

# CINERAMA

: The First Really Big Show



## DIVING HEAD FIRST INTO THE 1950s: AN OVERVIEW

by Nick Zegarac

Above left: eager audience line ups like this one for the “Seven Wonders of the World” debut at the Cinerama Theater in New York were short lived by the end of the 1950s. All in all, only seven feature films were actually produced in 3-strip Cinerama, though scores more were advertised as being shot in the process. Above right: corrected three frame reproduction of the Cypress Water Skiers in ‘This is Cinerama’. Left: Fred Waller, Cinerama’s chief architect. Below: Lowell Thomas; “ladies and gentlemen, this is Cinerama!”



Arguably, Cinerama was the most engaging widescreen presentation format put forth during the 1950s. From a visual standpoint it was the most enveloping. The cumbersome three camera set up and three projector system had been conceptualized, designed and patented by Fred Waller and his associates at Paramount as early as the 1930s. However, Hollywood was not quite ready, and certainly not eager, to “revolutionize” motion picture projection during the financially strapped depression and war years...and who could blame them? The standardized 1:33:1 (almost square) aspect ratio had sufficed since the invention of 35mm celluloid film stock. Even more to the point, the studios saw little reason to invest heavily in yet another technology. The induction of sound recording in 1929 and mounting costs for producing films in the newly patented 3-strip Technicolor process had both proved expensive and crippling adjuncts to the fluidity that silent B&W nitrate filming had perfected. By 1931 audiences expected sound from their film going experience and by the end of the decade Technicolor had become more widely embraced and anticipated.



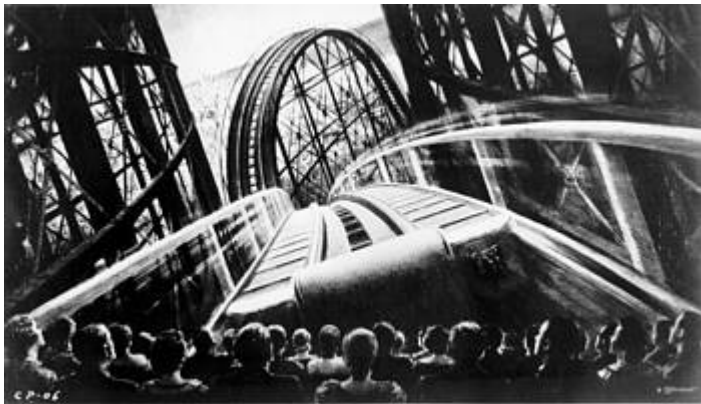
Cinerama’s claim of enhancing the filmic experience therefore remained negligible, even as late as 1952 when trade papers lauded Cinerama with such superlatives as “magnificent” and “vainglorious”. Cinerama was undeniably bigger than life; its triple 35mm, spherical spread projected onto a 146 degree curved surface literally swallowed its participants in a concave spectacle that when combined with seven tracks of stereophonic sound was apt to give the equilibrium a genuine queasy feeling. Today, technological advancements in motion picture recording and projection are par to most audience expectations. In our technological age we automatically demand that the



science advance along with the art. Yet, even as a contemporary movie audience, that expectation in technical proficiency was, at least with Cinerama raised to a level that few, especially in 1952, could have either foreseen or anticipated.

Above: glowing examples of 3-strip Technicolor (from left) Jane Powell in *A Date With Judy* 1948, Errol Flynn with Olivia de Havilland, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, 1938, Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With The Wind*, 1939.

The last great revelation in motion pictures had come very early in their development when Herbert Kalmus (above, left) launched the Technicolor process. Like Technicolor, Hollywood had briefly toyed with widescreen projection as early as 1930, an experiment that luminaries such as cameraman Gilbert Warrenton found wasteful and unnecessary. After all, most theatres in the 30s barely exceeded seating for 1,500 people, hence everyone was already situated close enough to the standardized screen. And even if depression strapped studios were willing to overlook the tripling of their production budgets (for in film stock alone there was three times as much footage needed to create this enveloping illusion), executive enthusiasm for early widescreen processes was often met with more than a hint of groaning from directors and cameramen who rightly assessed that an entirely different aesthetic and composition of the frame was required.



(Left: from big screen to small screen. Top: Cinerama press promotion for the roller coaster sequence that opened the film. Below: Peter Bang and Duus Hansen pose with an early model television in Denmark, 1950.)



The wider image effectively eliminated the need for the close up – a move that upset more than a handful of vane starlets who deemed the technology a usurper in their ability to dominate the screen. So too, did frame composition have to be more carefully reconsidered. If a bush or desk appeared too much in the foreground of any part of the expansive image it literally consumed the attentions of the viewer, drawing attention away from the action taking place. If there was not enough action in the shot then the entire image acquired a static quality akin to that of a stage play. Hence, the horizontal supremacy of early widescreen processes quickly developed a reputation throughout the industry as ideally suited only for photographing 'funeral processions' and 'snakes.'

In the 1930s in particular there was the reluctance on the part of theater exhibitors to allow literally the entire structure and design of their grand movie palaces to be considerably altered, or in some cases, entirely renovated at a considerable expense to accommodate the expanded screen. Still furthermore to this mounting apprehension was a shortcoming derived from Cinerama's inherent difficulties in perfectly timing the projection of its three independently aligned images. Occasionally, mis-registration during projection exposed the obvious separation to the naked

## The ultimate dimension in TERROR!



eye. After brief experimentations with the novelty of widescreen and a few expensive and ill timed flops, widescreen motion pictures were effectively dropped from every studio's roster of pending projects.

But in 1950 a damaging wrinkle in the supremacy of the film industry - as sole purveyors of mass entertainment - shocked and alienated the old school much more than the loss of distribution the studios had incurred in their European markets with the advent of World War II. Television had entered the market place with a thunderous explosion of consumer interest. By 1952 the small screen was on its way to becoming a main staple in everyone's living room. It had effectively cut audience theater attendance by more than half, and this during a decade where production costs had nearly tripled to what they had been in 1930.

The studio moguls were ill equipped to cope with television's popularity. While some boycotted their stars from appearing on its programming, others misperceived television as merely a marketing tool to advertise and sell their new movies to the public. On the whole then, television was dismissed outright as a temporary interloper that the movies would eventually crush. But in the meantime the question on every executive's mind remained how to woo patrons back into movie houses in the interim between television's immediate

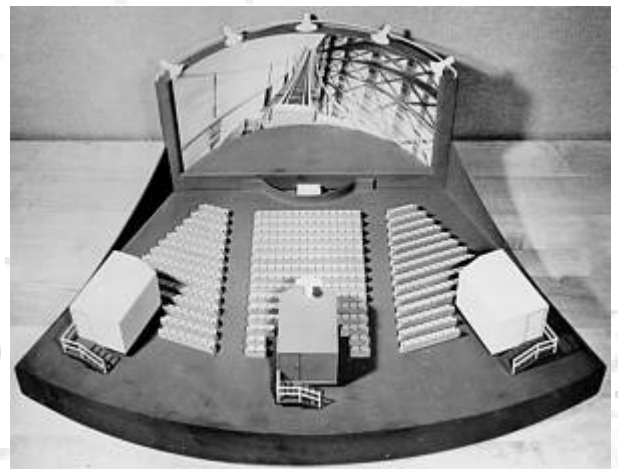
popularity and its inevitable demise.

(left: before there was widescreen there was 3-D. Absurdly amusing for roughly five minutes the effect quickly degenerated into tiresome ridicule. It also gave audiences a terrific headache. Below: a conceptual model for the installation of Cinerama's three projector set up in a theater.)

The first rash decision that studios undertook to reestablish their supremacy in the field of entertainment was to increase the budget on pending Technicolor productions and the quantity of films to be shot in color, while scaling down in virtually all other aspects of their yearly output. Serialized travelogues, cartoons and featurettes all of which had once served as dynamic filler in between features were either dramatically cut or entirely cancelled from the production schedule. Serialized B-films, like **Tarzan**, **Andy Hardy**, **Dr. Kildare** and **The Thin Man** series were either put on suspension or canceled. The in-house roster of behind the scenes talent primarily responsible for achieving each studio's unique in-house style – skilled artisans, dress makers, set designers, make-up and hair stylists et al soon discovered that with a downturn in production came a distillation in the number of unionized positions needed under contract on site. Star talent too that had once seemed so galvanic and crucial to the studios' survival was, by 1955, whittled down to only those stars whose contracts had yet to come up for renewal.

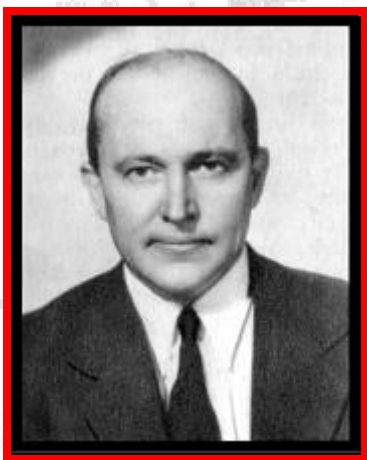
The second move that Hollywood en masse embraced to maintain its hold on audiences was to heavily rely on gimmicks designed to exemplify the differences between television and the movies. If the prospect of being filmed in 'glorious Technicolor' was not enough to entice patrons back and prove to them how limited their relatively blurry black and white receivers were, then 3-D projection initially promised something excitingly new and revolutionary from the film-going experience that the average spectator could not achieve in the comfort of his/her living room. However, 3-D came with a host of drawbacks.

Not only did it require the use of cumbersome glasses – that bleached the quality of the color image into a faded ghost of what



true Technicolor had previously provided, but prolonged exposure to the illusion gave most theatre patrons a colossal headache brought on by eye strain. Because 3-D required a two camera set up to create this depth-misperception most theatres required the insertion of an otherwise unwarranted intermission at the midpoint to reload their projectors. This is precisely why films like the barely two hour horror classic, **House of Wax** and Hitchcock's **Dial M for Murder** feature a reluctant and intrusive pause approximately sixty-five minutes into their plot. As the entire premise behind 3-D was that it allowed audiences to experience action 'coming off' the screen, the narrative of most films shot in the process quickly regressed to an incongruous need to have characters throw something at the camera; hence the laughable hokum of watching Ann Miller toss lurid pink handkerchiefs as she tap dances about the room in MGM's **Kiss Me Kate**, or the use of a ping-pong ball bouncing from its string and paddle just inches away from the camera lens in **House of Wax**.

Bad scripts and B-level acting, coupled with the gruel of eye strain quickly exhausted whatever limited appeal 3-D had. In the period of two short years the process was virtually abandoned. Films originally shot in 3-D, and those in production at the time 3-D fell out of favor received a re-release in 'flat' versions. But by then the film industry had a whole new reason to raise their spirits – the rebirth of what had been considered a defunct and cumbersome process in the 1930s.



For some time, maverick film producer and adventurer extraordinaire, Merian C. Cooper (left) had become enamored with the Cinerama process. Bold, daring and with a penchant for achieving the unattainable, Cooper's record in Hollywood had been an impressive hiccup to the mainstream dream factories of the golden period. He had documented wild animals in their native habitat and achieved a level of screen realism few thought possible with silent hits like **Grass** and **Chang**. In 1933, Cooper's legacy would finally be secured with the lavishly mounted adventure/melodrama **King Kong**. But Cooper was, among his many attributes, equally restless in his pursuits. Interims of military service interrupted his filmmaking. But in 1952 Cooper mounted his Cinerama cameras onto the nose of a bomber and took to the skies, determined to capture the glories and vast wonderment of the United States from an aerial perspective. The result was Cinerama's first – and arguably only true – success; a grand travelogue that instantly captured the imagination with its sweeping spread and breathtaking visuals.

**This Is Cinerama** began with a black and white prologue photographed in the standard 1:33:1 aspect ratio. A sort of history of the movies in brief, the film was introduced by journalistic luminary Lowell Thomas whose zeal for self promotion led majestically up to the moment of "...an entirely new process which we believe will revolutionize the motion picture industry. Ladies and gentlemen...*this is Cinerama!*"

(left: Cinerama's roller coaster sequence that had audiences terrified, above – in theory, showing the separate of camera negatives, and below – in practice.)

From here the center screen blossomed into Technicolor and was joined on either side by an image that devoured the human frame of vision – thrusting the audience from a darkened tunnel onto the tracks of a roller coaster which proved all too real and perilous for some in the audience. Initially executives had pressured Cooper to place the coaster footage at the end of the film, warning that the shock of its exhibition would cause some patrons to either lose their lunch or faint. Cooper refused. "If they don't (faint) we've got a failure," he replied. Cinerama proved



to be anything but. Perhaps in part because Cooper realized that Cinerama was unabashedly wider than anything ever seen on the screen he also refused to acquiesce to featuring a dramatic sequence in his feature – relying instead on the magnificent backdrop of landscape to boggling the imagination of his audience. The film concluded with some of the most breathtaking footage ever photographed of such landmarks as the Pentagon, Grand Canyon, New York City and Golden Gate Bridge effortlessly coasting by as the Mormon Tabernacle Choir sang “America the Beautiful.” It may have been Cooper’s show, but Cinerama was now a process destined for the new dawn of motion picture entertainment.

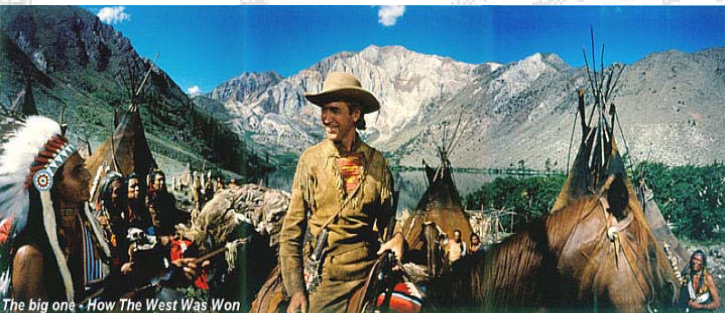
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## Of ‘Scope’ and ‘Quality’ 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox and the promise of Cinemascope

Today, most film historians tend to reflect on the 1950s as that heady period in American cinema history buttressed by changing public tastes, the emergence of the teen market in ‘pop’ culture, and the final flowering of what was until that time affectionately coined “the studio system.” Yet many of these same historians tend to overlook – except in footnotes or in the briefest of trivializations – the overwhelming importance and impact of widescreen technologies, such as 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox’s Cinemascope at the end of 1954, on the legacy of motion pictures in totem. In hindsight, the race for supremacy in what was then a burgeoning new era in film production seems a trivial pursuit at best, further complicating the filmmaking process and frustrating both its craftsmen behind the camera and theatre exhibitors in front of it with a barrage of conflicting aspect ratios, various dye transfer processes, confusion over proper matting and framing of the image during projection, and, in short, disposability of the processes themselves – often after only a handful of movies had been shot employing their technologies.

Excluding the development that had gone into Fred Waller’s Vitarama during the 30s, his new take on an old gimmick - Cinerama was the first of the 50s big screen



The big one - How The West Was Won

wonderments. Like its predecessor, Cinerama employed a three camera 'magic eye' system for filming and projection, and like Vitarama, Cinerama inherited all the cumbersome setbacks attributed to filming on such a grand scale. Although initial critical reviews of the roughly assembled and loosely strung together test footage cum documentary – **This Is Cinerama** were lauded as breathtaking, like 3-D the allure of enveloping entertainment quickly and steadily lost its appeal when more traditional narrative-styled films were attempted. Save the grand spectacle of **The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm** and **How The West Was Won**, and several more travelogue-styled journeys most later productions billed as Cinerama (Stanley Kramer's **It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World**, and, Stanley Kubrick's **2001: A Space Odyssey**) were actually single strip Super-Panavision productions.



In the wake of Cinerama's initial success, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox emerged from the fold with the first single strip widescreen process to garner widespread usage and considerable staying power as a viable format: Cinemascope. Like Cinerama's first cousin - Vitarama, Cinemascope had been patented in the late 1920s. However, unlike Cinerama's awkward three camera set up, Cinemascope required only one camera to create its panoramic illusion. Better still, Cinemascope's patent owner, Professor Henri Chrétien had crafted his process in compliance with standardized 35mm camera negatives used since the earliest days of filmmaking – hence, the removal of Cinerama's annoying lines of separation that were never entirely concealable between the three independent strips of film viewed during projection.



What made Chrétien's process unique were his hypergonar camera and projector lenses. During filming the lens warped the image and recorded it onto 35mm film stock horizontally squeezed. During projection a concave lens un-squeezed that image horizontally to an aspect ratio that was approximately 2:40:1. Chrétien dubbed the process, Anamorphoscope. But Fox executives, who had flown to France and narrowly beaten out a bid from Warner Brothers to acquire the process, developed an exclusive arrangement with Bausch and Lomb for

further development – rechristening it Cinemascope.

In the wake of Fox's coup, Darryl F. Zanuck (previous page, left) announced to the trades that all subsequent movies released by his studio would be Cinemascope productions – a move that infuriated Warner Brothers CEO, Jack Warner even more when Fox's first Cinemascope release, **The Robe** proved to be a qualified and resounding success. Warner made several attempts at developing his own rival and very like-minded process - Warner Superscope - but initial test footage shot in that process proved so disastrous that Warner was forced to acquire a rental license from Fox for Cinemascope instead. The licensing agreement under which Warner was permitted to shoot his 1954 remake of **A Star Is Born** and other films using Cinemascope was eventually adopted by virtually all other studios for their own productions except one – Paramount.

(Above: Cinemascope frame reproduction from A Star Is Born (1954) with Judy Garland, Tom Noonan. Above right: The Grauman's Chinese world premiere of Fox's Prince Valiant in Cinemascope.)

The chief problem with all early Cinemascope productions proved to be its severe warping of any vertical object placed near the outer edges of the screen image. This shortcoming was further aggravated during panning and dolly shots as columns, trees, buildings – even actors and actresses situated to the extreme left of right of the central image tended to develop a rather unsettling and obvious bend. As a result, studios encouraged their film makers to limit their use of such shots, an infringement on artistic license that many, like director Vincente Minnelli, openly detested and publicly decried.

But Cinemascope also came with an added plus; a stereophonic soundtrack recorded in four magnetic stripes on either side of the film frame. The audio portion of Cinemascope featured three discrete channels behind the screen and a fourth spread jointly to speakers on the side and back walls of the auditorium. Pioneering sound engineer Hazard Reeves had previously inaugurated a similar stereo process for Cinerama's debut. Ironically, Reeves would win a technical Oscar for his magnetic striping on Cinemascope, not Cinerama.

(Below left: Bausch & Lomb's early Cinemascope anamorphic adapter lens Below center and right: squeezed and un-squeezed frame enlargements of Ingrid Bergman from Fox's *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* 1958.)



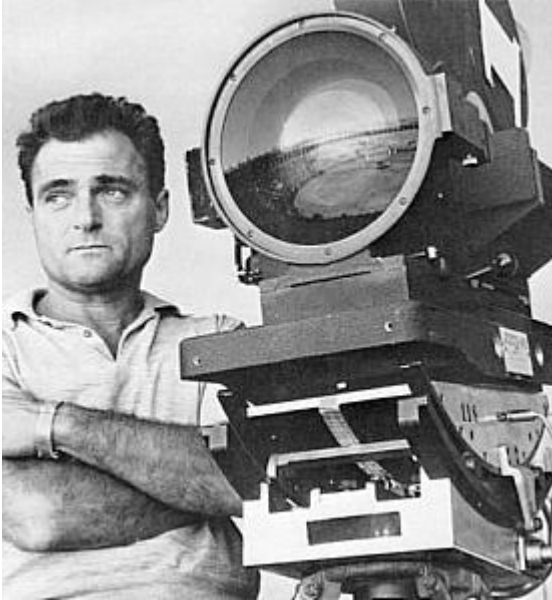
(left: frame enlargement in Cinemascope from Fox's *Three Coins In The Fountain* 1954. The yellow perimeter illustrates how much of the image is cropped when formatted for playback on conventional television sets. Roughly 25% of the image on either side is removed to compensate for the extreme width. The alternative is to have a letterboxed image, whereby black bars are placed both at the top and bottom of the image to effectively recreate the rectangular image.)

Fox, and other studios licensing Cinemascope, had hoped that multi-channel stereophonic sound would become the standard replacement for optical mono. However, between 1952 and 1954 theatre operators resisted the hefty price of conversion to a stereo speaker system and lobbied instead for the availability of optical soundtracks on Cinemascope films. Fox relented. Eventually other studios developed their own combination system for audio recording on Cinemascope films, dubbed Magoptical, which carried both mono and four channel magnetic stereo tracks. However, the addition of Magoptical tracks to the already encoded stereo image reduced the width of Cinemascope to an aspect ratio of 2.35:1.

In their desire to accommodate everyone's needs yet preserve the original aspect ratio of Cinemascope, Fox began issuing mostly mono mixes in general release with stereo prints made available exclusively for larger first run theatres. Other studios were not so accommodating, abandoning true stereo all together and in favor of employing a derivative of Magoptical sound christened Perspecta-Stereo; erroneously so, because Perspecta featured directional mono mixes spread across all channels, not discretely channeled stereo.

Despite these initial growing pains, audience reception to the debut of Cinemascope was overwhelmingly positive and virtually unanimous. Although there were very few theatres equipped to handle Cinemascope initially, virtually all exhibitors made the popular crossover by the middle of the 1950s. However, while executives at Fox felt exonerated in their belief that Cinemascope 'was' the future of filmmaking several dissenting voices quickly championed the prospect that the movies could do better.

## Around the World with Michael Todd



Although Cinemascope and Fox were flush with accolades and success, flamboyant master showman Mike Todd remained unconvinced of 'scope's' supremacy. After all, Todd was, among his many ventures, a heavy stockholder and initial investor in Cinerama – the widescreen wonder that had started it all. But with Cinemascope's burst in popularity Cinerama suffered a proportionate downturn in public interest and lack of studio investment to produce new films in the three camera process. Yet, for Todd the problem was not simply that he had been outplayed in the forum of popular opinion, though it must have upset his gambler's lucky streak to be outdone and undone so quickly by a competitor.

However, despite its ease of operation, especially when directly compared to Cinerama's cumbersome three-camera setup, Cinemascope's promise of widescreen spectacle was less appealing for Todd because it failed to capture the vibrancy of color and sharpness that Cinerama had easily reproduced.



The sharpest portion of a projected Cinemascope image was in the middle with a gradual and rather obvious blurring of the image as one advanced to the outer edges of the screen. Fox had been clever to time its shots accordingly so that audiences were rarely given the opportunity to critique these discrepancies in image quality. Hence, while the economy of Cinemascope interested Todd greatly, the overall quality of the image failed to live up to his weighty expectations.



Divesting himself of his Cinerama stock, Todd approached Massachusetts' American Optical developer and CEO, Brian O'Brien with a \$100,000 check. Using his considerable payoff from Cinerama, Todd wanted to finance a new and improved photographic process he himself crudely dubbed as "Cinerama out of one hole." After considerable debate and gestation, O'Brien and Todd decided that the new venture would incorporate a combination of technical elements that had been around since the late 1920s.

During the depression and war, 65mm film gauge had been considered a wasteful extravagance. But with the newly infused capital of the booming 50s, 65mm was resurrected from its historical oblivion along with the Mitchell BFC camera that had been in mothballs since 1931. Unlike conventional movie cameras, which photographed at 24 frames per second (fps), the Mitchell recorded its visual information at 30fps, thus producing a sharper and flicker-free image. For Todd the improvement in clarity was a sideline to his centralized fascination for the ninety pound, 12.7mm 'bug-eye' lens that virtually captured the same 128 degree vista as three-camera Cinerama.





(Previous page: Todd A-O frame reproduction of *Oklahoma!* (1955) Gordon MacRae and Shirley Jones. Center: Todd's penchant for pretty faces and figures, inculcated during his days as a burlesque-styled showman shines through in this bit of press promotion for Grauman's Egyptian Theater premiere of *Oklahoma!* Below: a crane hoists a miniature of Prof. Fogg's balloon in Todd's second production in Todd A-O; *Around the World in 80 Days* (1956).

Heavily influenced by Todd's lingering aspiration to duplicate the intricate precision of Cinerama's projection, his newly christened process of Todd A-O (Todd American Optical) featured a deeply curved screen and stereophonic sound system almost identical to Cinerama's, with specially rectified prints made exclusively for theatres where normally high projection booths would have otherwise resulted in considerable dimensional distortions on the screen.

The greatest initial obstacle that needed to be overcome by Todd was to gain widespread acceptance for Todd A-O from the industry at large. Unlike Darryl F. Zanuck who had launched Cinemascope with the complicity and backing of an entire studio, Todd A-O was a technical process without a product to sell it. Undaunted, Todd approached playwrights Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II with a demonstration reel and the proposition to produce a film version of their first Broadway smash, **Oklahoma!** Impressed by what they saw, Rodgers and Hammerstein willingly invested in the future of their film franchise with Todd and his associates. The venture secured, Todd wasted no time in hedging his bets, photographing **Oklahoma!** twice: once in Todd A-O and once in the more conventional Cinemascope in order to accommodate as many theatrical venues as possible.



Although the initial and exclusive engagements of **Oklahoma!** at Grauman's Egyptian Theatre and New York's Rivoli were a resounding critical success the majority of theater patrons never saw the film in Todd-AO. Instead, they were shown the CinemaScope version which was visually and cinematically inferior in almost every aspect. Despite its stunningly vibrant image, the Todd A-O version of **Oklahoma!** was a decidedly tempered visual experience that did not fully exploit all of the involved photographic capabilities the process could deliver. Thus, Todd introduced both his process and **Oklahoma!** with a short subject; **The Miracle of Todd A-O** that included among other things, breathtaking aerial photography and a roller coaster ride.



(Center: Todd discusses a scene with David Niven from *Around the World in 80 Days*. Bottom: Frame enlargement of Niven and Cantinflas aboard a mock up of their balloon.)

To further showcase Todd A-O, the master showman turned his attentions to a subject very close to his own heart. In 1949 Todd and Orson Welles had attempted a lavish Broadway version of Jules Verne's 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, **Around The World In 80 Days**. Plagued by numerous financial and technical

difficulties the Broadway show opened and closed in no time with minimal fanfare and zero profit. For his part, Todd had always envisioned the Verne story as an all-star spectacle. For the film version he literally invented the concept of 'the cameo' defined by Todd as a brief and subtle bit of business performed excellently by a stellar performer. Thereafter, Todd went about bribing, entertaining and minimally paying some of the biggest names in Hollywood to appear in his film adaptation. By the time **Around The World in 80 Days** began production it was already rumored as destined to become one of the most opulent and all-star entertainments ever filmed.



However, as had been the case with **Oklahoma!**, the Todd A-O road show version of **Around the World in 80 Days** proved to have a limited release and was eventually and mostly screened in 35mm reduction prints by the general public. However, unlike **Oklahoma!**'s two version set up, Todd's director of photography, Lionel Linden only photographed **Around the World in 80 Days** once on 65 mm stock, thereafter reprinting the same version to the smaller gauge film for the lesser markets. Linden used two identical Todd-AO cameras and lenses side by side to photograph the various versions of the film; one running at 30fps in 70mm, the other at 24fps on 35mm reduction prints. In rare cases the same camera was used simply by recalibrating its speed, or, maintaining the same speed with a single camera setup. This last remedy was only used for economy's sake and in scenes where no dialog was involved since the discrepancy between 30 and 24fps would have resulted in a re-syncing nightmare.

Throughout his fledging career as producer, Todd had remained financially strapped; cutting corners wherever he could while maintaining a significant amount of showman-like integrity for the initial premiere engagement of his films. The curiosity surrounding Michael Todd is that, as an individual, financial success seems to have paled in comparison to his manic and ever-changeable zeal for putting on a good show. Today, **Around The World In 80 Days** appears as little more than overblown travelogue; a far cry from the unanimous accolades and Oscar as Best Picture it received in 1956. The discrepancy in its reception – then and

now - seems to be predicated on the fact that no one today is likely to have witnessed the film in its 70mm splendor. Minus Todd A-O 30fps razor sharp image and enveloping presentation, the film remains something of an elegant disappointment, just as 35mm reduction prints of **How The West Was Won** pale to the mammoth three camera projection used during that film's first Cinerama road show.

(Right top: Director John Huston checks a camera set up for his Dimension-150 production of *The Bible*...in the beginning 1966. Center: original poster art for *Patton* 1970, the only other film shot in Dimension-150. Bottom: a relaxed moment on the set of *Patton* with George C. Scott.)

As press promotion for **Around The World In 80 Days** mounted, Todd, who had seemingly grown tired of the efforts



invested thus far, divested his own interests in Todd-AO. Although he had already secured Rodgers and Hammerstein's **South Pacific** as the next big project, those details were shortly thereafter inherited by Magna Film Corporation, American Optical and the film's distribution apparatus, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. Having abandoned their home grown Cinemascope 55, Fox purchased Todd A-O outright with technical decisions made shortly thereafter that effectively made Todd A-O far more economical. Reduced from 30fps to the more easily adopted and conventional 24 and minus both the 'bug eye lens' and curved screen dimensions that had made its projection unique, the newly emasculated version of Todd A-O was merely Cinemascope with a slightly brighter and sharper image.

By 1959, Todd-AO was being replaced with other, and often more superior, 70mm projection systems, most noticeably Panavision, Technirama and M-G-M Camera 65/Ultra Panavision 70. Todd A-O's company policy had always been that it retained a percentage of any film's gross that employed its process. Competitive widescreen systems did not enforce such a demand. Hence, in the same year that **Porgy and Bess** was produced in Todd A-O four additional features that might have employed its camera system opted instead for alternatives: **Ben-Hur** (Camera 65), **The Big Fisherman** (Panavision), **Solomon and Sheba** (Cinemascope), and **Sleeping Beauty** (Technirama).

The snub would have made little difference to Todd. Commencing on a film adaptation of **Don Quixote** in 1957 with leftover equipment from Todd A-O that Todd loosely re-christened as the improved "Todd Process" for 35mm road show prints, any future involvement from Hollywood's most ambiguous showman came to an abrupt end when Todd died tragically in a fiery plane crash a little more than a year after **Around The World In 80 Days** galvanic premiere.

As an interesting aside, the Todd A-O story does have one final and unique twist. By 1964 single film productions that were shot in Panavision 70, but incoherently and incorrectly billed as Cinerama, were all the rage. Fox had never been directly involved in Cinerama. Although they still controlled interests in Todd A-O, the current version of that system was almost a decade removed and severely distilled from the process it had once been. To reinvigorate their interests, Fox developed a 'new' widescreen process: Dimension 150. In actuality all Fox did was to reintroduce Todd A-O and outfit it with a 150 degree lens designed



by Dr. Richard Vetter and Carl Williams.

Lack of proper marketing and press promotion resulted in limited appeal for this new/old photographic process. It did not help matters that the first film to be photographed in Dimension 150 was John Huston's wholly unremarkable, **The Bible...In the beginning** (1966). Like Todd A-O, Dimension 150 required direct projection on a curved screen for optimal performance. This it almost never received. As a result, most theatre attendees who saw **The Bible** in general release were privy to little more than a 70mm projection print that was slightly warped and looking rather squeezed on a flat screen. After only one more film, Franklin Schaffner's **Patton** (1970), Dimension 150 – and Todd A-O for that matter, was officially retired as a filmic process.

Above: Schauburg Cinema in Karlsruhe Germany often hosts Todd A-O revivals. Right: Todd with American Optical pioneering genius, Brian O'Brien.



## Hold-out on the Mountain

Paramount Pictures and VistaVision

Throughout the 1950s, as Cinemascope fever collectively gripped the studio back lots, only Paramount Pictures showed disinterest and ultimately refusal into the fold. John R. Bishop's (left) camera and film processing departments at the studio preferred to stick with the more manageable aspect ratio of 1.66:1 while searching for ways to improve its overall picture clarity and definition. Once again, investment turned to a process which had first seen the light of day three decades earlier. The William Fox "Natural Color" camera that had been built in the late 1920s by the William P. Stein Company eventually became the basis for VistaVision.



Exposing two frames of film at the same time through color filters, Bishop's contribution to revamping the new system was to cut out the separation between these frames, roll the camera onto its side and fit it with Leica 35mm still camera lenses, affectionately dubbed the Lazy-8 because it pulled its stock horizontally in eight perforation frames. The result was an Eastman Kodak negative area 2.66 times greater than 35mm but printed down to standard 35mm with a vastly improved image on screens up to fifty feet wide. The great advantage to VistaVision – misperceived at the time of its inception as a setback – was that it



required Technicolor dye transfer prints, thereby in retrospect sparing its productions from the wretched fading inherent in all Eastman-based film stocks. VistaVision proved popular in England with the Rank Organization. However, in 1957 Rank slightly altered the anamorphic shrinkage rate to produce an image more closely framed as 1.85:1 – the most commonly favored non-scope widescreen alternative since it was brighter, sharper and 33% larger than conventional VistaVision.



VistaVision also incorporated three sound formats: optical mono, four track magnetic, and, Perspecta-sound – a mono track advertised as 'fake' stereo because it technically spread the sound field across all three channels emanating from behind the screen. However, whereas true stereo had its effects, dialogue and music coming from isolated and directional locations, Perspecta's sound field cumulatively moved across all three speakers. The perceived advantage to Perspecta-sound derived from its being cost effective – though only on Paramount's side of the equation. As for theaters – installing Perspecta was almost as costly as retooling for genuine stereo, with the only exception being that Perspecta required no further installation of auditorium speakers.

(Top: The VistaVision logo that preceded all Paramount produced films. Kay Thompson encourages everyone to 'think pink' in Paramount's *Funny Face* 1957. Cary Grant and Grace Kelly race the Riviera in *To Catch A Thief* 1955.)

Determined to launch VistaVision with a bang, Paramount employed its makeshift process on Michael Curtiz's **White Christmas** in late 1953 while continuing to perfect VistaVision behind the scenes and ordering vastly altered new cameras from the Mitchell Camera Company. Although the VistaVision camera was very quiet it nevertheless required being located inside a massive 'blimp-like' sound proof structure for dialogue recording.



When **White Christmas** proved a colossal hit Paramount embraced its new process as 'revolutionary' – something it was not. Though VistaVision's publicity far outweighed its fact, the inflation of truth invested in the process paled in comparison to that lavished by the promotions department on VistaVision's next project: Cecil B. DeMille's **The Ten Commandments**. Advertised as "motion picture high fidelity" much of VistaVision's impeccable presentation derived from the fact that its dye transfers were done by Technicolor, not in the rather abysmal, but more cheaply produced, Eastman stock that Cinemascope employed. Though Paramount did not produce many black and white VistaVision films, a critique of those it did reveals that little benefit was gained by its large format negative alone.

Despite Paramount's initial claims to have revolutionized motion pictures, no other studio bought into the process, though MGM eventually borrowed it to produce two of VistaVision's most glowing successes: the musical **High Society** and Hitchcock's **North By Northwest**. As the fifties came to a close it became obvious that Cinemascope and its like-shaped rivals had won the battle of the big screens. In the end, VistaVision became more of an interesting hiccup than the mainstream competitor Paramount had initially hoped for.

(Decadence in VistaVision: above: Bing Crosby and company in the gaudy finale to Paramount's first colossal hit in their new widescreen process – **White Christmas** 1954. Below left: Crosby again, with Grace Kelly in MGM's sublime **High Society** 1956. Below right: Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard find one another in the rain in **Breakfast at Tiffany's**'s 1961, one of the last films to be photographed at Paramount in VistaVision.)

