The Motion-Picture Industry

by Mitchell Wolfson

[With a few of the immediate introductory remarks deleted, there follows the Get-Together Luncheon speech of the 73d Convention, given on April 27, 1953, by Mitchell Wolfson, motion-picture exhibitor and operator of Wometco Theatres, Miami, Florida.]

There is in literature an account of a creature which had the startling ability to fly off in all directions at one and the same moment, and yet not destroy itself as a whole. With regard to revised viewing techniques for motion pictures, I fear that we are trying to do the former, that is fly off in all directions, but with great danger of falling victim in the process.

Sometime, and you gentlemen know it far better than I, we shall emerge with the one best system for the improved showing of motion pictures, and it is my sincere hope that we do not have to wait for too long.

Please understand that in this portion of my comments I am dealing solely with 3-D, periphery viewing, or whatever technique may yet be for the improved viewing of motion pictures.

After standardization — and I want to put special emphasis on those words — *after standardization*, it would seem that our problems come in this order: First, we need an improved light source — greater and more even brilliance coupled with either an adequate cooling apparatus or film gates and film which can endure the greater temperature without harm. And an important part of this improved light is a power supply of sufficient capacity and reliability.

Second, we need a not-too-costly screen with a picture surface which will be compatible with both the new picture and films as we now know them. This screen must have the further qualification that it be suited to the structural limitations of most existing theaters. Of course, all these video improvements must be accompanied by stereophonic sound at a reasonable cost. And finally and most important, this stereo sound must be contained on a sound track which is placed on the same film print that includes the picture and which should continue to use 35mm stock.

And third, you who create must also educate. When you have accomplished standardization, adequate light and power, and suitable screens and sound, then you must embark on a widespread but simply worded educational program so that that to which you have given so much of yourselves does not suffer through misuse.

As a member of the motion picture industry, I for one am a little embarrassed that outside capital took techniques which we, for years, knew existed — and with them stampeded us into such precipitous action.

But mingled with embarrassment is a good measure of elevation over the fact that the industry is on the move. Apparently, we have quit wringing our hands in despair and are now using that energy to bring the motion picture up more fully to its potential.

While I am not absolutely certain as to the reasons why I was invited to speak here, I am sure that one of the reasons must have been that you wanted to know how exhibitors feel about all this. Frankly, gentlemen, we've been romanced, cajoled, wheedled, high-pressured, and in some measure I think confused as regards these new techniques.

What we want is to separate fact from fancy and the workable from the impractical. Our heads are spinning with the varied formulae being hurled at us. We hear of screen proportions of 4 to 3, 5 to 3, 6 to 3, and 8 to 3. On the heels of a supposedly authoritative announcement that the present 3-D is no good for drive-ins, we get word that drive-ins are actually experimenting with 3-D and are having some success. We get long distance phone calls urging us to call in engineers who, and I quote, "know all about the new process," and can survey our theaters and tell us just what we need. So we invite engineers to survey our theaters at our expense. What happens? They tell us they do *not* know anything about the new process, and would not know what to survey if they came to our theaters. They ask us to insist on standards.

We are urged to sign orders for equipment which others tell us does not exist.

Claims made by one group are refuted by another.

If all this sounds as though I am irked by these happenings please discard that thought. We may be confused but it is a happy confusion because, as I said before, it's a sign that the industry is on the move; that people in the industry are out to improve it and not just out to bring a lawsuit — which seems to have been the favorite pastime of the last decade. Happily for you gentlemen, that latter is a spectator sport as far as most of you are concerned.

There may be some in the industry who are egging you on with the "Hurray — hurray — hurray" of the circus barker. I urge more caution than this because we cannot afford to nor will we change our booth equipment and screen every time the picture changes. If we knew for a certainty now just what single technique would emerge as the best, I too would be urging all exhibitors to hurry. But we do not know.

Rather than dwell on what we do not know, let's line up in a row the ducks that we do know:

1. Well, the number one duck is a fact that you gentlemen touch on only in a technical manner and not professionally — that is the fact that a good show with mass appeal never goes wanting for an audience, regardless of the number of dimensions it is able to display.

2. Our number two duck is the fact that the interest of the public is stimulated by viewing methods which create more realism.

3. The number three duck is a twin brother of number two and lies in the belief that one, or a combination of the new methods of presenting motion pictures will arouse the public to a sustained interest in the industry in general and its product in particular.

There are our three ducks which will come first into our gunsights. And you can accuse me of a double meaning if I say that we are awaiting them in our blind.

I don't believe that any one of these ducks is going to be brought down with one blast of a gun. And that number three duck — the final improved method for showing our wares — is going to take a lot more birdshot than any one of us can carry. But regardless of the number of shells which have to be used to get that duck, he's going to taste mighty good when we do bag him; and it will be a feast enjoyed by millions — you, me, and the public.

When first I was asked to address this convention, some months ago, one item high on the agenda was drive-in theaters. I imagine that all the talk and work on new picture sizes and viewing with stereo sound methods will, in the meantime, limit interest for awhile in these outdoor movies.

Nevertheless, they need some mention here, not only because the subject was in the original agenda, but because there are over 3600 drive-ins now grossing over $200,000,000 yearly, and this is a specialized theater which draws, for the main part, from a specialized segment of the public, some of whom would not attend indoor theaters even if there were no drive-ins. It is for this reason that I believe that the new viewing methods and stereophonic sound are not as immediately important for these theaters.

Do not mistake me. These theaters constitute an important and vital part of our industry. Improvements are taking place in these theaters. I believe that the trend will be to the twin drive-in. The basic reason for this is a factor in which you are vitally interested and that is definition in the picture. With a twin, the drive-in need be only eight or nine ramps deep which permits practical viewing of a picture of sufficient size and clarity, and certain economies and better operations, such as one booth atop the concession stand; one concession stand to serve both sides of the twin drive-in and an opportunity in double-feature territory for the patron to select the picture he wants to see, by driving his car to that side of the twin which is exhibiting the particular feature that he wants to see. Yet a patron can remain in his car without moving and see the second feature if he cares to see both features.

While I foresee a continued general success for the drive-in theater with pictures as they have been made in the past, these showplaces do need a great measure of your skill to provide them with the new techniques. Most important, perhaps, is

that improved light source of which I spoke earlier. In fact, this is needed in many drive-ins today for today's picture.

Another point might be that you could further develop the process of rear projection which I have not yet seen but which is reported to allow shows to start earlier in the evening and which may solve other problems.

There is another item that costs this industry millions of dollars every year and which engineering might relieve to some extent. That is shipping charges on films. If the film itself cannot be made lighter, then surely in this day when synthetics are proving they can do many jobs better than the material they substituted for, the shipping cases can be made lighter and yet as durable.

I am most happy that your Society recognizes the kinship of motion pictures and television — even though some in our industry have not.

I have just come from some exhibitor meetings where I have urged their continued interest in, and work toward, the establishment of an effective theater-television system. I should do no less here. Theater-television can and will bring culture to Main Street and wider knowledge to the citizens of every town in the land. The revenue-producing potential of theater-television has not yet begun to be tapped, and in my opinion its importance has been overlooked by many. Week before last, Arthur Godfrey came to Miami to originate his telecasts from there. Theater business that week was normal to good every night but Wednesday. That was the night of his telecast from there and that was the night that our theaters, and our competitors' theaters, were empty.

That proves again the power of immediacy — which is the power of theater-television.

The mention of theater-television brings to mind the parallel characters of the motion-picture theater and of regular television broadcasting. As a businessman who has operated 35 theaters for nearly 30 years, and who also happens to own a television station, I would like to relate some of our experiences and some of our successes, which seem to prove that experience in one of these businesses serves to improve the other.

First, we have used and have seen the tremendous public response to movie advertising on television. TV advertising of movies is more than selling — it's compelling.

And it should cause no surprise to our way of thinking that we, theater owners, were the first to become television broadcasters in Florida. In both mediums, we are using a picture that shows movement combined with sound, and in both we are providing entertainment for the public. That one of these systems sells as it tells is an economic factor only; the premise remains the same. The surprise to me is that many other exhibitors did not pioneer television broadcasting. How well the two entertainment systems blend and may help each other is pointed out by one of our experiences. This happened a couple of years ago. As exhibitors used to a sharp clear picture, we were wholly dissatisfied with the picture we were getting from kinescopes and film on television. Our own research department went to work on that problem and before long had come up with a camera far superior to anything on the market — so good, in fact, that our TV viewers said that our kinescope shows were about as good quality as cable quality and we were asked by several other stations to build similar cameras for them. We believe this was a good contribution to the art of TV broadcasting resulting from our motion-picture experience.

Nor do we believe it was by chance alone that our television station, last year, was given by the National Association of Radio and Television News Broadcasters the top award in all the nation for our station's news coverage. Again, we attribute this success to our long experience with newsreels. As exhibitors, our experience and appreciation of the public interest in moving and talking newsreels in the theaters led to our awareness of this dynamic television news need and probably induced our willingness to spend the money to accomplish this gratifying recognition.

Public service — there's the watchword of both theaters and television; and it is more improved standards and contributions in this field which will bring more satisfaction and prosperity to all in either field. It will bring the public better entertainment, the men engaged in the

industries better salaries, and the stockholders better dividends. Public service has been a long-time ally of the successful motion-picture exhibitor. The local theater and theaterman has been the focal point in the community for Red Cross, Community Chest, War Bond and other patriotic and civic drives. He is long experienced in the community effort and could add greatly to the public service opportunities of television broadcasting.

You will note that I have not tried to prophesy the future of either 3-D, periphery vision or drive-in theaters, nor even TV; but of several facts I am sure. The American public wants and will pay for better viewing techniques.

Our television and motion-picture industries await these new improvements in viewing, in color and in various dimensions.

We need you — the engineers — and look to you for these new and exciting opportunities. With the help of the various crafts and allied artists and their productions of good entertainment, I am sure that we businessmen can sell our combined efforts to the American public and the world with ever increasing benefits to all.

In business, just as in a locomotive, the engineer is the man up front. Guide us well, gentlemen.

Letters to the Editor

Re: "Basic Principles of the Three-Dimensional Film"

[from H. Dewhurst]

In this most interesting paper by Raymond Spottiswoode, N. L. Spottiswoode and Charles Smith in the October 1952 *Journal*, the Authors appear to have singled me out by name as the pioneer protagonist of the "Human Vision" system of 3-D projection, about which they make criticisms which should not, I think, pass without challenge and on which, therefore, I feel I must take it upon myself to comment.

Otherwise, to my mind, the Authors are to be congratulated upon marked and positive contributions to the art of 3-D projection. They have, as it were, made a virtue out of expediency insofar as variable camera-lens interaxial spacing practice is concerned, in utilizing to the full the space in front of the screen; a forbidden ground hitherto which has tended to be regarded as taboo for all but stunt shots. An adjunct to this end which they have used — and a novel one as far as I know — is the placing in space in front of the screen of an aerial window, effected by marginal printing in the optical printer, enabling these in-front-of-the-screen shots to be viewed without eye strain. Their mathematical methods of analysis, too, cannot help but clear the air still further of current misconceptions, although I am a little dubious as to whether the lay mind will take readily to thinking in terms of reciprocals. Their concept of a "nearness factor" does, however, provide a much needed reminder that an image placed, say, half-way in front of the screen for one viewer is half-way for all.

And now for my few complaints. In particular criticisms of fixed camera-lens interaxial "Natural Vision" systems, the validity of the arguments advanced by the Authors is to a large extent vitiated by the assumption, as in the introduction on page 276 to the "Part III" critique, that the lens-focusing mechanism is always coupled to the convergence control. As far as my own system is concerned, this is a misconception. I had thought to make it clear in my paper ("Auto-Precision Stereoscopy," *Phot. J., Sec. B. 92B:* 2–24, Jan.-Feb. 1952) that this coupling was normally in operation only when my attachment was used in conjunction with a stills miniature camera, and then only for instantaneous "candid" work — the coupling being subsidiary to an independent manual override.

Even with this restrictive complication of coupling left out, it is in any case a misconception for the Authors to say (p. 276): "It is therefore not to be expected that a mere reproduction at the camera of the human eye separation — in the absence of human viewing methods — will of itself produce strain-free viewing. This cannot