinism of either kind, this article looks at the interplay between the physicality of the drive-in as a medium and the discourse of the culture in which it grew.

Literature concerning drive-in theatres tends to offer a social history of the medium. With respect to youth romance, drive-in histories explain the moral panic

of the ‘passion-pits’ with cultural reasons. For instance, Films Media Group claims that while the 1940s-1950s were a time when sexuality was not discussed in public, the introduction of foreign films into the American market began to challenge this norm. The drive-in represented a deep-rooted fear that American culture had towards ‘risky’ teenage behaviours and the fear of losing wholesome mores. In the 1940s, indoor theatres were not subject to the same controversy as their outdoor counterpart. I argue that while moral panics surrounding the drive-in are rooted in American sexual norms, these fears could not have been realized without the specific architectural elements of the drive-in.

II. Methodology

In his work on moral panics, Stanley Cohen states that he is concerned “with the way in which the [panic] was initially interpreted and presented by the mass media, because it is in this form that most people receive their pictures of both deviance and disasters” (24). Following Cohen’s model, I looked at newspaper articles from the 1930s-1970s as evidence for the way that drive-in theatres were represented in print media. In conducting my discourse analysis, I used purposive sampling and preformed keyword searches in both entertainment-based publications and popular newspapers, namely *Variety*, *Motion Picture Herald*, and *The New York Times*. In order to conduct my searches I narrowed my results to the aforementioned decades and used keywords such as “passion-pit”, “drive-in”, “theatre”, “ozoner” (a term used to describe the manager or owner of a drive-in), “pix”, “motor theatre”, and “outdoor theatre.”

III. Roadside Architecture

The architecture of the drive-in was crucial to the moral panic surrounding the drive-in theatre. The drive-in belongs to a class of architecture called “roadside architecture,” which also includes motels and some restaurants (Bell 216). The goal of roadside architecture is to capture the attention of nearby motorists and passers-by in order to gain their business (Bell 215). Drive-ins borrowed many architectural elements from indoor theatres, such as the screen and theatre rows, but ultimately recreated them into a different medium. The screen was situated at the front of the theatre and its enormous size, usually 50 feet or more in height, grabbed the attention of both the audience and passing motorists (Bell 216). The screen became a symbol of the drive-in and could be recognized from a distance. In keeping with the aims of roadside architecture, a large attraction board (similar to a billboard) was erected by the roadside. These boards were adorned with lights and often used colourful displays and lettering that was decisively larger than the surrounding urban signage

(Bell 217). The purpose of these boards was to inform passers-by of the films playing and any other attractions the theatre was offering.

One of the most important differences between indoor theatres and drive-ins is the seating arrangement. Although there was a limited amount of space reserved for 'walk-ins' near the front of the screen, most people would sit in their cars at the drive-in. The drive-in was set up in a series of lanes that created a number of semicircles, each slightly longer than the one in front of it, and all of which faced the screen. Patrons were able to enter directly from the road, and after paying admission, they would choose a lane to park their cars. It did not take long before an unofficial understanding took place that the front section of drive-ins was for families, while the back rows were for teenagers or couples who wanted privacy (Bell 223).

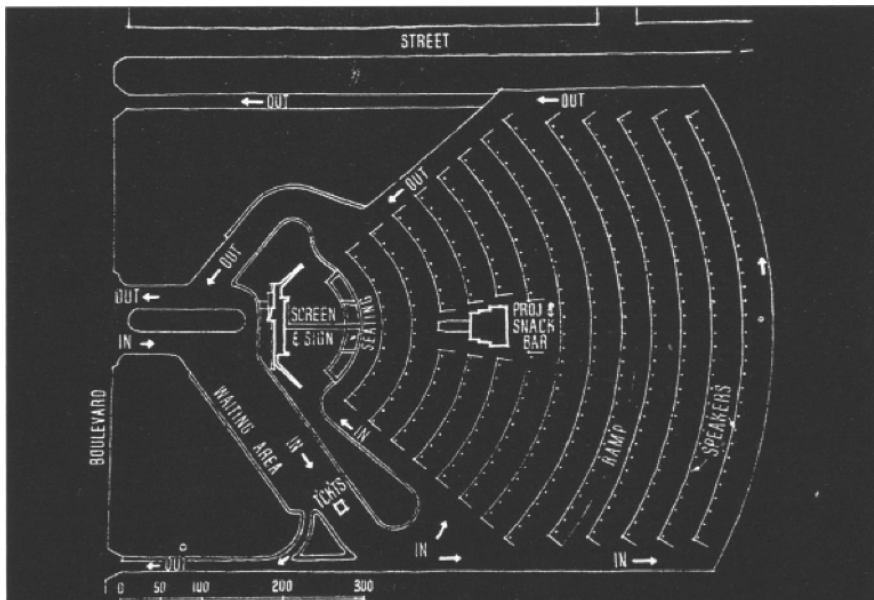


Fig. 1. Example of a standard drive-in site plan from 1940 (Bell 2003, Fig. 14.1.).

The drive-in theatre operated outside, which meant that business depended on natural lighting. In contrast to indoor theatres, which could dim the lights and offer matinees, a film could only be shown in the evening once it was dark enough for the image to be seen on-screen. Accordingly, films at the drive-in were shown late at night. Both the late hours and the ambience of the nighttime sky were central conditions for moral panics about the drive-in.

IV. Racy Behaviour at the Drive-In

Panic surrounding drive-in theatres was primarily concerned with two types of ‘inappropriate’ sexual activities: (1) concern about behaviour taking place in the parking lot, and (2) concern about what was taking place on screen. The drive-in almost instantly gained the reputation of being a ‘passion-pit.’ After only a few weeks of operation, a news article in the *Motion Picture Herald* stated that:

Some characteristics (of the drive-in) even offer opportunities for levity that one preparing for a serious report wishes he not forego. Perhaps it will occur readily enough to the reader what fun a Young America could have in a coupe under the added simulation of a sophisticated Hollywood romance! (“A Motor Age Experiment” 15)

The journalist of this article makes a prediction as to how the theatre will be appropriated by younger audiences based on a material aspect of the theatre, namely that the drive-in offers the privacy of being in one’s own car. In 1938, after drive-in theatres had been around for a few years and were rising in popularity, *Variety* published an article explaining why the drive-in may eventually become a serious threat to indoor theatres. The article cites the fact that outdoor theatres cost significantly less to open because “all the drive-in operator needs is a vacant lot” (“Spread of Drive-In” 21). The article also outlines how cooling systems are irrelevant since the theatre is outside, and seating is brought with the patrons as they arrive in their cars. All of these ‘threats’ are directly related to the physical nature of the theatre in comparison to the indoor theatre. The article concludes that another significant advantage of the drive-in “is the fact that patrons may spoon in their cars as they watch a picture. Or spoon without watching it” (“Spread of Drive-In” 21). The *Variety* article places emphasis on the car as a fundamentally different material aspect of the drive-in theatre and contrasts it with indoor theatres.

The connection between sexual behaviour and the drive-in theatre continued into the 1940s. In 1945, *Variety* ran an article entitled “Could It Be Necking Has Something to Do with It?” The article outlines the story of a New York Ozoneer who drove to his theatre during the “worst May snowstorm in 50 years” to perform a “routine inspection and head back for his fireside” (“Necking” 7). Instead, what he found was a line up of 50 cars waiting to be let into the theatre, all of which stayed for the entire duration of the film “despite the chilly, miserable weather” (“Necking” 7). Although the body of the story does not explicitly suggest any sexual activity, the journalist implies that “necking” was the reason the patrons braved the snowstorm in their cars.

By the early 1950s, the drive-in was no longer a novelty. After two decades, drive-ins began to decline in popularity in part due to the expanding presence of large indoor theatres. In response to these losses, many theatres adopted ‘dusk-to-dawn hours’, which resulted in an increase in public concern about sexual activity at the theatre. The public reacted strongly to ‘all night hours’, and media outlets were virtually unanimous in their claim that ‘all night hours’ meant one thing – more teenage sex. In 1953, an organised group of churchmen in San Antonio complained that “young people attending the shows stayed out so late they could not attend Sunday school or other Sunday morning church services” (“Dusk-to-dawn Ozoners” 1). The churchmen argued that since the same film is shown twice after midnight “teenagers are not interested in seeing the same picture twice just for the sake of seeing a movie” (“Dusk-to-dawn Ozoners” 1). The men suggested that not only were their children staying out all night at the drive-in, but they were also being exposed to an “in the flesh stripper” that some drive-ins would reportedly hire (“Dusk-to-dawn Ozoners” 1).

Another *Variety* article from 1953 states that dusk-to dawn operations were “putting back the bad-label drive-ins [had] fought to get rid of” (“Passion Pits with Pix” 1). The article goes on to claim that because of this new operation, drive-ins garnered unfavourable publicity “in the way of raids, the public going to authorities to have restrictive laws put on drive-ins, and many other complaints” (“Passion Pits with Pix” 1). One instance of the public going to authorities occurred in 1957 when two Montgomery County delegates introduced a bill to the Ohio General Assembly.

The bill proposed a ban on unmarried persons less than eighteen years of age from attending drive-in theatres after midnight unless accompanied by their parents. As the delegates explained to the committee, “people are disturbed by the goings-on in drive-in theatres after midnight” (“Greater Dayton Drive-In” 1). Harold LeCrone, the assistant prosecutor for the trial, argued that “there are many juvenile ‘passion pits’ existing under the pretence of cinema art” and that “art is playing second fiddle to sex orgies in some dusk-to-dawn theatres” (“Check Motels” 19). LeCrone furthered his claim by stating “there was a definite increase in illegitimate births in his county as a direct tie-in with dusk-to-dawn movies” (“Check Motels” 19). LeCrone’s (unsubstantiated) claim about birth rates was backed by the reasons that drive-ins were “cheaper than motels” and becoming “hang-outs for teenage gangs” (“Check Motels” 19).

Concerns about all night hours at drive-in theatres arose due to the darkness and privacy afforded by the nighttime sky and seating arrangements. By the 1960s, however, some ozoners began to implement new tactics to change the reputation of the drive-in away from being associated with illicit sexual activity. In a *Variety*

article from 1964, the reporter notes that drive-ins began to transform their ‘passion pit’ reputation by altering the physicality of the medium: “the stigma of the ‘passion pit’ era has now been greatly erased by patrolling... security police and increased lighting” (Providence’s Quality Bookings 1). This statement shows that when ozoners were faced with the task of transforming the reputation of the drive-in, they aimed their efforts at the procedural and architectural aspects of the medium. These changes parallel many of the features present within traditional theatres that discourage illicit sexual activity. Ozoners hired security to patrol the drive-in and undermine the privacy that patrons had within their cars; this parallels the use of ushers in indoor theatres who would patrol aisles with flashlights. Likewise, just as lighting in traditional theatres reduces privacy, so too does increased lighting in drive-in theatres. Privacy and darkness afforded sexual behaviour, but when the drive-in was equipped with additional security and light, non-prescribed sexual uses of the medium were no longer afforded.

V. Controversy on Screen

Another central part of the drive-in moral panic was the sexual nature of films being shown on screen. Most of these types of concerns arose between the late 1960s and 1970s, but there is evidence of public anxiety before this period. Here we are reminded of Cohen’s claim that during moral panics, there are times when a panic emerges, and then seems to disappear from public discourse only to reemerge again. In 1951, a drive-in theatre in Detroit was nearing the end of its season, so the ozoner decided to play a selection of films that involved sexual themes and drug use; the films had already been shown in indoor theatres. In a *Boxoffice* article, H. F. Reves covered the controversy, stating:

a study of current billings indicated that, while a number of drive-ins have been booking pictures on narcotics and sex education, the films themselves generally are accepted for regular theatre showing, and in some instances, have won substantial acclaim for their educational value. (Reves 14)

When these films were shown at the drive-in, a number of requests for censorship were sent to the sheriff’s office. In this case, a film that was initially praised for its educational value at indoor theatres was later labelled inappropriate and targeted for censorship. Reves sums up the issue well, stating “reaction of the public indicates that people are quicker to suspect trouble on film content at a drive-in because of the reputation flamboyantly given to the outdoor houses by some newspaper and magazine stories” (14).

The issue of what constitutes appropriate content to show at drive-in theatres became a central issue during a 1970 re-election campaign of Nebraska Senator, Roman Hruska. During the campaign Hruska, who owned a number of drive-ins, was challenged by his opponent Frank Morrison on the grounds that the types of films he showed at his theatres were pornographic in nature. Morrison questioned Hruska's ability to "sermonize against loose sex and low morals while displaying filthy situations upon the public screen for money" (Drummond 64). Morrison, however, was challenging films that fit within the accepted culture of the indoor theatre. For instance, he listed the films "The Blood Drinker, which is in the Frankenstein tradition and Catch 22, which was widely acclaimed despite some nudity" (Drummond 64). The films in these examples were the same in content when they were shown at drive-ins and indoor theatres; what changed was the medium of dissemination. Since the drive-in was already riddled with sexual associations, the public was quicker to reject films that used the drive-in as a platform.

Not only did preconceived notions about the drive-in allow for the panic about what was being shown, but the screen itself became a crucial element of the moral panic. In 1971, the Supreme Court agreed to a trial that would decide if drive-in theatres violate obscenity laws when they show racy films, even if those same films were already being played in indoor theatres. Ozoneer William Rabe was fined 600 dollars for showing the film *Carmen Baby* "on the grounds that the context of its exhibition" made it obscene (Graham 32). The "context of exhibition" this article refers to is the fact that "there was evidence that motorists and children outside the fence could see the film, and the Oregon court found that it violated the privacy of residents of nearby homes" (Graham 32). The problem here was not the content of the film, but the fact that people who were not in the theatre could see the sexually explicit material. The drive-in theatre is a type of roadside architecture, the purpose of which is to attract attention from the surrounding community; the height of the screen was the issue in question because people could see it from a distance. Even after the Supreme Court ruled against the charges of obscenity, there was the public belief that it should be a crime for a theatre "to show a film that illuminates the night-time sky of a residential area with a vivid portrayal of erotic sexual scenes" (Graham 31), and that even though "drive-ins are no longer 'passion pits' there should not be too much passion on the screen" ("Passion Pits No More" 6).

This aspect of the panic centred around the fact that nudity, gore, sexuality and other 'inappropriate' material were being shown in a way that was deemed as too accessible. There were no walls to conceal the content, the films that were projected onto a screen could be seen beyond the limits of the theatre, and films were advertised on roadside billboards for any passing motorist, child, or community member

to see. Indoor theatres allowed for a culture that was uncomfortable with sexuality to hide the illicit content away in a building for intended viewers. Due to the architectural elements of the drive-in, it was difficult to control who was exposed to images on screen. The structural aspects of the drive-in theatre allowed for concerns to develop, namely that the drive-in was corrupting the youth and sexual mores.

VI. Conclusion

The notion of affordance is crucial to understanding the moral panic surrounding sexuality at the drive-in. The drive-in theatre afforded a moral panic because the material elements of the theatre, such as the night sky, lack of lighting, and use of automobiles all afforded privacy, and thus the possibility of sexual activity. The screen and the announcement board of the drive-ins afforded a panic surrounding the appropriateness of films because they could be seen over the fence of the theatre; people could unwillingly be exposed to both the images of and advertisements for racy films. In both these instances, examining the material features of the drive-in and the way in which they were culturally interpreted provides a more complete understanding of the moral panics surrounding the drive-in theatre.

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