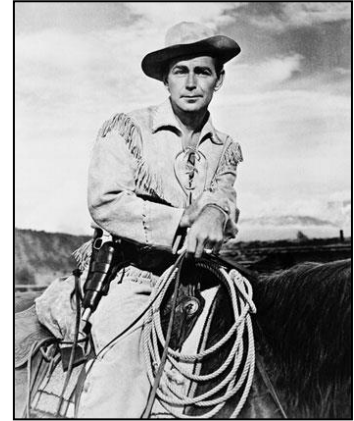


### The Postwar Western

The late 1940s and the 1950s was also the golden age of the ‘A’ western, one of American film’s classic genres.

**Define: The western** in its **classical phase** (1930s to the middle 1950s) had the following **mythic characteristics**. It was set in the American West between the end of the Civil War and the “closing” of the American frontier in the 1890s; a few westerns are set in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – they are usually less classical and the presence of automobiles and pick-up trucks emphasize the decline of the values of the old West. The western chronicles a time when American white settlement in the West was sparse, and the West was in **transition** from its natural state inhabited primarily by American Indians to the “civilized” state of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the implantation of Eastern American institutions.



Alan Ladd about to drive the bad guys out of town

Westerns are usually **melodramas** with conflict between the forces of good and evil. A **lone male hero**, typically **nomadic** with no settled address, takes it upon himself to fight for the forces of good; he often rides into town at the beginning of the film and leaves at the end and “rides off into the sunset” to an unknown destination. Male behavior is governed by a **code of honor** (reminiscent of Japanese *bushido* and European medieval chivalry) where you settle your problems by **acts of violence** and you kill your enemy fair and square and face-to-face in a street duel and not from ambush. This temporary, barbaric code, characteristic of periods of history like the early Middle Ages in Europe where law and order were weak, gives way to settled authority (“law and order”) once the civilization process is completed.



The Grand Tetons seen from Jackson Hole, Wyoming (‘Shane’ 1953)

The stories take place against the backdrop of **spectacular western scenery**, which often plays an important role in the action as the human players. Some critics see the territory in the western as a kind of **untilled garden** that European easterners come to cultivate. The magnificent scenery gives the narrative an **epic** quality that confers an historical or cultural importance on the proceedings –e.g., against the backdrop of important historical events such as the Civil War, law and order arrives in the West so that America’s Manifest Destiny and its march toward the Pacific Coast may be realized.

Western movies celebrate the virtues and accomplishments of the **individual** male, who through skill and courage is able to stand alone against the forces of evil and anarchy and conquer them; and afterwards he expects little in return. If the male hero bonds with anyone, it is with another man. Women usually play a supportive role in westerns; if there are a lot of them around, it means the mythic western phase is past.

The theme is often the conquest and **civilizing of the Wild West** – the hero has to overcome the hostility of the natural environment, the defensive action of the Indians, and particularly the machinations of the **outlaws**, who take advantage of weak authority and resist the coming of the law. At the end of the movies, the area of the West is closer to being civilized, or as in the case of ‘My Darling Clementine’ and “High Noon,” it is in its final phases.



**Clint Eastwood**

The evolution of the western genre went through several **stages**:

**1) Primitive**, when the conventions of the genre are just being compiled (‘The Great Train Robbery’ 1903).

**2) Classical** – from the 1920s through the 1950s. Very much a part of the classical Hollywood achievement with balance and poise, stars, a compelling story, etc. The distinction between good and evil is clear; the values of the classical western are part of the American myth of the Old West and are widely shared by the audience. John Sturges’ ‘The Magnificent Seven’ 1960 has a group of American gunfighters magnanimously coming to the aid of Mexican villagers plagued by bandits. In George Stevens’ ‘Shane’ 1953 Alan Ladd rides into town from nowhere, eventually gives up his pacifist ways to take down the thugs, and then – unforgettably – rides off alone toward the Grand Tetons with Brandon de Wilde, the child who worships him, disconsolately shouting “Shane!! Come back!!”

**3) Revisionist** – filmmakers are less certain about traditional values; the films are more complex and ambiguous, and they often question the ideology of the genre in the classical phase (e.g., John Sturges’ ‘Bad Day at Black Rock’ 1955, where local settlers are intolerant and murderous; Sergio Leone’s ‘Once Upon a Time in the West’ 1969 (Leone is admittedly an Italian), where people die for often no good reason and where the society of the West is a matriarchy and crooked businessmen are responsible for settling it; Clint Eastwood’s ‘Unforgiven’ 1992 and its jaundiced view of violence in westerns).



**A glamorous Daffy Duck**

**4) Parodic** – the films mock the conventions of the genre (e.g., Mel Brooks’ ‘Blazing Saddles’ 1973, where cowhands fart around a fire after eating dinner, and a gunslinger is so fast on the draw that the viewer never sees his gun leave its holster).

And of course moviemakers can revert to previous stages in the process at any time.

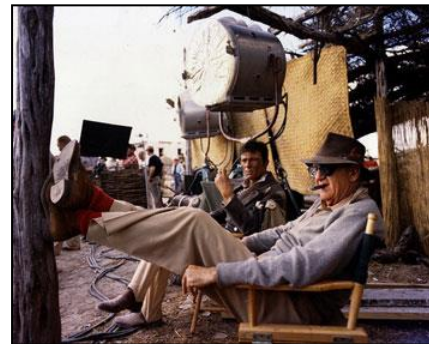
**Politics** might have been a reason for the popularity of the western in the **postwar period**. Americans (rightly) saw themselves as being the good guys – on the side of the angels – in World War II. The late 40s saw the beginning of the Cold War, in which American leaders were calling on the population to make sacrifices in order to resist world-wide Communism. The western can be seen as a kind of allegory of the USA being on the side of virtue in this difficult world-wide struggle.

Whereas film noir and 50s science fiction reflected the unconscious anxieties of postwar America, the western expresses our **optimism and self-confidence**.

## Examples of the Western

The Western genre was satirized in the seven-minute **Looney Tunes** (or Merrie Melodies) cartoons that were commonly played before the beginning of the main feature in American movie theaters in the 1930s and 1940s. A team of inspired satirists were responsible for the cartoons at **Warner Brothers**. “**Drip Along Daffy**” is a spoof of the clichés and other ingredients of the American western genre. Daffy has a “comic relief” sidekick, who sings; action centers in the saloon, where everyone drinks hard and acts tough and is determined to prove their virility; there are gunfights in the streets; good guys wear white, and bad guys dark clothes, etc. Daffy is very aware that he is the “hero” of the story, and is outraged when contrary to the demands of the genre the bad guys are in danger of coming out on top, or his sidekick is named sheriff. The authors invent (mostly successful) gags to poke fun at the conventions (horses shooting at one another; traffic lights to regulate the movement of gunslingers; wind-up toy soldiers shooting gunslingers in the face, Daffy’s pants coming off when he tries to draw his guns, etc.).

**John Ford** was perhaps the most accomplished maker of westerns. John Wayne often starred in his films; they were often filmed in Arizona’s Monument Valley. Most of his westerns fall into the classical category. Although he made fun of “arty” films, he was known for the visual poetry in his movies.



**John Ford on location in the 1950s**

**1) Review: My Darling Clementine** 1947 John Ford (20cFox) 4.0 Henry Fonda, Victor Mature, James Garner, Linda Darnell, Walter Brennan, Tim Holt, Cathy Downs, Ward Bond, etc. Excellent Ford western. Flagrantly fictional account of how the Earps cleaned up Tombstone in the 1880s.

Earp is calm, virtuous, soft-spoken, dignified, but firm and having a long memory. Theme is **building/civilizing of the West**: Tombstone is uncivilized and wild, but the Earps commit to bring order by Wyatt’s undertaking the marshal’s job (admittedly they are motivated primarily by clan revenge – family honor). The civilizing process is symbolized by the famous church **dance scene**, when wild Wyatt, having fallen in love with Clementine, takes her to the dedicatory dance and on the floor of the unfinished church exposed to the sky and the surrounding mesas, he dances with her – somewhat awkwardly, suggesting that it will be a while before Tombstone is a sophisticated city. A sign of settling down is Wyatt leaning back in **his chair on the porch** and balancing self with his feet on the post in front of him, and his getting a shave and a haircut – his cologne is mistaken by Clementine and one of his brothers for honeysuckle.

The editing pace is measured and slow until the action scenes when the confrontation between the Earps and the Clantons require a speeding up of the pace. The Clantons are true bad guys – a vicious Walter Brennan with his four sons in tow; a dedicated dad who has however no further heart to fight after the four of them are shot, and Earp does not insist on arresting or killing him.

Usual beautiful, big sky photography shot in the **grandeur of Monument Valley** that gives movie its epic character; photography is unusually lyrical, majestic and moving even for a Ford movie; the black and white photography seems even to emphasize its beauty. Wyatt’s walk down Main Street before the shootout is memorable: big sky with the Monument Valley mesas in the background, all quiet – no music – except for the sound of footsteps and the clanking of the spurs.

Less of the Ford sentimentality, and nice touches of light humor surrounding Wyatt's falling in love, getting a shave and a haircut that make him look like a city slicker. Linda Darnell a little heavy on the Mexican spitfire, straining credibility a bit; Downs as Clementine is somewhat vapid, but appropriate, as



**John Ford's Monument Valley (Arizona)**

and Doc Holliday, and Old Man Clanton all four of his sons. Wyatt tries to show his mercy to Old Man Clanton and let him go (to suffer like Oedipus), but Clanton pulls his gun....

Touchingly sentimental **final scene**, in which Wyatt shyly takes leave of Clementine, "Mam, I sure like that name – Clementine," and rides off toward the buttes to the accompaniment of the chorus singing 'My Darlin' Clementine'; but he has already said that he will back to visit Clementine, who is staying on as schoolmistress. Shot with perfect taste and tact. Despite the bloodshed, movie is at times gentle, nostalgic, poignant, poetic.

The **dance scene** is a great classic. It portrays Ford's idea of the civilizing of the West. In the background the beautiful Monument Valley buttes and the big sky remind us of the epic significance of the scene. American flags fly, and the settlers celebrate the dedication of the yet-to-be-completed church. Wyatt pairs with a respectable woman (later to become the town's school teacher), and instead of carousing with prostitutes in the saloon, he dances properly with a prospective mate according to courting custom.

'Clementine' is clearly a **classical** western. Justice is brought to Tombstone by a loner (who will return); justice is established; civilization is just around the corner.

The American West is seen as a beautiful fallow **garden** (look at the epic beauty of the mesas and the sky shot by the director) that will be tamed and cultivated by mainstream American civilization.

2) **'The Searchers'** (1956) is currently Ford's most highly admired film. It shows Ford still in the classical genre but **questioning** some of the mainstream values of the western. Although the film has many classical characteristics such as superb cinematography and the homage to the bravery of the European settlers of the West in their struggle against the elements and the Indians, it is also an investigation of anti-Indian **racism** and its (perhaps partial) renunciation by the protagonist John Wayne. Coming out in the late 1950s when many were

sweet, slight girl who as the town's schoolteacher represents the arrival of civilization. Mature is convincing and even moving as the ill Doc Holliday; it is good to have a character that is not so flawless and virtuous.

Excellent, exciting final showdown at **OK Corral**. Wyatt and his brother approach the corral in slow, epic fashion. The fighting takes place behind cover and with horses and stages racing between the antagonists, the men taking cover behind buildings and firing through the dust. Belying its sometime gentle tone, the film is a bloodbath with Wyatt losing two brothers



**Wyatt Leans Back in Tombstone**

questioning the former certainties of the Cold War, the film seems on the **cusp between a classical western and a revisionist one.**



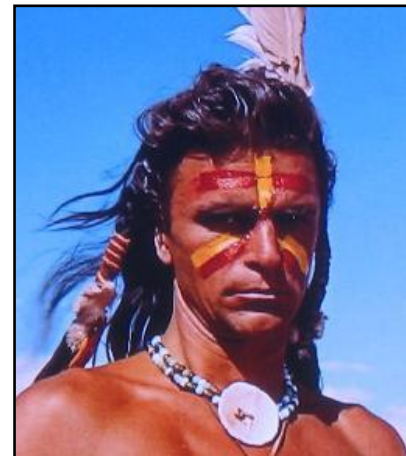
It is also **exquisitely beautiful** – its cinematography, mise-en-scène, etc.

**John Wayne** is Ethan – mysterious, noble, commanding, monumental; Henry Brandon outstanding as the Indian chief Scar; Ward Bond as the preacher warrior, Natalie Wood in her beauty provides ample reason for Ethan to be so obsessed about finding her; Jeffrey Hunter as Natalie Woods' part Indian brother who provides some of the comic relief. Powerful, beautiful, elemental western, one of the best of the last. Full of interesting characters: Bond as the boisterous preacher/lawman, who wears a stovepipe hat and alternates between his contradictory jobs (an echo of the mythic warrior priest of medieval times); Jeffrey Hunter as older adopted (?) brother of Natalie Wood, excitable, not conscious of the amatory overtures of his girlfriend, desperately loves his sister and determined to defend her against the racist rage of Ethan.

Another film in which brave white settlers promote the progress of civilization against evil elements, this time the Comanche tribe; their renegade chief Scar attacks and murders settlers in revenge for the death of his own children at the hands of the Americans.

Emotional center of film is **Ethan**, who returns home late after the end of the Civil War, a man free, with no ties or home or clear idea of his origins; there are hints that he is wanted by the law, and he has not made peace with the Confederacy's loss of the war. He is a skilled frontiersman, who knows the language and customs of the Comanche, but he **despises** them, presumably because they killed his mother before the film begins; cf. scene when he shoots out the eyes of a dead Indian brave, since he doesn't want the Indian to find peace in the afterlife, or his scalping of Scar after he kills him. Much of the emotional impact of the film comes from John Wayne's magnetic performance: it is hard to forget the final shot of him standing disconsolately in the doorway of the cabin with the glorious Monument Valley scenery in the background.

Even though clearly a serious threat to the White settlers, American **Indians are taken more seriously** than in most classical westerns. Although he hates them, Ethan knows Comanche culture, he is familiar with their spiritual beliefs, and he speaks their language. The camera penetrates into the Indian encampments and we learn something about Comanche marital customs. Scar is a brutal chief, but we are informed that his hatred of the whites comes from members of his family being killed by them. American Indians are still a threat, but no longer a faceless one.



**Comanche chief Scar in John Ford's 'The Searchers' 1956**

When **Debbie is kidnapped**, Ethan and Martin set off to find them; long bitter pursuit with "Big Shoulders" Ethan as a force bigger than any society, somewhat like the craggy Monument Valley mesas in the background. When the searchers finally catch up with Scar and Debbie, there is a dramatic moment of conflict between Martin and Ethan about whether the latter will kill Debbie (he thinks she has been irremediably defiled by living as one of Scar's wives), but when he catches up with her and she cowers in fear, he takes her in his arms and says "Let's go home, Debbie." Ethan hasn't been changed, but his humanity has been drawn out; when he sees Debbie's face, he just can't kill her.

Quite a bit of comic relief, some of it good (the Preacher), and some of it pretty hokey; and Ford has Ethan repeating his mantra, “**That’ll be the day**”, several times. The humor works well as relief from the intensity of the chase. Film technique is very skilled, e.g., presumably for variety Ford at one point changes narrative to voice-over through device of Laurie reading the letter she has received from Martin, who recounts what he and Ethan have been doing.

The film is **beautifully framed**. The first scene begins with the **door** to the homestead swinging open from the inside to reveal the brilliant epic panorama of Monument Valley, and Ethan soon arrives riding slowly out of the horizon. And it ends with all surviving characters domesticated and returned to civilization, except Ethan who stands alone outside the door (for reasons we only imperfectly understand, he cannot put down roots in one place), and holding his right arm with his left hand in a homage to his mentor **Harry Carey**, he turns and walks slowly away as the door closes – “The End.” Ford’s framing of Wayne in the door serves to emphasize the aloneness, perhaps even the loneliness, of the great western hero.



**John Wayne, the most popular film star of all time**

The film stands out in Ford’s *oeuvre* for the intensity of its emotion and its deeply dramatic character. It stands squarely on the **cusp between a classic western and a revisionist one** – John Wayne is the strong, competent hero who struggles to restore domestic order, and yet Ford has chosen to place **anti-Indian racism** at the center of the film.

### **The Decline of Hollywood, 1946–1970**

In 1946 American movies reached their all-time attendance high – about **90 million viewers per week**, approximately 75% of Hollywood’s “potential audience” (the people who could physically get to the movies). The numbers were never even to get close after that: attendance was to be cut in half by the early 1950s. About 4000 movie theaters were closed in the same period. Americans were clearly doing something else for regular entertainment.

#### **Approximate Average Weekly Movie Attendance in USA**

1945	90,000,000
1950	60,000,000
1960	25,000,000
1970	17,000,000
1980	19,000,000
1990	23,000,000
2000	27,000,000

What were the main reasons for this decline in movie popularity in the United States?

Perhaps one we have already seen – the HUAC hearings and pursuit of Communist influence in Hollywood. One may doubt that the hearings and the establishment of the blacklist had much direct influence on attendance; Sklar however contends that the atmosphere of persecution in Hollywood caused a serious decline in the quality of American movies in the late 40s and 50s – “American movies weren’t as good as they used to be.” (Sklar, 279) This is a judgment other scholars would challenge, including your instructor.

Another development was the **Paramount Decree of 1948** that ordered the major studios to divest themselves of their theater chains, often the most profitable part of their operation. Studio-owned theaters comprised only about 17% of the nationwide total, but being strategically situated in large cities, they could be used to dominate the movie market. Smaller producers and exhibitors had been agitating for decades for the ending of the “monopolistic” position of the major studios, since the three-armed conglomerates of the major studios made it next to impossible for smaller film producers and theater operators to compete. The Justice Department finally achieved a favorable ruling from the Supreme Court. The **divestiture of the theater chains**, which was achieved by the early 1950s, deprived the studios of much of their financial stability (a lot of their income came from the theaters) and marketing strength. (It is true however that the decline in movie attendance began in 1947, many years before the Paramount Decree took effect.)



#### Why Aren't they at the Movies?

Another important factor was the commercial introduction of **television** in the late 1940s; there were over 50 million TV sets in American homes by the early 1950s. Preferring to stay at home in their **new suburban homes** raising their large families of “baby boomers,” postwar Americans went to the movies much less often: **movie attendance** was halved by the early 1950s, and declined even further by the end of the decade. Why go to the movies, when you can enjoy entertainment on the little screen at home, especially when alongside the inevitable dreck, there were so many high quality TV shows in that period? In any case, movies had *not* been the most popular form of American entertainment even before the coming of TV. Polls had shown that radio had been far more popular than film in the 1930s and 1940s and that even before the advent of television most people were inclined to stay at home for their entertainment.

The studios, whose business was to deliver entertainment to the public, probably should have recognized this trend early and started to adapt, perhaps buying somehow into the television industry. In any case, the old Hollywood **‘B’ movie soon disappeared**. Why would people continue to go to the movie theaters to see cheap, formula-dominated movies when they could stay at home? As mogul Samuel Goldwyn said, “It is a certainty that people will be unwilling to pay to see the poor pictures when they can stay home and see something which is, at least, no worse.” (Sklar, 276)

Yet another factor undermining the traditional way of doing business was the revival of the **foreign film** industries in countries like Britain, France, Italy and Japan following World War II. The result was first a smaller foreign market for American films after the war than was expected (remember that American-made films had dominated the market in foreign countries between the world wars). At the same time, foreign films began to be marketed more aggressively in the USA, and movies from these countries were playing to large American audiences in “**Art Houses**” by the early 1950s. Partly because foreign movies were often artistically more interesting than most American films and also because imported movies could use sexual themes much more freely than the home-grown product (foreign movies were not subject to the Hayes Code), they cut into the domestic viewing audience, especially among the educated, students, intellectuals, etc. Foreign movie were not generally much interested in the depiction of violence.



**Sophia Loren about 1960**

Controversial themes in foreign movies were challenged in U.S. courts after the war. The Italian film 'Miracle' (1951) contained passages that the Catholic Legion of Decency considered "a sacrilegious and blasphemous mockery of Christian religious truth"; and Cardinal Spellman of New York (a famous anti-Communist warrior) condemned the film and called on "all right thinking citizens" to unite to tighten censorship laws in the United States. When an appellate court upheld the banning of the film by the State of New York, the issue was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court; the Court had in previous decisions hinted that it was disposed to overturn the Mutual Decision (1915), which had denied First Amendment protection to the motion picture industry. In the '**Miracle' Decision (1951) the Supreme Court** intoned

...we conclude that expression by means of motion pictures is included within the free speech and free press guaranty of the First and Fourteenth Amendments. To the extent that language in the opinion in Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Comm., supra, is out of harmony with the views here set forth, we no longer adhere to it.

Films were now considered to be "an artistic medium" protected by the U.S. Constitution and not primarily a form of business endeavor as previously defined by the Mutual Decision. The Court stated further that the term "sacrilegious" was impossibly vague and broad and that prior censorship based on it was "a form of infringement upon freedom of expression to be especially condemned." It left open the possibility that a local jurisdiction could limit the exhibition of "obscene" films with "a clearly drawn statute".

The decision had momentous long-term implications for the film industry. For the time being, it did not much affect studio movies, since their content was controlled by the Hayes Code, but it did give the green light to the 'sexy' foreign films shown in the US.

Henceforth the studios would not be able to rely on censorship to control the competition from foreign films. The decision probably also promoted the tendency of the studios to strain against Hayes Office restrictions and to deal more explicitly with sexual themes on the screen (cf. 'The Seven Year Itch' 1955).

## The End of the Old Studios

Studios went into a steady-state crisis. **Agents** became increasingly more important, since they represented the stars, who everybody recognized were the key to movie success. In this period studios progressively lost the initiative in making the movies; film projects were put together by **independent production companies** such as MCA under the famous Lew Wasserman, which packaged a deal with stars, writer, director, cinematographer, supporting actors, financing, studio facilities, etc., sold it to the studios, rented the backlots and sound stages from the studios, and then oversaw the production process. The studios, which had typically put up a good deal of the money for the film, would then be responsible for distributing the finished product. The theaters that showed the films were of course already under separate ownership.



**Century City, the old site of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox's backlot in LA**

The studios were often **bought up** by big agencies, banks, or corporate **conglomerates** (e.g., Gulf and Western), and became a clog in a corporate machine more than ever interested in the financial bottom line rather than film quality. The owners often **sold off the studio sound stages and back lots** as real estate at big prices to be turned into pricey commercial developments, such as Fox's sale of **Century City** in Los Angeles to Alcoa Aluminum in the late 1950s.



After a few years studios decided to make peace with the television phenomenon. They discovered that they could put their fallow production facilities and resources to use by going into production of **television shows**: popular series like George Reeves' 'Superman' and 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents' brought significant revenue to the studios. Revenues from television production helped keep the head of



Paramount's logo combined with Viacom

several studios above water in the crisis years.

Increasingly in the 50s and early 60s the studios specialized in helping to **finance** films and in **distribution**, since production was often in the hands of the independents and the theater chains were off limits. The studios kept their names alive on the screen credits largely by playing the role of the middle man getting the product out to the

theaters through their distribution system. The filmmaking equation had now returned to about what it had been in 1915, when production, distribution and exhibition had generally been in the hands of separate, independent businesses. Adolph Zukor would not have been happy in 1960. The organization, security and predictability that had been characteristic of the studio system was now lost.

## What to Do?

Studios were obviously in crisis. How were they to **revive their market**, perk up the ears of the American public?

### 1) Visual Changes

One approach was to resort to **visual gimmicks** to lure people out of their homes and away from their flickery small black and white television sets. Three dimensional films (**3-D**) were reasonably popular for a few years (cheap 3-D glasses had to be distributed in the audience to activate the visual effects), but after giving the public a few entertaining jolts, they faded from the scene. Viewers found the glasses annoying, and the films made in 3-D were generally trite and uninteresting.



VistaVision layout for Cary Grant in 'North by Northwest' 1959

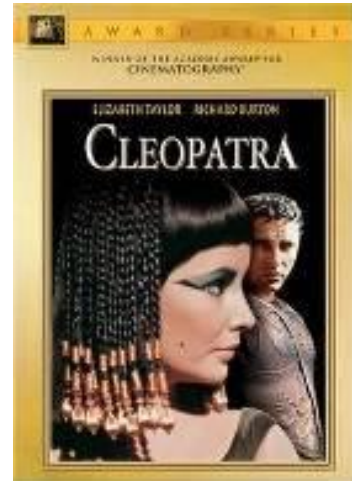
Since **color** was preferred by almost all viewers to black and white, the addition of color to films was an easy answer to the "invasion of the TV sets" that provided the American family with only flickery black and white images. The technology was already available, since American movies had been using Technicolor film stock since the 1920s ('Gone With the Wind' and 'The Wizard of Oz' 1939 were prime examples, as were MGM musicals after 1945). In the Golden Age of Hollywood (1930s and 1940s) about 20% of studio films had

been photographed in color; in the late 50s the percentages had risen to over 50%. By then virtually all 'A' movies produced in Hollywood were filmed in the bright, sometimes garish hues of **Technicolor** or in its more subdued successors.

**Widescreen** was popular in the 1950s and turned out to be enduring. Cinerama was a short-lived process that projected three images on a very wide, slightly concave screen to give an impression of depth. When this proved to be too limiting, different companies tried more modest widescreen images such as Cinemascope, Panavision, Vistavision that projected at about a 2.35:1 ratio (compared to the traditional 1.33:1); within a few years this was pared down to the standard widescreen (1.85:1) that is still in general use today. While traditional filmmakers initially resisted the use of widescreen formats, they adapted to them creatively once they became used to them: widescreen, for example, provided a wider and more “democratic” field of vision for cinematographers than the traditional ratio.

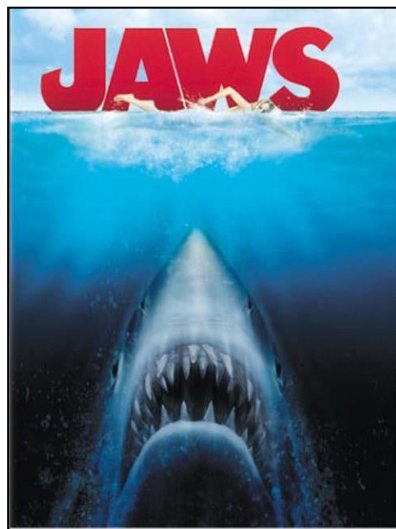
## 2) The Blockbuster Strategy

Another development was the **blockbuster strategy**: instead of producing a wide range of movies intended for different kinds of audiences (“segmenting”) and “playing it safe”, gamble on one or a small number of big films in the hope (expectation) that it will hit it big and return big profits for the studio (the “home run strategy”). Since about 85% of movie tickets sold in the late 1950s were purchased by young adults and teenagers, studios gambled that the blockbusters would appeal to the young audience.



**Recipe for Disaster**

There was already some indication of this strategy in the 1930s (David O. Selznick’s ‘Gone With the Wind’ 1939 and perhaps ‘The Wizard of Oz’ 1939), but it hit its stride in the crisis time of **the 50s** with productions like ‘The Robe’ (1953), ‘The Ten Commandments’ (1956), ‘Ben Hur’ (1959) and ‘A Star is Born’ (1954). Blockbuster movies were also successful in the early 1960s with ‘West Side Story’, ‘The Sound of Music’, and ‘My Fair Lady’, but there were also expensive flops, like the infamous ‘**Cleopatra**’ that in 1963 cost 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox almost \$300 million (in 2006 money) and almost bankrupted the studio (Elizabeth Taylor received a record \$7 million for her participation); the studio managed to survive, and it pulled itself out of the hole with the enormous success of ‘The Sound of Music’ (1965), which grossed over \$900 million (2006 prices). Filmmakers in this period carried “the gambling spirit to suicidal extremes.”



**The blockbuster that helped restore the US film industry in the 1970s**

But the strategy again flourished in the **1970s** beginning with ‘The Godfather,’ ‘The Exorcist,’ the fabulously successful ‘**Jaws**’ (1975) that eventually grossed over \$400 million in 1975 prices, and then the Star Wars (1976) and Spielberg (‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ 1979) properties. The blockbuster strategy was by and large successful, and was largely responsible for the recovery of the profitability of the film industry after 1970.

The blockbuster has been a central part of the marketing of films ever since (Lucas, Spielberg, Kevin Costner, Sylvester Stallone, etc.). It has many **disadvantages**. Since blockbusters are so expensive (nowadays up to \$200 million for a film), they are potentially **dangerous**, as Hollywood producers learned with the spectacular flops of Michael Cimino’s ‘Heaven’s Gate’ (1980) that cost \$44 million and grossed \$3 million at the domestic box office, Kevin Costner’s ‘Waterworld’ (1995), Kevin Costner’s (again) ‘The Postman’ (1997),

which cost about \$100 million and grossed about \$17 million, and of course not to forget Eddie Murphy's 'The Adventures of Pluto Nash' (2002) that cost about \$100 million and grossed 4.4 million.

The obvious risks in this kind of filmmaking made the studios very **conservative** about the content of their films, which tend to have a distressing amount of **sameness** (top stars, some action to please the guys, some romance to please the ladies, enough sex and violence to appeal to the mostly young audiences that see these films, etc.) and a reliance on **sequels** – if 'Rocky' made a lot of money, then the safe thing to do is to make more of them! 'Jaws' had at least three sequels.

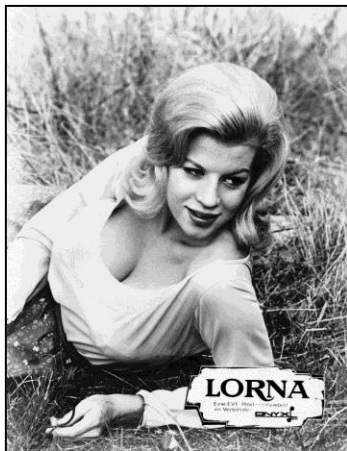
Nevertheless, the blockbuster strategy has been one of the main money-making engines of Hollywood since the 1950s; it is at the heart of Hollywood profitability especially since about 1970.

### 3) Sex and Violence

Another marketing strategy beginning in the 1950s was to appeal to the prurient interests of American viewers by further emphasis on **sex and violence**. Without directly challenging the Hayes Code, 50s studios stressed sex in the form of large breasted starlets like Marilyn Monroe, Jane Russell, and Jayne Mansfield, while presenting lurid melodramas like 'Peyton Place' 1957, 'A Summer Place' 1959, Douglas Sirk's immortal 'Imitation of Life' 1959, and Warren Beatty's debut movie, 'Splendor in the Grass' 1962, where Natalie Wood experiences severe psychological difficulties since her parents won't let her have sex. European movies further promoted the trend, particularly beginning in 1956 with the success of the famous Brigitte Bardot in Roger Vadim's 'And God Created Woman' 1956. Although nudity, sexual activity, and brutal violence were generally kept off the screen in this period, everyone noticed that the Hayes Code was being severely eroded.



**Brigitte Bardot helped change the rules about sex in Hollywood.**



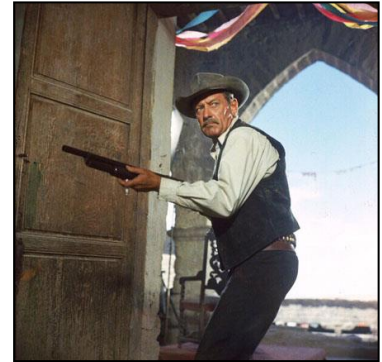
**Lorna Maitland in the Sacramento Delta**

As studios struggled with declining revenues in the early and mid 1960s, they hired **Jack Valenti** (died 2007) to head the MPPA, and he decided in 1966 to junk the old Hayes self-censorship, which was being partly ignored anyhow, and to introduce the **rating system** that is still more or less with us today. (In the USA, a 'X/NC' denotes extreme sex, an 'R' sex without coitus or frontal nudity (the raters were particularly hard on men) and serious cursing, and a 'PG' (or 'R') pronounced violence). The financial crisis in Hollywood and the changes in American popular culture about sexuality had finally **destroyed the Hayes Code**; American filmmakers were now free to indulge themes of sex and violence freely so long as they could live with the film rating they got from the MPPDA.

The way was now open for a greater use of sex and violence in American movies. Roger Corman and Russ Meyer were already getting away with extensive soft-core sexploitation films in the early 1960s (take a look at his classic 'Lorna' that was filmed in the Sacramento Delta and featured

the gargantuan breasts of actress Lorna Maitland). Late in the decade and early in the 1970s **hard-core pornographic movies** became popular, especially in the large cities, where theaters showing ‘Deep Throat’ (1972) and ‘Behind the Green Dorr’ (1972) made a lot of money. You might say this was the true **nadir** of American movies. (Theaters specializing in erotic movies thankfully gave way to home video in the 1980s).

**Mainstream movies** were also affected by the new trend. Beginning in the late 1960s, movies like ‘Bonnie and Clyde’ (1967) and ‘The Graduate’ (1967) considered new aspects of sexuality such as impotence and sex between the generations that would have been forbidden in earlier decades. Extreme violence (large amounts of blood, bodies graphically torn apart, dwelling on the act of murder, the camera not turning away, brains splattered spectacularly against the wall, etc.) moved to the forefront of American movies in this period. The killing scene at the end of ‘Bonnie and Clyde’ seems to have started the trend; Sam Peckinpah (celebrating the balletic beauty of violence in slow motion in ‘The Wild Bunch,’ 1969) and Francis Ford Coppola (juxtaposing explicit violence with family drama in ‘The Godfather,’ 1972) helped make it a permanent part of the American movie scene. Extreme violence has retained an important presence in American movies up to the present (Mel Gibson’s ‘Apocalypto’ 2006 is an extreme case in point).



**William Holden ready for mayhem in Sam Peckinpah’s ‘The Wild Bunch’ 1969**

American movies seem to have reached **rock bottom around 1970**: the quality of the product was generally mediocre, film critics loved foreign “art” movies, attendance was still anemic, and profits were modest at best. Was there any hope for American movies?