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Kira Kitsopanidou

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Electronic delivery of alternative contents in cinemas before the digital era: the case of *theater television* in the US exhibition market in the 1940s and 1950s

Kira Kitsopanidou

- ¹ Hollywood has often used new technology in order to revive interest in its product. Back in the 1950s, when the film industry was facing extension of the leisure market and rapidly changing consumer practices and tastes, the studios used new cinema-specific technologies, like 3D and widescreen systems, in order to revitalize business by redefining motion pictures as a participatory experience and a specialized form of entertainment. Interestingly, however, the first technological innovation the studios turned to in response to declining post-war box office was not 3D or Cinerama, the invention of industry outsiders, but theatrical television (Gomery, 1984).¹ Paramount and 20th Century-Fox teamed up with large radio and electronics corporations who were intimately involved in theater television as a means of further exploiting the economic possibilities of their patents in this technology. For Hollywood moguls such as Spyros Skouras, 20th Century-Fox president, theaters equipped for video projection would emerge as major entertainment centres offering an even wider range of big screen content for audiences to enjoy.
- ² Nowadays, the growing digitalization of the global screen estate and the delivery of alternative programming to digital cinemas, including gaming, sporting events and concerts, has renewed interest in the field of theater television. Alternative or additional content (as some prefer to call it) is fast becoming a significant component of cinema exhibitors' programming, diversifying the traditional demographic mix of cinema audiences and generating new revenue streams for cinemas worldwide. This paper aims to draw attention to some of the early experiments in alternative content programming

in cinemas in the United States during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Though much of the innovation in theater television that occurred prior to 1953 took place in a world where domestic television had limited penetration and at a time when it was still uncertain how television would develop, we feel that an examination of these early experiments in electronic distribution of live extra-filmic attractions to theaters will contribute to improve our understanding of contemporary developments by placing them in historical perspective.

Television in the cinema: pre-war developments and first public demonstrations

- 3 During the late 1920s and early 1930s, it was still not clear whether television was best suitable for large screen display in the cinema or for home viewing. In 1927, Bell Telephone Laboratories displayed both individual television and big screen television in New York. Television pioneers like John Logie Baird, Lee De Forest and Ulises Armand Sanabria also worked on both displays. The early 1930s witnessed the first public demonstrations of theatrical television in Europe and in the United States. As early as 1930, the Proctor Theater in New York offered television pictures as part of its regular program for a few days. A year later, the Broadway Theater in New York hosted the first telecast of a theater performance directly from the Theater Guild Playhouse.² In 1936, the Berlin Olympic Games (the first to be covered by television) were reportedly seen by an estimated audience of 160 000 people on large screens in 25 public television rooms in and around Berlin (Keys, 2006: 148).³ At the end of the decade, five theaters in London were showing live broadcasts of prize fights and horse races.⁴
- 4 The first public demonstrations in the United States took place at the New York World's Fair in 1939, where Baird and RCA introduced their theater projection television systems (Anderson, 1999: 426). The first full-scale public screening, however, took place at the New Yorker Theater in New York City during January 1941. This initial telecast, presented to representatives of the FCC, advertising agencies, and the movie industry, consisted of a one-act play and performances of ballet, opera, and vaudeville. In May, RCA arranged a second demonstration for movie industry distributors and exhibitors featuring a variety of live events, including a Madison Square Garden prize fight and a dramatic sketch staged in the NBC studios. The critic Terry Ramsaye, who attended the event as a reporter for the *Motion Picture Herald*, reported shortly afterwards: "*If theater television proves to be an art, it was the first art to be born in the doghouse*" (Anderson, 1999: 426). Although quality of projection did not exactly measure up to standard 35mm film projection, it was sufficient enough to attract the attention of several Hollywood distributors to theater television as a means of both reducing film distribution costs and creating further revenue streams for their theater networks. Paramount and 20th Century-Fox were among the first studios to invest in the new medium in the late 1930s.⁵ After the war, demand from the film exhibition market boosted research and development in the field of theater television. Indeed, a 1945 survey reported that 60% of exhibitors intended to install theater television systems.⁶

R&D deals in the 1940s boost innovation but regulatory and distribution problems hinder theater television's expansion

- 5 To meet the growing demand from the exhibition market in the immediate post war period, RCA pursued an intensive research program in theatrical television. The company's early 1930s direct projection system by cathodic-ray tube used a rotating-lens disc, Kerr cell and carbon arc light source giving an image whose size was no bigger than 7.5ft x 10ft. Definition did not exceed 60 lines. For the next decade, RCA engineers would concentrate on developing very powerful kinescopes to replace the mechanical scanner disk and improving optical parts of the device in order to increase image definition. However, home television being RCA's primary commercial target, its theater television technology seems to have been more intended for use in hotels, cafés and small news theaters, than first-run theaters.⁷ Since RCA needed to market its technology to exhibitors, the company had a strong incentive to seek alliances in the film industry. In 1947, a research and development deal was concluded with Warner Bros. and 20th Century-Fox and several demonstrations were jointly arranged in 1948 and 1949. Whilst the film industry and RCA initially shared a common vision of a dual television system able to serve both home and theater with separate types of programming, conflict arose when the film industry began venturing further into home television. While RCA's first prototype of a colour projector was presented to the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia in 1947, it would not reach the market until 1954.
- 6 Paramount's intermediate-film process made its public debut in April 1948 at the Paramount Theater in New York with a live coverage of a boxing match presented to an audience of 3 000 people.⁸ In June 1948, an audience of nearly 5 000 viewed themselves entering the Chicago Theater where Paramount presented a spectacular show consisting of various vaudeville acts recorded in a studio across the street (Gomery, 1992: 233). Whereas quality, from the point of luminosity, was hailed as excellent, approximating that of 35mm projection (or according to Douglas Gomery as « nearly the equal of newsreels in tone, depth, and brilliance »⁹), definition was rather poor (« similar to good kinescope »¹⁰), limited by TV scanning and additional camera, film and processing losses. As with the RCA system, which could not be mounted in regular booths because of the short throw of the projector, installation was complex, since space for a developing machine was not always available. Operation and maintenance were rather costly and complex too (Spottiswoode, 1951: 370). The intermediate-film system led to expensive multiplication of operators (projection, camera and lab) and high installation costs (about \$ 35 000) which earned it the reputation of the « Cadillac of large-screen TV ».¹¹
- 7 Taking the lead in the innovation of theatrical television, Paramount began installing theater television systems in the Balaban and Katz circuit in Chicago during spring 1947. From 1948 to 1949, the studio equipped several theaters in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles for the running of Broadway plays and the broadcasting of sports events (baseball World Series, Big Ten football), presidential speeches and Senate hearings. In 1950, five theaters out of ten equipped for theater television in the United States belonged to Paramount's Balaban & Katz circuit. From 1949 to 1951, they carried a total of 49 theatrical television shows.¹² Failing, however, to attract interest from the exhibition market for its film intermediate system and despite its early lead, Paramount decided to

abandon the process and ordered theatrical television systems from RCA in the summer of 1951. RCA had completed design of its first commercial theater television equipment (the PT-100) in the early months of 1950 and had already delivered a number of projectors to Fox and Warner Bros. By 1952, however, the Balaban houses in Chicago suddenly cancelled plans to install theatrical television. After a reported 235 000 dollar investment in television equipment in theaters in Detroit, Minneapolis, St Paul and Chicago, Paramount ceased all its operations in this field.¹³

- 8 Warner Bros.' and Fox's relationship to RCA proved also to be short-lived. Warner Bros. left the alliance following a conflict with the FCC regarding frequency allocations for its television operators.¹⁴ Fox tried several other systems and finally acquired in 1951 the exclusive rights to a Swiss system called Eidophor invented in the late 1930s by Fritz Fischer. Despite its complex design and volume, the use of a high intensity arc as light source gave adequate brightness for a theater-sized picture surpassing all other existing systems.¹⁵ Four months after acquiring the Eidophor, an agreement was signed between Fox and CBS Laboratories for the use in the Eidophor of the CBS sequential colour system. Following a demonstration in October 1951 of live colour action scenes on a 10 x 8 feet screen¹⁶, a *New York Times* journalist reported that "Under laboratory conditions all these pictures are very vivid, all colours perfectly natural, all shadings delicate and of exquisite reality."¹⁷
- 9 Still, the first Eidophor commercial prototype for colour television projection would not be delivered to Fox until 1954, thus making it unnecessary for RCA to rush its development of colour theater television systems.¹⁸ Without the added value of colour, theater television would be unable to become a technologically superior media to home television. By the end of 1952, over one hundred theaters had installed or were in the process of installing theatrical television systems, with RCA controlling 75% of the market (Hilmes, 1999: 122).¹⁹
- 10 Measuring up to the quality of a standard Hollywood feature was only one of the challenges facing television in the cinema in the 1950s. Further conflict arose when the film companies and major theater chains sought solutions to the problem of an effective and cost-efficient method of delivering live alternative content to theaters. The FCC viewed television as primarily a domestic medium like radio. The Commission's reluctance to grant part of UHF frequencies on a commercial base²⁰ for theater television purposes left studios and exhibitors with only two other options: using a licensed common carrier (coaxial cable or telephone wires) or setting up privately owned video distribution facilities. On the one hand, coaxial cable was sufficient for occasional transmission of low definition monochrome television pictures but not satisfactory for high detail monochrome or colour pictures. Telephone wires, on the other hand were both expensive and inadequate. Exhibitors were regularly complaining about insufficient line clearance by AT&T who adopted a turtle-like pace in providing long lines and local loops. Thus, it became clear that setting up a privately owned facility based on microwave relays for linking theaters was the only solution. During the Theater Owners of America (TOA) midwinter conference in January 1952, executives of the largest circuits nationwide announced a 500 million dollar investment plan which called for the industry to set up its own broadcasting infrastructures for intra and inter urban connexions, including studio connexions. Charles Skouras, National Theaters president, announced that he intended to establish a studio in LA from which he would transmit the shows to his 73 theaters using direct wire service to avoid applying to the FCC for a licence. Indeed, the FCC's report

concluding the 1952-1953 hearings, denied allocation of special frequencies for theater television purposes, forcing exhibitors to use expensive telephone lines which affected the quality of the service. As Michele Hilmes argues

Through a tendency to protect established interests against innovative competition, indecision over asserting or denying jurisdiction and what is surely one of the worst examples of regulatory foot-dragging in history, the FCC managed to delay, avert and handicap testing and operation of these systems to the point that the companies involved could no longer support their efforts (Hilmes, 1999: 130).

Building up the theater television medium: the quest for content

- 11 The lack of content designed and produced specifically for the medium further compromised its chances of success. Indeed, in the early 1950s, theater television made use of scattered programs borrowed from home television. Much of the programming during the 1940s and 1950s consisted of major boxing attractions or football. Filmed news of sports events were an important component of newsreels shown in movie theaters before radio transmission. This type of content seemed to better fit a still rudimentary technology without compromising audience participation, theater television's selling argument. In May 1941, an audience of celebrities of the sports and theater worlds invited to the New Yorker Theater (New York City), participated in the telecast of the Billy Soose-Ken Overlin middleweight championship as it was taking place in Madison Square Garden.²¹ *Mechanics Illustrated*, reporting on the event in August 1941, commented that "Giant images of Soose and Overlin, 20 feet tall, were projected on the screen. The audience of nearly a thousand, saw the blow by blow fight as though they were actually standing in the ring".²²
- 12 The first major boxing event transmitted in a theater was the Louis-Walcott world heavyweight championship fight in June 1948. The fight was transmitted in the Fox Philadelphia Theater using an RCA projector and simultaneously to the Paramount Theater in New York using the film intermediate system. In 1949, the Baseball World Series were shown to paying audiences in theaters in Brooklyn, Boston, Scranton and Chicago. Prior to the start of the football season in 1951, some eastern theaters were equipped in order to carry a series of football games. Overall box-office results were considered satisfactory despite the fact that the games were available on home television.
- 13 Several theaters also used television news programs on a daily basis to replace regular film newsreels with favourable response from the public. In June 1951, NBC announced plans for theater television production²³ but quickly abandoned the project. Despite recurrent talk that exhibitors were interested in producing content for theater television, no action was ever taken in fear of violating consent decrees that prohibited exhibitors from producing films. As for Hollywood studio production, as early as July 1951, the *Herald Tribune* reported that

A 20th Century-Fox representative said the company would probably produce some of its own shows for the projected theater tv system (Eidophor), setting up production centres in New York, Chicago, Hollywood and other key cities. The company might also negotiate with theatrical producers for the rights to pipe Broadway musical hits into subscribing movie houses throughout the country and

was considering the possibility of staging concerts and arranging its own sport events.²⁴

None of these plans were ever materialized as studios abandoned theater television for widescreen production which drew on Broadway properties for its content.

- 14 Film properties were also excluded from video distribution, as Hollywood distributors and exhibitors disagreed on this issue. Although the Skouras brothers, Paramount and the MPAA had been actively studying the possibility of closed-circuit film distribution in the 1940s, the National Exhibitors Theater Television Committee did not authorize features to be included in theater television transmission on a regular basis in the 1950s. In 1951, Raymond Spottiswoode perfectly summed up Hollywood's interest in video distribution:

If all theater programs consisted of televised actuality and tele-transmitted movies, the cost of release prints would be virtually eliminated, projection staffs could be greatly reduced and many local exchanges closed down. Even more important, costs of picture production could be amortized in a few weeks, instead of few months, by simultaneous teleprojection in several thousand theaters (Spottiswoode, 1951 : 371).

- 15 Whilst exhibitors defended video transmission as a differentiated product that would bring audiences back to the theater, they opposed the use of the new technology as a replacement to 35mm film projection. The projectionists' union called for additional men in the projection booths during telecasts of alternative content as it did when Cinerama came along in 1952. In 1954, *Billboard* suggested however that

The motion picture industry's eventual conversion from film to visual magnetic tape recording is expected to give theater TV its final big boost. For when Hollywood switches from film to tape in its production of features, most of the theaters will be forced to equip themselves to project visual magnetic tape.²⁵

- 16 It was also clear that as long as the transmission problem remained unsettled, large theatrical television networks could not be formed nationwide and the cost of high-quality programming built specifically for the medium would remain too prohibitive for both producers and theatrical television exhibitors. United Paramount Theaters obtained in 1951 the exclusive television rights to the University of Illinois and University of Michigan football games and showed them in theaters in Chicago and Detroit with sell outs towards the end of the season.²⁶ Nonetheless, the 1950-1951 season of live theater television programming showed losses that forced Paramount to halt further plans for theater television. *Variety* reports early in 1952, that although some theaters had shown profits on individual events during the 1951 season, most were near the break-even point due to very substantial telephone costs.²⁷

- 17 In 1951, Theater Network Television Inc. made its entry in the field of exclusive major outdoor boxing attractions for theater television transmission in collaboration with the International Boxing Club. In mid November 1951, TNT also negotiated with Madison Square Garden in New York City for theater television rights to a number of selected winter events. The Louis-Savold heavyweight fight in June 1951 was the first large screen commercial telecast from New York's Madison Square Garden for a total audience of 22 000 people in eight houses in Baltimore, Washington, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Albany.²⁸ The press reported that the operation was a commercial success as some theaters were running in full capacity. The Walcott-Marciano heavyweight championship in October 1952 set a new record for TNT linking 49 theaters in 31 cities for an overall gross estimated at about \$ 400 000 (gross was almost four times higher than for the Louis-

Savold telecast).²⁹ Average admission price was \$ 3,25 – increasing up to \$ 15 dollars on the black market in Richmond).³⁰

- 18 In the early days, exhibitors had been very reluctant in charging higher prices for theater television programs (no doubt because they were also available on home television). This created the impression that they gave big-screens shows away as a bonus. TNT's exclusive programming of selected major attractions was making it possible to raise ticket prices. For the Marciano-LaStarza championship in September 1953 exhibitors charged \$ 2,50 to \$ 4,80. The telecast was shown in 45 theaters in 34 cities (for an estimated gross of \$ 325 000).³¹ For the Rocky Marciano-Ezzard Charles heavyweight championship at the Yankee Stadium in New York in June 1954, ticket prices rose from as low as \$ 2,5 to as high as \$ 6,60. TNT had initially obtained the largest line-up of theaters nationwide (73 theaters in 50 cities) bolstered by fourteen mobile projection units (eight drive-ins and six conventional theaters). Despite the fact that CBS radio broadcasted the fight, TNT recorded box-office receipts of approximately \$ 450 000 to \$ 500 000.³² In 1955, TNT established a new record with the Marciano-Moore fight which was screened exclusively for theater television and was viewed in 133 theaters and drive-ins in 92 cities by 350 000 persons. Box-office grosses mounted to \$ 1,2 million. Ticket prices rose as high as \$ 7. 20 (while average price was somewhere around \$ 3.50).³³
- 19 TNT was also responsible for the first Metropolitan Opera telecast in December 1952. TNT carried the Met's three hour uncut performance of *Carmen* to 31 cinemas in 27 cities via coaxial cable.³⁴ The telecast was something less than a box office sensation, with the exception of Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and Minneapolis. Approximately 67 000 persons attended the telecast, while box-office ran over \$ 100 000.³⁵ The press expressed conflicted opinions about the technical performance of the telecast, which used three cameras in fixed positions for the opera and one for the intermissions.³⁶ While most reviews reported shadow ghosts and out of focus long shots, criticizing stage lighting, Rose Heylbut, music critic for *The Etude Music Magazine*, noted however in her article on the Metropolitan opera telecast published in July 1955 that
- while paying full respect to the demands of visual and musical authenticity, the telecast continued the illusion of really being there by giving attention to the social note which invariably accompanies the opening of the opera (...). Even before the performance began, there was the buzz and excitement of being there which is so great a part of theatre enjoyment.
- 20 The November 1954 Met opening-night gala special was sent to an even larger network (32 theaters in 27 cities, while seats were priced as high as \$ 7) bringing a box-office return of \$ 180 000. TNT employed for the occasion a large crew and production staff of 475 people.³⁷ The three-year contract announced early in 1954 by TNT and the Metropolitan Opera Association was finally dropped.
- 21 Broadway fare was also considered as programming source for theatrical television. Fox's plans in the early 1950s to telecast top Broadway attractions never materialized like those announced in 1953 and 1954 by both TNT and Box Office Television.³⁸ Early in June 1953, *Variety* reported that TNT was negotiating rights for the telecast of Mike Todd's operetta extravaganza, *A Night in Venice*, in collaboration with the Fabian and Stanley Warner theaters. In September 1954, *Variety* also reported that Box Office Television was trying to line up theaters and sign a deal for *Seven Year Itch*, whose film rights had been bought by Fox for its CinemaScope system. Obtaining rights for big Broadway hits and negotiating

deals with the Actors' equity and the IATSE stagehands union proved to be extremely complex.³⁹

Alternative programming versus theaters' regular fare

- 22 In 1954, S. H. Fabian, president of the Stanley Warner theater network argued that “Everything in entertainment will be shown in motion picture theaters. This is the exhibition policy of tomorrow”.⁴⁰

Giving “Audiences seats at performances of the best entertainment that the stage, opera, ballet and concerts worlds have to offer”⁴¹ meant, however, that theaters with picture commitments had to work out their programs with film distributors (they still do nowadays). Some exhibitors were forced to delay the opening of new product in order to accommodate telecasts. In some cases, press reports seem to suggest that film fare was presented almost like a bonus to the special event telecast (film presentation before the special telecast allowed the audiences time to take their seats in the theater or came as a bonus after the telecast as if to justify higher prices charged by the exhibitor). From the distributor's point of view, however, the new medium was regarded “as one for developing attractions different from film and adding to the box-office value of the feature film”.⁴² Quoting Charles Skouras, Fox-West Coast Theaters president, *Billboard* reported in 1949 that television would replace the second feature in theaters.⁴³

- 23 As Hollywood was turning to widescreen and big-budget production, which eliminated the burden of the double-feature policy that many exhibitors still cherished in the context of declining audiences and product shortage, experimentation with alternative content programming could disturb the type of marketing and commercial strategies studios had in mind for first-run theaters. The short-lived 3D vogue in 1952-1953, then CinemaScope in 1953 put an end to theater television's expansion. Not a single permanent installation was recorded in 1953, as exhibitors began to favour temporary installations for specific events⁴⁴, while none of the national telecasts lined up more than 50 houses that year. Two years later, the Marciano-Moore heavyweight championship was telecasted to 129 theaters (in 92 cities) where only 52 had permanent equipment.⁴⁵ Theater Television Associates, formed by a Dayton sales consultancy agency, abandoned the project of a series of weekly boxing events and sales meetings. So did Stadium Network Television with its plans to present the orchestras of major cities like Philadelphia, Boston or New York on a subscription basis for theaters in cities that did not ordinarily get such musical fare.⁴⁶

The revival

- 24 Clearly, theatrical television in the 1950s failed to set up a viable business model outside off-hours uses of the equipment for industrial sales purposes and business meetings for the purposes of which, as *Variety* reported in March 1953, there was some bicycling of equipment between theaters.⁴⁷ As Hy Hollinger pointed out in January 1955,

Always a bridesmaid, but never a bride. That appears to be the status of theater television as it enters its sixth year of operation...it has been on the verge of matrimony with success for many years, but the marriage has been swallowed in a maze of complications .⁴⁸

25 Furthermore, Hollywood had yet to decide how to permanently integrate the new distribution tool in its business. In a letter to Earl Sponable in the early 1950s, Ray A. Klune, executive production manager at 20th Century-Fox, best summarizes Hollywood's uncertainty regarding the use of the new distribution tool :

This, of course, brings up the question concerning to what degree we, as non-theater owning motion picture producers, will benefit by this kind of a device other than the revenue that we might derive from licensing theaters for its use unless, of course, we as distributors of pictures acquire the rights to the special events and sell them to theaters as we now sell our pictures.⁴⁹

26 Theatrical television in the 1950s failed to emerge as an alternative to free home television controlled by the radio networks.⁵⁰ However, the short-lived experiment with closed-circuit telecasts of live extra-filmic attractions to theaters, while clearly reviving the tradition of the polyvalent sites of the early years⁵¹, defined cinema screens as successful substitutes for stage and stadium, and as a focus for special attendance attractions[...].⁵²

27 Nowadays, in the words of Chris McGurk, chairman and CEO of Cinedigm Digital Cinema, cinemas are being transformed into a networked entertainment center that you can program almost like a cable channel.⁵³

28 Arguably, 3D (11 % of North American theatrical revenue in 2009) and the success of live alternative content, still very relative compared to studio output (0.5 % of the U.S. box office in 2009), have been a very powerful driving force in the digitization of cinemas.⁵⁴ As a result of the success of « The Met : Live in HD » beginning in 2006, a new group of players are entering the theatrical distribution of alternative, non-movie programming, specializing in the production and distribution of a wide range of contents (operas, theatre, concerts, musicals, sports, comedy shows or even circus), including screen-advertising companies (such as Screenvision), digital deployment groups (such as Arts Alliance and Cinedigm), Hollywood studios (such as Disney and Sony) and specialized companies (such as more2Screen in the U.K and French company Pathé Live, formerly Ciel Ecran).⁵⁵ As the film exhibition sector faces shrinking of the release windows in the US, the alternative content market is bringing in additional income for exhibitors who realize that 3D has not expanded the moviegoing audience as promised.

29 To conclude, we believe that although the media landscape today and the configuration of forces driving contemporary theater television, beginning with digital cinema advocates and somewhat reluctant exhibitors, are very different from those in the 1940s and 1950s, the case of Theater Television sheds new light to the relations across and between media and entertainment forms which is crucial in understanding the revival of high-definition movie-theater broadcasts of high profile events in the 2000s.

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NOTES

1. In fact the studios had been experimenting with all three technologies since the 1920s.
2. Cf. History of Theater Television, Box n° 67, folder: Theater TV, FCC Hearing (History), Sponable Collection, Columbia University.
3. Anna McCarthy (2001) has written about the history of television in public spaces in her book « Ambient Television: vision culture and public space ». She describes the use of television in the United States in public spaces such as taverns, bars, restaurants, department stores, shopping centers, waiting rooms and airports. According to McCarthy, in the 1940s, a number of companies, such as DuMont, RCA, Philco and General Electric, developed large-screen receivers (both projection and « direct view ») to accommodate the bar's collective viewing situation. One

company, the United States Television Manufacturing Corporation, even specialized in receivers for public places. McCarthy claims that for motion picture exhibitors, television « turned the tavern into a theatrical space for viewing images, one that was not subject to the same heavy licensing laws and fees as movie theaters » (McCarthy, 2001: 46).

4. McCoy John E., Warner Harry P., « Theater Television Today-Part I », in *Hollywood Quarterly*, vol. IV, n°2 (Winter 1949), p. 161, Anderson Christopher, « Television and Hollywood in the 1940s », in Schatz Thomas, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1999, p. 426.

5. In 1942, Paramount and General Precision (20th Century-Fox's single largest shareholder) helped organize the Scopphony Corporation of America with the specific purpose of developing theater television.

6. « Television Developments », 1946 *Film Daily* year Book, p. 75.

7. Douglas Gomery (1992: 232) suggests that the RCA, recognizing that the picture quality obtained by its direct projection system was hardly up to the standard of 35mm projection, sought theater situations of no more than one hundred people. In July 1949, *Billboard* review of the Walcott-Ezzard Charles heavyweight fight at the Brooklyn Fabian Fox Theater before an audience of 4 000 people pointed out that « *the image was somewhat less satisfactory than that which can be obtained on home TV receivers, but it was easily good enough for the purpose* ». Cf. *Billboard*, 2/7/1929, p. 14.

8. Paramount first demonstrated its version of an intermediate-film process shown by Fernseh at the 1933 Berlin Radio Exhibition, in December 1947. The TV image, after reception in the theater, was reconstituted on a cathode-ray tube and photographed on a continuous loop of film coated with emulsion by an orthodox intermittent camera. The exposed film was passed from the camera into a 90 foot per minute developing machine, in which developing time was cut down to a few seconds by raising the developer to a high temperature. After fixing, washing and drying, the film travelled immediately into a normal film projector. The 35mm print could then be edited and reused. For the description of the process see Raymond Spottiswoode, *Film and its techniques*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951, p. 368-370.

9. Gomery, 1992: p. 232. See also Richard Hodgson, *Theater Television system*, in *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*, vol. 52, n°5, May 1949, p. 540-548.

10. *Billboard*, 24/9/1949, p. 4.

11. *Variety*, 4/7/1951, p. 5.

12. *Variety*, 12/3/1952, p. 15.

13. *Variety*, 12/3/1952, p. 4.

14. Warner ended its partnership with RCA after ordering several systems for its theater chains from 1947 to 1951. Although the studio had planned a theater television network of some 25 theaters, it would install television systems in only thirteen of its theaters in the following years. Cf. *Variety*, 11/5/1949, p. 26 and *Variety*, 30/12/1953, p. 33.

15. Indeed, the system was supposed to deliver a luminosity of 5000 lumens as opposed to 1000 lumens for the black and white RCA. According to Fox's chief engineer, Earl Sponable, the Eidophor had a capacity for 1000 lines of resolution and was capable of maintaining the same luminosity level over an average screen or a screen eight times larger. Cf. *New York Times*, 3/10/1951, p. 40 and « Skouras, Sponable Disclose Details of Fox Deal for Development of Eidophor », in *Film Daily*, 26/2/1951, p. 1, 4.

16. History of Theater Television, Box n° 67, folder: Theater TV, FCC Hearing (History), Sponable Collection, Columbia University.

17. *New York Times*, 3/10/1951, p. 40.

18. On Fox's strategy regarding the Eidophor see « The Widescreen Revolution and Twentieth Century-Fox's *Eidophor* in the 1950s », in *Film History*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2003), p. 32-56.

19. RCA had equipped a certain number of major theater circuits in the USA such as the Fabian group, the Radio Keith-Orpheum circuit and the American Theaters Network.
20. For a more detailed discussion of the FCC's involvement in the failure of theater television see Gomery (1984), Hilmes (1999) and Kitsopanidou (2002).
21. This was part of the RCA demonstration organized back in 1941 for film distributors and exhibitors.
22. *Mechanics Illustrated*, August 1941, p. 48.
23. Gomery, 1984: 223. Average cost for a 70 min program was estimated at \$150 000.
24. *Herald Tribune*, 20/7/1951.
25. *Billboard*, 21/8/1954.
26. Cf. Televisionotes, Television Department, MPPA, « The Louis-Savold Theater Telecast », 18/6/1951, box n° 58, folder: Motion Picture Association of America, H. J. Schafly to E. I. Sponable 18/6/1951, box n° 64, folder: Theater Television, general, 1952-1962, Sponable Collection.
27. *Variety*, 2/1/1952, p. 48.
28. Houses in Boston, Binghamton, Detroit and Minneapolis did not receive the event because of insufficient line clearance. Cf. *Billboard*, 16/6/1951, p. 8.
29. *Variety*, 1/10/1952, p. 4, 23.
30. TNT, according to *Variety*, grossed \$1,35 per seat (1/10/1952, p. 23).
31. *Variety*, 30/12/1953, p. 31
32. Insufficient line clearance and high cost of building up new lines for the occasion limited the theater line-up to a little over 60 theaters. The actual line-up represented, according to *Variety*, 98 % of the available TV theaters (15/9/1954, p. 34).
33. *Variety*, 4/1/1956, p. 42.
34. Back in 1881, the Theatrophone in France, a popular attraction at the International Electric Exhibition in Paris, brought live performances of the Opéra, the Opéra Comique and the Comédie Française transmitted by telephone lines into rooms in the Palais d'Industrie three evenings a week. Several Theatrophones were then installed in public spaces such as hotel lobbies, bars, clubs and hospitals in France. In 1890, the Theatrophone became available as a service to individual subscribers at home and thrived until 1920 broadcasting operas (Bertho, 1984: 80-81).
35. *Boxoffice*, 20/12/1952.
36. As opposed to the use of 15 cameras for the opera and one for the intermission in today's digital cinemacasts.
37. Cf. *Variety*, 10/11/1954, p. 20, 17/11/1954, p. 3.
38. As was the case with heavyweight championships and football series, box-office receipts split between the theater television content provider and the exhibitor would have been 50-50 %.
39. Cf. *Variety*, 3/6/1953, p. 3 and *Variety*, 22/9/1954, p. 1.
40. Cf. *Variety*, 6/11/1954, p. 3
41. Skouras quoted in *Variety* (20/7/1951).
42. Cf. *Billboard* quoting Nathan L. Halpern, TNT's president in January 26th 1952.
43. *Billboard*, 24/9/1949, p. 4.
44. National Theater Supply reported unsold equipment as the year 1953 ended. Cf. *Variety*, 30/12/1953, p. 31.
45. *Variety*, 4/1/1956, p. 42.
46. *Variety* 16/9/1953, 30/12/1953.
47. Cf. *Variety*, 10/6/1953, p. 18. To boost off-hours use of theater space, both TNT and BOTV acquired portable units from General Precision (Cf. *Variety*, 15/12/1954). *Variety* reported in July 1953 that 53 companies in 12 major industries had shown interest in conducting business meetings simultaneously in many cities (*Variety*, 15/7/1953, p. 4). A Ford Motor convention in 1954 was transmitted to 39 theaters, each earning approximately \$3 500 in rentals. According to *Variety*, despite competition from hotels and television studios, exhibitors were getting straight

rentals for use of space and equipment of about \$400 to \$750 (Cf. *Variety*, 29/9/1954, p. 18). In February 1954, Sheraton founded the Sheraton Closed-Circuit television company in order to exploit closed-circuit television in twelve cities.

48. *Variety*, 5/1/1955, p. 51.

49. R. A. Klune to Earl Sponable, 17 August 1951, box 73, folder: General, 1949-1951, SC, p. 3.

50. The equipping of movie theaters never reached more than one percent of the nation's theaters (Boddy, 1992: 24).

51. Prior to 1910, in many of the venues showing motion pictures, movies were not the only attraction. Films were also shown in other kinds of theatrical spaces (vaudeville theaters, opera houses, churches, social clubs, etc.).

52. S. H. Fabian, president of Stanley Warner Corp. quoted in *Variety* (*Variety*, 6/11/1954, p. 3).

53. « Once you have a dish on the roof, it allows you to turn a theater complex into a networked entertainment center that you can program almost like a cable channel ». Cf. « Alternative content rides digital delivery into theaters », <http://www.thewrap.com>, 5/4/2011.

54. The worldwide success of *Avatar* by James Cameron in 2009 has led to the rapid acceleration of digital cinema conversion.

55. David Hancock, « Global options: alternative content gains momentum in cinemas worldwide », <http://www.filmjournal.com>, 12/5/2010.

ABSTRACTS

In the early 1950s, 20th Century-Fox acquired the rights to a Swiss television theater system called Eidophor which the company promoted as creating a “new field of operation—a field of limitless opportunity” for cinema exhibitors. The idea was to pipe “special events” (Broadway musical hits, operas, concerts, sports and films) to subscribing theaters around the country “giving perfectly sharp, technically faultless pictures and flawless sound reproduction”. In 1952, the number of theater television transmissions reached 300, five of which were organized nationally. On december, the opera *Carmen* was telecasted from the Metropolitan Opera in New York to 31 theaters in 26 cities. The 1954 opening night gala was sent to an even larger network. Alternative content programming, which was first seen as a regular component of the movie theater experience in the US, evolved into an event driven theatrical television pattern. Theaters (mostly major theater circuits) would install equipment for events that justified the expense. The digital projection rollout in theaters today in the US and worldwide call for revisiting and reconsidering alternative content programming strategies of the 1950s and 20th Century-Fox's vision of the possibilities of electronic delivery for motion picture exhibition. This paper aims to shed more light in one of the less known chapters of the history of motion picture presentation in the US, whose renewed interest today is closely linked to the digital media revolution. As the exhibition market transitions to digital delivery, the deployment of alternative contents, including gaming, sporting events and concerts, is converting the cinema screen into a multimedia center, a giant high definition television screen. How far is this idea from the theater television concept of the 1950s which Spyros Skouras qualified as “the greatest stimulant our industry has had since the advent of sound” ?

Au début des années 1950, la 20th Century-Fox a acquis les droits à un système suisse de télévision projetée (*theater television*) appelé Eidophor, qui allait, selon la direction du studio,

élargir le champ des opportunités économiques pour les exploitants de salles. L'idée était de transmettre en direct aux salles abonnées des « événements spéciaux » (des pièces à succès en provenance de Broadway, des opéras, des concerts, des événements sportifs et des films) dans une qualité d'image et de son optimale. En 1952, 300 transmissions ont pu avoir lieu dans les salles de cinéma aux Etats-Unis, dont cinq organisées au niveau national. En décembre 1952, l'opéra *Carmen* a été diffusé en direct depuis le Metropolitan Opera de New York dans 31 salles de 26 villes différentes. Le gala d'ouverture de l'Opéra en 1954 a même été transmis dans un réseau de salles encore plus étendu. Envisagé au départ comme un complément régulier de la programmation des salles, le contenu hors film fera finalement l'objet d'une exploitation plutôt événementielle. Les exploitants (notamment de circuits importants) n'installeront finalement l'équipement nécessaire que pour les transmissions justifiant la dépense. La numérisation du parc de salles américain et mondial appelle aujourd'hui à réexaminer les stratégies de programmation de contenus hors film dans les années 1950 et à revoir le discours de la 20th Century-Fox au sujet des possibilités ouvertes par la diffusion électronique. Cet article a pour objectif d'étudier l'un des chapitres les moins connus de l'histoire de l'exploitation cinématographique aux Etats-Unis. En effet, à la lumière des évolutions contemporaines dans le domaine des médias numériques, cette première tentative d'introduction à grande échelle d'une forme de distribution dématérialisée de contenus film et hors film vers les salles de cinéma revêt une importance particulière dans l'analyse des évolutions actuelles en matière de stratégies de programmation et des discours qui ont accompagné l'introduction de la projection numérique. Les salles de cinéma sont en train aujourd'hui de transformer leur offre grâce au numérique et aux dispositifs de retransmission en direct via satellite. L'écran de cinéma prend les allures d'un centre multimédia ou d'un écran géant de télévision haute définition. Cette idée est-elle si éloignée du concept de télévision projetée dans les salles (*theater television* ou cinéma-télévision) des années 1950 que Spyros Skouras, président de la 20th Century-Fox a qualifié comme « le plus grand stimulant que notre industrie ait connu depuis l'avènement du son au cinéma » ?

INDEX

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AUTHOR

KIRA KITSOPANIDOU

Maître de conférences à l'Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3 où elle enseigne notamment l'histoire économique et technologique du cinéma et des formes télévisuelles américaines. Sa thèse de doctorat s'intitule *L'innovation technologique dans l'industrie cinématographique hollywoodienne. Le cinéma-spectacle des années 50 : une mise en perspective des stratégies liées à l'Eidophor et au Cinémascope*. Elle a publié nombre d'articles consacrés aux innovations technologiques dans l'industrie américaine du cinéma. Elle est l'auteur de *L'Economie du cinéma américain : histoire d'une industrie culturelle et de ses stratégies* (coécrit avec Joël Augros, 2009). Elle prépare un ouvrage sur l'histoire de la 3D au cinéma en collaboration avec Martin Barnier.