

BIGGER, SHARPER, BETTER!

THE STORY OF VISTAVISION

“The sight of the VistaVision sign alone helps us understand to what degree that system made its day, and how a technological definition in the heart of a collective art can become a figment of memory. We seem to be nostalgic for the systems---they touch us like angels in a certain tender age---as much as we are for stars or stories that colored an epoch.”

*- Peter von Bagh, *The Dream of VistaVision*¹*

In the early 1950s, the American film industry was in a state of disarray, occasionally verging on outright panic, to a degree unseen since the traumatic, if highly lucrative, period of transition to sound in the late 1920s. Already reeling from the effects of the 1948 Supreme Court decision requiring them to divest themselves from the profitable theater chains and block booking practices which had, over the course of three decades, created and sustained their unquestioned dominance of global popular entertainment, the studios now found themselves facing an enemy, in the form of a small box with a tiny, oddly shaped screen and a generally blurry, indistinct picture, which threatened to steal away their audiences quickly and, perhaps, permanently.

¹ Von Bagh, Peter. *The Dream of VistaVision*, in *Prima della Rivoluzione*, p. 321

To a dispassionate outside observer, this reaction might seem surprising. After all, everyone in the business had, at least in theory, known that regular television broadcasting was on the horizon for quite some time. The same executives currently fretting about television's impact had been making movies about it since the early 1930s. If World War II hadn't begun, they'd have been dealing with TV by the end of that decade rather than ten years later. However, the rapid embrace of new technology had never been Hollywood's strongest suit, and during the war years, everybody had been far too busy enjoying extensive profits as domestic attendance reached previously unseen heights to spend much time worrying about any technological changes which the postwar world might bring to entertainment. With a large part of the audience suddenly declining to come to theaters for new releases, often in favor of staying home and watching their older product, the men who ran the movie business found themselves in need of a quick and reliable way to stanch their losses.

In the end, the answer they collectively hit upon was one that had served from nearly the beginning of American cinematic history: if all else fails, add more spectacle and increase the novelty. In making movies literally bigger than ever before, the moguls reasoned, they could easily overshadow the seemingly hypnotic power of television by literally making it impossible for anyone to look away.

The first real attempt to market a widescreen process in the United States had come in 1928. Called Panoramico Alberini, it was the invention of the Italian Professor Filoteo Alberini, who earlier had experimented with a 70mm process using the same name. That early attempt at viability had been used precisely once, for an Italian epic called *Il Sacco de Roma*. (1923).² Several years later, attempts were made to interest the British and American film industries, but these were unsuccessful. At the time, the studios were more invested in two homegrown

² Carr, Robert E. and Hayes, R.M. *Wide Screen Movies*, p. 144

processes, Magnascope and Grandeur, with the hope that they would bolster receipts which had been heavily impacted by the Depression. Ultimately, however, the confluence of an imploding economy and exhibitor reluctance to invest in the expensive refurbishments necessary to accommodate another new technology so soon after the arrival of sound led to the swift demise of both.³ (The most notable release in Grandeur, recently restored by the Museum of Modern Art, was 1930's *The Big Trail*, most known for giving a very young John Wayne his first leading role.) Following this brief period, no further work of any significance was conducted regarding widescreen until television's advent, at which point widescreen seemed to be all anyone in the industry was working on and thinking about :

“During a brief but cataclysmic eighteen-month period from late 1952 to early 1954, dozens of new widescreen processes were announced or unveiled to the motion picture industry, the press and the general public. Industry publicists enthusiastically promoted these new entertainment technologies as remedies that would restore the health of the ailing motion picture industry and lure audiences back into motion picture theaters. The popular press eyed these developments with a certain skepticism, questioning whether Hollywood had developed a radical new technology that would, as the coming of sound had done almost twenty-five years earlier, ‘revolutionize the screen or whether it [was] wildly romancing a novelty that [would] soon turn out to be a

³ Belton, John. *Wide Screen Movies*, p. 11

dud.”⁴

Initially, most of the majors either adopted a wait-and-see approach regarding widescreen, or attempted to create their own in-house versions of 20th Century-Fox’s Cinemascope, which had rapidly become the most widely-used process upon its 1953 debut. Eventually, just about all concerned bowed to the inevitable and came to Fox with hat in hand looking to cut a deal.

The lone holdout was Paramount, which insisted on developing its own in-house process, dubbed VistaVision, while taking every opportunity to take a combative stance, often shading into outright ridicule, toward its chief widescreen rival in the press. As Vistavision made its 1954 bow, *Business Week* succinctly defined the terms of battle, positing the process as “Paramount’s direct challenge to Fox for the mass movie market...[making] a big pitch for neighborhood houses and drive-ins, as well as for the foreign market”.⁵

If Cinemascope is now ultimately better remembered and enjoyed a far longer vogue in the public eye, Paramount and its technicians still enjoyed the last laugh, as the standards developed for Vistavision, in slightly moderated form, became those which are still used for most theatrical projection today.

VistaVision grew out of the tumultuous period between the advent of Cinerama and the ascendancy of Cinemascope. As John Belton points out, the splash caused by the new wide-screen phenomenon left the studios in a bit of a bind as they looked for ways to convert their suddenly passe'

⁴ Belton, *ibid.*, p. 12

⁵ Belton, *ibid.*, p. 136

Academy ratio films to the widescreen epics for which audiences now clamored. To do this, they decided to crop 1:33:1 films to varying aspect ratios, ranging from 1:66:1 (which Paramount favored) to 1:85:1. This ad hoc process was dubbed Panoramic Screen. These films were then projected using a wide-angle lens to achieve a jerry-rigged "widescreen image".

Coming to the conclusion that they could best their rivals at Fox, Paramount's technicians hit upon the idea of adapting the old, never-utilized Alberini method. Almost 30 years after it had failed to gain traction in the United States, Panoramico Alberini provided the genesis for the Paramount Lazy 8 Butterfly Camera, soon renamed VistaVision. In order to achieve the widescreen effect, film was run through the camera horizontally, with eight perfs (the equivalent of two frames) exposed at a time, rather than the standard four frames run through vertically in a conventional camera.⁶

The original plan called for the new format to be unveiled in three different ways: a double horizontal frame, a standard 35mm print reduction from VistaVision and anamorphic prints. Ultimately, all prints (with the possible exception of an isolated run or two) were released in one of the latter two formats.

When the time came to decide general specifications on their new visual wonder, Paramount kept the 1:66:1 aspect ratio. In reality, however, according to the advertising booklet put out by the studio, the desired ratio was really 1:85:1, much the same ratio as other studios were using for their widescreen efforts when not using Cinemascope, and most prints were sent out in this ratio, which was felt to be the widest the picture could be without sacrificing the vaunted image quality. Should smaller

⁶ Carr and Hayes, *ibid.*, p. 144

theaters not wish to install seamless screens, 1:66:1 retained the crystalline picture without noticeable dropoff.⁷

Vistavision's chief advantage, trumpeted endlessly by its studio, lay in the fact that it allowed for far greater image clarity and ease of use than was possible with its two main competitors, Cinerama and Cinemascope. Cinerama, the first widely shown widescreen process, had debuted in 1952 with a travelogue entitled THIS IS CINERAMA, showcasing, among other wonders both natural and unnatural, the Grand Canyon and assorted roller coasters (which doubtless left some audience members in a state of nausea rather than the intended euphoria). Screening involved a remarkably cumbersome procedure requiring three projectors which needed to operate in precise unity in order for the film to be projected across the three linked panels forming the curved screen.⁸

Unsurprisingly, this resulted in frequent breakdowns in the system from premiere night on, not to mention the reaction from theater owners, who were understandably reluctant to commit to refurbishing their theaters for an expensive novelty with a less-than-proven track record. Additionally, one unfortunate effect of the tri-partite construction of the Cinerama screen lay in the fact that the seams joining each screen together were highly visible, especially when illuminated by the projector's light, lending a somewhat ramshackle air to the surrounding grandeur. This allowed Paramount to expend great amounts of copy

⁷ Paramount Promotional Booklet at The Widescreen Museum, www.widescreenmuseum.com

⁸ Enticknap, Leo. *Moving Image Technology from Zoetrope to Digital*, p. 154

promoting VistaVision's "Seamless Screen". In the end, Cinerama was enormously successful in the big-city engagements it played, but it would be another three years before another film was made using the process, and with a few exceptions (most notably the epic *How The West Was Won* (1962), it was never able to gain a truly mainstream foothold with moviegoers.⁹

With comparison to Cinemascope, which commanded a far greater market share than Cinerama ever did, Paramount took a different tack. Cinemascope utilized standard 35mm film and cameras, immediately making it a better market bet than Cinerama. As Leo Enticknap notes, this did at times require some rebuilding of auditoriums, but the effort needed was minimal in comparison.¹⁰ Cinemascope utilized conventional 35mm film with an aspect ratio of 2:55:1. This was later altered to 2:35:1 in some instances, in order to accommodate exhibitors who were reluctant to put in stereophonic sound systems, and thus required standard mono tracks. With the introduction of the magoptical soundtrack in 1957, which allowed for both types of soundtracks on the same piece of film, this became the accepted Cinemascope ratio. In 1970, a slight change, to 2:39:1, was made to address the need for hiding splices, which often showed up as flashes of light at the top or bottom of the frame. Since the correction was so minor, both ratios are now used interchangeably.¹¹

Cinemascope worked by using an anamorphic lens originally developed by French inventor Henri Chretien, who had been working on various forerunners since the 1930s,

⁹ Belton, *ibid.*, p. 144

¹⁰ Enticknap, *ibid.*, p. 60

¹¹ Widescreen Museum, *ibid.*

when Paramount had initially been interested in his Hypergonar lens.¹² The lens compressed the film along its horizontal plane, creating the widescreen effect. One drawback of this, in the format's early years, was that it often caused the edges of the picture to blur or become indistinct, another fact which Paramount focused on with great alacrity when singing VistaVision's praises.¹³

Another key difference between the two formats lay in the fact that VistaVision could take up the whole of a 62x35 screen while maintaining complete clarity. The horizontal nature of the format when projected at the 1.85:1 ratio, leading to an image that was higher than anamorphic Cinemascope, meant that it was superior in terms of images that emphasized height. Meanwhile, Cinemascope had the advantage by far over its competitor in scenes favoring width, meaning that in the early going, "the first few VistaVision films, *White Christmas* and *Strategic Air Command*, adhered to this aesthetic. While characters in Cinemascope films tended to recline on sofas or easy chairs (*How to Marry A Millionaire*) or sprawl on the ground (*Rebel Without a Cause*), those in VistaVision films tended to sing and dance (*White Christmas*) or stand at attention (*Strategic Air Command*).¹⁴

Realizing that it needed to be able to show its films in the thousands of theaters already equipped with Cinemascope while simultaneously hoping to undercut Fox's domination of the widescreen field, Paramount bought the rights to the Superscope variable anamorphic projector, a device designed to make VistaVision prints compatible with Cinemascope equipment.

Paramount offered "at a modest fee, SuperScope prismatic anamorphosizers to any theater that wanted VistaVision prints but did not already have variable compression units." And the machines had one other valuable capability which the studio could exploit. They could be used to

¹² Belton, *ibid.*, p. 120

¹³ Belton, *ibid.*, p. 124

¹⁴ Belton, *ibid.*, p. 126; Carr and Hayes, *ibid.*, p. 146

show all the widescreen processes currently available, as well as, in theory, any others which might be created. Often, just to be safe, "theaters already with Cinemascope or other fixed anamorphic lenses either rented SuperScope units or purchased them as backup."¹⁵

As previously noted, VistaVision's greatest cachet accrued through its image quality, which was generally held to be superior to that of any other widescreen contender of the period, as John Belton ably explains:

"The chief virtues of VistaVision, according to Paramount president Barney Balaban, were its "compatibility" with traditional modes of production and exhibition and its "flexibility", that is, its adaptability to different theater situations. VistaVision's wide-area negative, achieved by using 35mm film exposed horizontally (as in a still camera), resulted in a wide, eight-sprocket-hole two frame image. When rotated 90 degrees and reduced to standard 35mm, it produced an extremely sharp image and possessed excellent depth of field.

VistaVision thus solved many of the problems inherent in ersatz widescreen, providing greater image resolution and a better angle of view for widescreen projection, without committing itself to the radical redefinition called for by [other] extreme widescreen processes. At the same time, VistaVision offered theaters which, for economic or architectural reasons, were unable to convert to Cinemascope, a viable widescreen alternative, permitting them to project in aspect ratios ranging from 1:33:1 to 2:1, which it considered the maximum width that

¹⁵ Carr and Hayes, *ibid.*, p. 146

most medium-sized and small theaters in the country could employ."¹⁶

As the studio itself rather modestly put it, their reduction process was "the feature others must follow if they are to reduce grain, eliminate fuzziness and gain bigger, better and brighter pictures."¹⁷

The latter was one of many thinly veiled swipes at the competition as embodied by Fox. These had begun even before the decision was made to proceed with VistaVision, when legendary Paramount founder Adolph Zukor gave an interview to *Variety* in which he stated that Paramount would make films in any available widescreen format with the exception of Cinemascope, following this up by implying that perhaps Fox's passion for technology had hobbled its ability to make decent films. The battle was joined, ultimately reaching its culmination in Paramount's first public exhibition of VistaVision at Radio City Music Hall in April 1954 at which the studio conducted a somewhat underhanded comparison between the two formats by showing Cinemascope footage on a modified screen (smaller than that on which it would normally be shown, making it seem as if the film wasn't taking up the full screen), which was promptly unmodified for the purpose of showing off the glories of VistaVision via clips from *Strategic Air Command* and *To Catch A Thief*, which was

¹⁶ Belton, *ibid.*, p. 125

¹⁷ 1954 VistaVision promotional booklet, widescreenmuseum.com

then in production.¹⁸

Critical hosannas were immediately forthcoming. Writing in *The New York Times*, Thomas Pryor, obviously a man completely unafraid of hyperbole, gushed that "no film this reporter has seen in more than twenty years of professional observance of movies has ever matched in clarity or focal depth the background detail apparent in the demonstration footage. Moreover, no apparent loss of brightness was visible at the extreme ends of the picture. The contrast in the quality of the black-and-white film was especially dramatic...in this instance the monochrome footage actually became sharper than it normally is even on the standard size screen." (Pryor, NYT, October 10, 1954)

The Bing Crosby-Danny Kaye musical *White Christmas* served as VistaVision's maiden appearance before the masses, premiering at Radio City on October 14, 1954. Given its popular stars and score of Irving Berlin favorites, as well as public curiosity about the latest wrinkle in widescreen, the film was a huge hit, grossing \$12,000,000, and VistaVision was well-launched, following this success with the equally well-performing *Strategic Air Command* (1955), starring James Stewart and directed by Anthony Mann, both of whom, in this case, were definitely slumming, neither doing too much to get in the way of the technology's star turn.

For all the ballyhoo, it's crucial to note that, at least according to film preservationist James C. Katz, partially responsible for the

¹⁸ Belton, *ibid.*, p. 125

controversial 1996 restoration of *Vertigo* among other projects, very few audiences outside of moviegoers at a handful of first-run cinemas in major urban areas ever saw every VistaVision film /in/ actual Vistavision, given the format's ability to retain excellent image clarity even in lesser aspect ratios. "Almost no VistaVision films had been projected in theaters for full distribution. I think the only ones that ever were were *Strategic Air Command* and *White Christmas*. They actually were not only shot in VistaVision but were shown in the theater in that format."¹⁹

Only 101 films in total were ever shot in VistaVision during the seven years of its reign as a viable release format, ending with Marlon Brando's 1961 directing debut, the Western *One-Eyed Jacks*. In the end, for all Paramount's dreams of domination, the only other studio to make use of VistaVision was the Rank Organisation in England.²⁰

As it was, most of the VistaVision releases were a fairly undistinguished lot, consisting mostly of pleasant if forgettable romances and fluffy musicals, with the occasional drama (generally taking place somewhere in the wide open spaces, by sheer non-coincidence), thrown in for good measure. But occasionally, VistaVision served as the setting for some of the best work of great directors, including John Ford's *The Searchers*(1956), Stanley Donen's *Funny Face* (1957), Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 second take on *The Ten*

¹⁹ von Bagh, *ibid.*, p. 324

²⁰ Enticknap, *ibid.*, p. 60

Commandments (maybe not great per se, but damn entertaining if you're in the right mood), and most importantly, Alfred Hitchcock, who was particularly enamored of the format and made *To Catch A Thief* (1955), *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958) and *North by Northwest* (1959) in VistaVision. (A one-time-only foray by the format away from its home studio, since Hitchcock, who was shooting the film at MGM, insisted on using it.)

Even with the backing of one of the most powerful studios in the business, VistaVision was eventually done in by even less expensive systems that followed it, as well as improvements in image quality which Fox was able to make to Cinemascope over time, with the final blow being delivered by the various 70mm systems which promised even better picture quality. But although it ceased being used for mainstream production less than a decade after the fanfare of its launch, the 1:66 (or really 1:85) ratio created for VistaVision has become the ratio used for all standard theatrical screenings today. It was also used for back-projection and the creation of certain special effects as late as the end of the 1990s, until it was inevitably superseded by CGI and other digital processes.²¹ In the end, Paramount's big gamble, even though it was, perhaps, killed off before its time, proved to have a durable and lengthy afterlife.

²¹ Enticknap, *ibid.*, p. 60

