

Pass the ammunition : a short etymology of "Blockbuster"

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Pass the Ammunition: a short etymology of 'blockbuster'

This article stems from a long-standing interest in the etymology, or linguistic history, of film-industry and showbusiness terminology. In particular, I became interested some time ago in the origins and use of the now-ubiquitous word 'blockbuster'. Its use today – indeed, overuse – tends to be in connection with what I and Steve Neale, in our recent book, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History*, refer to as 'unusually expensive productions designed to earn unusually large amounts of money'¹ – that is to say, films which are not just exceptionally successful box-office hits but those which are specifically intended to be so, and are budgeted, made and marketed accordingly. However, while scholars and critics may attempt a certain precision in its use, popular usage is far less circumspect. In my experience as a university film studies tutor, 'blockbuster' is often assumed to be synonymous with the contemporary action film, the genre in which the largest sums are typically invested today and which often heads the box-office charts. Furthermore, it is not unusual to find 'civilians' (those moviegoers who are not members of the academic film community or minority film culture) describing virtually any and every Hollywood movie as a blockbuster, intuitively regarding the word as a synonym for the kind of mainstream entertainment the American film industry typically produces irrespective of genre. (In much the same way, 'Hollywood' itself is sometimes taken to stand for the whole of the film industry rather than the major American corporations in particular.)

In researching my share of *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters* I attempted to locate the first uses of 'blockbuster' in the American trade press – in particular, the major showbusiness newspaper *Variety* – as a way of tracing its adoption into film-

industry vernacular. Additional research clarified the word's extra-cinematic origins (of which more later). My extensive searches of *Variety* – which were initially confined to its weekly editions, more readily available on microfilm in UK libraries than the daily version – suggested that the 'original' use of the term in its modern sense occurred in the journal's review of *Quo Vadis* (1951) in the weekly issue of 14 November 1951, which described the film as 'a b.o. blockbuster [...] right up there with *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind* for boxoffice performance [...] a super-spectacle in all its meaning'.² But I was subsequently alerted to an earlier use by Jeffrey Richards's book *Hollywood's Ancient Worlds*, which quotes a review from the British *Daily Mirror*, dated 22 December 1950, of Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949), predicting it, too, to be 'a box office block buster'.³ The strikingly similar vocabulary suggested a longer history to the film-specific use of the term than I had anticipated, and the recent digitisation of the *Variety* archive made viable a more detailed word search than could be achieved with microfilm.⁴

Thus it has been possible to construct a reasonably accurate history of 'blockbuster' before the mid-1950s, by which time it had become recognised and accepted by both the trade press and the film industry at large as betokening the kinds of film identified above: one which would 'gross \$2,000,000 or more in domestic (U.S. and Canada) rentals' as well as 'a relatively expensive picture that can head the program in all situations'.⁵ Both these definitions are taken from *Variety*'s reports of United Artists' own categorisation of its product, in 1954 and 1957 respectively. In its annual surveys the journal identified 1953 as 'a year of boxoffice blockbusters', with 135 releases grossing \$1,000,000 or over compared to 119 in 1952, and 1958 similarly as 'the year of the blockbusters for the picture business'.⁶ Heading the revenue chart in 1953 was *The Robe* (1953) and in 1958, *The Bridge on the River*

Kwai (1957), which, along with *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956), that year joined *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *The Robe* to top the annually updated 'All-Time B.O. Champs' list. All these secured the common understanding of the blockbuster as a 'kingsize' picture, large in scale, spectacle, cost and income, as well as wide in scope (or 'Scope) and long in running time (all five films ran between two-and-a-quarter and three-and-three-quarter hours).

Origins

In teaching about the blockbuster, I often pose students the question of how the word originated and what it first referred to. Their answers often echo those that I suggested to myself before beginning sustained research into the matter. They typically hinge on the understanding, in the context of cinema history, of the 'block' prefix.⁷ One sense of this is in relation to the common practice, prior to 1948 (and especially up to 1940), of block booking: that system of distribution, on which the dominance of the eight major Hollywood corporations depended, in which the exhibitor client was obliged to book an entire year's output from a major studio rather than being free to choose only the particular picture or pictures desired.⁸ Within a block package, it was common for the distributor to nominate a small number of films as 'specials' or, less frequently, 'superspecials': big-budget or prestige productions which would carry a higher-than-average price tag in terms of the proportion of box-office income demanded by way of rental. In some cases, a particular attraction might not be offered as part of a block at all, but instead be sold singly and only to those select clientele in whose theatres the film could best be presented, possibly on a 'roadshow' or high-priced, exclusive pre-release basis. Such films – which included, for example, *Gone with the Wind* – correspond closely to our modern understanding of what a blockbuster film is.

However, by the time the term entered common parlance, the era of block booking was over. After the 1940 Consent Decree, block booking was limited to groups of five and in the 1948 Paramount, et al., decrees the practice was outlawed altogether and every film had to be sold singly, without being conditional on the booking of another picture. So however much we might now want to describe pre-1948 superproductions as blockbusters, that is not how they would have been known at the time.

A second, more directly relevant, sense of ‘block’ is that of a city block. Trade advertisements for films in the 1930s and 1940s frequently included illustrations showing long queues of patrons waiting outside theatres for the chance of admission, with such lines often extending around the block of buildings on which the theatre was located.⁹ It is not unreasonable to assume that ‘blockbuster’ referred to a film so popular as to attract round-the-block queues, but again the term was never used in this way. In fact, the word does not owe its origins to the film or entertainment industries at all, so does not derive from any habitual trade practices. Its first use in the film trade press, in 1943, was purely opportunistic, on the basis of its topicality and current newsworthiness.

In that year, the Allied air forces began to employ a type of heavy explosive shell in the bombing of military and industrial targets in Nazi-occupied Europe. Newspaper reports of its being tested had appeared the year before and subsequent press coverage described the extensive damage it inflicted on cities and factories. The nickname given to these large bombs, typically weighing 4,000 pounds or 8,000 pounds, was ‘blockbuster’, indicating their capacity for large-scale destruction: a bomb powerful enough to demolish an entire city block. John Huston’s documentary *Report from the Aleutians* (1943) includes footage of 1,000-pound bombs being loaded onto U.S. aircraft, while Huston’s voice-over narration explains the strategic use of such

‘blockbusters’ for carpet-bombing large or scattered targets. The 8,000-pounder (over five tons) was the largest aerial bomb ever deployed until February 1944, when the R.A.F. introduced the 12,000-pound ‘factory buster’, and it was superseded again when in August 1945 American air crews dropped the first atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – weapons reportedly nicknamed ‘city-busters’ by the *Chicago Sun-Times*.¹⁰ Perhaps it should also be mentioned here that the UK’s biggest box-office hit of 1955 was named after another weapon used in a famous wartime aerial mission: *The Dam Busters*.

The earliest use I have been able to locate of ‘blockbuster’ to describe a motion picture occurs in trade advertisements placed in *Variety* and *Motion Picture Herald*, and presumably also in other contemporaneous trade publications, in May 1943 for RKO’s war film *Bombardier* (1943). The tagline reads: ‘The block-buster of all action-thrill-service shows!’¹¹ (Blockbuster was often hyphenated or written as two separate words in this period.) As the film’s title indicates, the choice of metaphor was a deliberate play on the story’s dramatic content, which concerns a squadron of trainee bombardiers and climaxes with an aerial assault on Japanese munitions factories. Another trade advertisement for a war-themed film, the documentary *With the Marines at Tarawa* (1944), describes its emotional impact by way of analogy: ‘It hits the heart like a two ton blockbuster!’¹² An appeal for industry support for a fund-raising campaign similarly invoked the image of a large bomb, and was accompanied by a graphic illustration showing a shell landing on the flag of Japan: ‘Let’s make the 6th War Loan a six-ton block-buster!’¹³ The publicists were here drawing specifically upon industry readers’ presumed awareness of the blockbuster bomb, its current prominence in the public mind and its connotations of massive impact.

Not surprisingly, reporters, reviewers and editorial copy-writers for the trade press also began to exploit the word for its shorthand descriptive vividness, albeit as a way of indicating commercial potential rather than a role in the war effort. Thus MGM's combat film *Bataan* (1943) was trumpeted in the company's house organ *The Lion's Roar* as 'a block-buster to scatter those wise guys in the industry and the press who are always telling us that the public won't support war films.'¹⁴ Paramount's *No Time for Love* (1944) was described by *Boxoffice* magazine as a 'comedy block-buster. Theatre grosses should be blown to ceiling heights.'¹⁵ *Variety*'s review of the musical *Brazil* (1944) predicted that it would 'prove a block-buster at the wickets, a musical investment for Republic that promises to out-gross any previous top-bracket film from this company.'¹⁶ In all these instances, 'blockbuster' has been added to the already extensive trade vocabulary for describing hits (a word whose own associations with the effect of military ordinance hardly need to be stressed) in martial terms. A further example can be adduced from another article in *The Lion's Roar*: 'Behind the big guns that fire the loudest box-office salvos in the industry must be men who know how to load them with the industry's most potent ammunition.'¹⁷

The potency of the blockbuster bomb as a metaphor or simile for the film trade seems, however, to have been limited by its immediate topicality. Once its novelty value and wartime currency had expired, after 1944 the word ceased to appear in advertising or editorial copy.¹⁸ The reason for its obsolescence is suggested by a line quoted in a trade advertisement for CBS's experimental colour television service in 1946: 'I think it obsoletes [sic] black-and-white as the ATOM Bomb made Blockbusters obsolete.'¹⁹ The much more powerful image of nuclear destruction, as well as the cessation of hostilities, had seemingly rendered the blockbuster outdated as a descriptive analogy as well as an actual weapon by the end of the war. One quaint

reference in 1946 would have been most appreciated by readers with long memories, when an MGM publicist reassured *Variety*'s gossip columnist that Elizabeth Taylor's first screen kiss, in *Rich Full Life* (1946), would be only a 'peck, not a blockbuster'.²⁰

Postwar Conflict and Competition

After a hiatus of several years, 'blockbuster' reappeared in *Variety* reportage in 1948, in two articles announcing programmes of forthcoming releases from the major studios. In April, *Daily Variety* led its survey of the year's upcoming pictures with several MGM films 'packed with stars', including *Words and Music*, *Homecoming*, *State of the Union* and *The Three Musketeers*, and a further group of 'Leo's Blockbusters' headed by *Command Decision*.²¹ In December, in an article listing sixty-five big-budget films in the pipeline, the daily noted that 20th Century-Fox's 'blockbusters are *The Black Rose*, \$3,500,000; *Lydia Bailey*, \$3,000,000; *The Snake Pit*, \$2,700,000; and *Prince of Foxes*, *Twelve O'Clock High*, *Down to the Sea in Ships* and *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend*, \$2,000,000 apiece.'²² Here we have at work the twin definitions of blockbuster which still hold sway: potentially successful releases and high-cost productions. Though *Command Decision* is, like *Bombardier* five years before, thematically suited to the description of blockbuster – an adaptation of a successful Broadway play about wartime bombing missions, it was one of the first postwar films to return to a World War Two setting after it had been deemed box-office poison due to the public's satiation with war pictures during the conflict – it was not the only film mentioned in that category; others listed alongside it included comedies, musicals and crime thrillers.²³ Instead the term had begun to acquire a more general significance unrelated either to a time of literal conflict (intensive aerial bombing campaigns held no relevance to America's subsequent involvement in the

Korean War) or to specific story material. Subsequent iterations in trade discourse over the next three years confirmed this.

Curiously, the version of the April article which appeared in the weekly, rather than the daily, edition of *Variety* (it was common for the weekly paper to reprint or revise articles that first appeared in the daily) did not use the word blockbuster. It did, however, likewise pursue a wartime analogy. The opening paragraph reads as follows:

Paced by Metro, studios are rushing to aid the sagging b.o. with the biggest array of star-studded pix in Hollywood history. The next 12 months will see the industry's big guns fired in a simultaneous barrage designed to crumble stiffening buyer opposition, and to hasten return of healthy business.²⁴

The tone of this passage, which is taken up by other contemporaneous articles and many more in the next few years to come, gives an indication of the state of mind which was increasingly taking over the industry and its press at this time. It suggests a siege mentality and a related commitment to an aggressive form of defence. To understand the reasons for this, brief contextualisation of the postwar era as it was experienced by the entertainment industry is necessary.

As is well known, Hollywood faced a number of crises in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The most pressing of these in commercial terms (setting to one side the investigations of supposed Communist influence in the film industry undertaken by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee) were (1) the results of the Supreme Court decision, handed down in May 1948, in the long-running antitrust case, which enforced the divorcement and divestiture of the theatre chains owned by the 'Big Five' major corporations, thereby depriving them of one source of profit; (2) the initially gradual but increasingly precipitous decline in domestic theatre admissions as

the greater availability of both disposable income and affordable consumer durables, the greater variety of postwar leisure options and the population shift to an increasingly middle-class, suburban base all combined to draw potential audiences away from the cinema. In five years, according to one report, attendance declined by one-third, from a peak of around 80 million admissions per week in 1946 to 53 million in 1951.²⁵

The antitrust action was the most visible manifestation of the long-standing hostility to the major producer-distributors of sections of the independent exhibitors (those not owned by or affiliated to the majors) who depended on them for a regular supply of product. It was the resentment against certain entrenched trade practices (such as block booking) on the part of some of these exhibitors that led them to urge the Department of Justice to investigate illegal collusion and unfair competition within the industry and ultimately to the Consent Decrees, signed by RKO in 1948, Paramount in 1949 and Fox, Warner Bros. and Loew's (the parent company of MGM) in 1950, that drew a line under the vertically integrated studio system. The ultimate result of the court action was not, however, to the universal benefit of independent exhibitors. While they had hoped to gain greater freedom in film bookings and consequent economic benefits from the ruling, they found instead to their cost that the majors had other ways of retaining control over the market than outright ownership of theatres. One of these was the practice of competitive bidding, or auction selling, for top product, which had actually been introduced at the behest of the New York district court in its own ruling on the antitrust case in June 1946.²⁶ Under this system, rival exhibitors in each area were forced to bid against one another for the right to show the most desirable new pictures in first run. By law, the picture had to go to the highest bidder, but offers were made 'blind' (that is, bidders were not permitted to know what

their rivals had bid) so in order to be sure of securing a picture, exhibitors were obliged to offer terms highly favourable to the distributors. *Variety* had reported in late 1948 that, rather than being liberated by divorcement, exhibitors were now afraid that it would make distribution the dominant sector of the industry, with the majors able to demand higher rentals for fewer films since they were no longer obliged to keep their own theatres supplied. This threatened to leave exhibitors with a product shortage, higher operating costs and increased competition, both from each other and from rival forms of recreation, including television.²⁷

As an alternative form of audio-visual entertainment and the newest arrival on the leisure-time scene following its postwar introduction in 1946, network television was of course the most conspicuous rival for audience loyalty. In 1948 *Variety* reported general agreement among exhibitors that TV was still not yet a significant threat to the film box office, and that any such future threat would be temporary until the novelty of the new medium wore off, as had happened previously with radio. But the same year a survey of 270 families in Long Island, New York, found that 20 per cent of those owning television sets visited cinemas less often than those without, and 58 per cent attended less often than they had before purchasing the TV. The survey suggested a national annual loss of rental income of \$3,400,000 if the same were true for the whole country.²⁸ This was of course if the present proportion of TV ownership remained constant; but in the next few years it grew exponentially, as did the television broadcasting industry itself.

Writing in the *Variety* anniversary of 2 January 1952, looking back like other contributors on the trends and patterns of the year just gone, Frieda Hennock noted:

There were many outstanding events in TV during 1951. Perhaps the most fundamental and far-reaching change was found in the balance sheets of

the 108 TV stations now on the air. Telecasting finally climbed out of the pit of unprofitable operation; black ink came widely into use and the red was happily stored away, let us hope forever, by the majority of broadcasters. Choice nighttime was already SRO [standing room only], with this condition spreading to other time segments. Television had become, in *Variety* lingo, ‘a B.O. Blockbuster.’²⁹

The reference here to ‘blockbuster’ as being part of the journal’s characteristically idiosyncratic, idiomatic vocabulary offers confirmation both that *Variety* itself was most likely responsible for the term’s renewed currency, and that it was applied by the journal as much to television and to other areas of showbusiness, including popular music and radio, as to the cinema. Thus in 1949, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis’s new show on the NBC radio network was said to face ‘the rugged competition of the front end of Columbia’s blockbusters’. Another report identified the source of this competition as ‘CBS’s new Sunday comedy blockbuster’ fronted by Red Skelton.³⁰ In reporting on the competition for viewers between the television networks in the new 1951-52 season, *Variety* ran the headline ‘NBC-TV’s Blockbustin’ Lineup; Net’s Torpedoes Trained on CBS’. For CBS’s response to its rival, an article on the same page adopted a pugilistic rather than a militaristic metaphor: ‘CBS Prepping Big Sunday Punches to Right-Cross NBC’s “Big Show”’.³¹

The important point to note here is the repeated emphasis on rivalry, competition and conflict, terms in which ‘blockbuster’ seems to play a regular and representative role. Similarly aggressive terminology abounds in trade journalism and advertising throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s. *Variety*’s previews of upcoming product, cited above, are also instances. In March 1949 the journal noted that a deliberate drive by 20th Century-Fox ‘to hoist film rentals another 25% shows signs of developing into

an offensive by all the majors for bigger returns in distribution [...] indications this week point to a determination by the other companies to stay abreast the growing battle. The entire industry is gearing for what may be the bitterest exhib-distrib fracas in many years.' The paper stated that:

the campaign is expected to touch off an unprecedented string of attacks from exhib organizations. With the growing tension, every theatre group, ranging from Allied to Theatre Owners of America, will line up in an effort to stave off distrib assault on rentals. Already the opening gun has been fired in the form of a challenge by Harry Brandt's Independent Theatre Owners of America to 20th's Spyros Skouras, Al Lichtman, and Any W. Smith, Jr., for a full-dress debate.³²

The intensified pressure on the film industry to fight the inroads of television provides one explanation for the hostile tone. In August 1950 *Variety* again reported on an upcoming product lineup in which 'Hollywood will unleash its biggest guns' in order 'to revive a lagging boxoffice':

Spectacle, adventure, music, comedy and romance have been molded into mass appeal yarns and united with boxoffice stars, color and the top production know-how to give one of the greatest mass attacks on TV yet provided.³³

This pattern is noticeable also in ad campaigns run by several of the majors. In a four-page preview of its new releases for the first four months of 1951, Paramount used language identical to that of *Variety*'s reporter. As well as the slogan 'The Big Gun: Paramount in '51' the ad included a banner headline, 'First Hits in a Year-Long Boxoffice Barrage' and the sub-headline 'Manpowered by the strongest army of talent ever recruited at one studio'. A logo depicting a cannon appearing to fire an

exclamation mark appeared on the first page and, in miniature, alongside the title of each film to be released (nine in all, including the wide general release of *Samson and Delilah*, claimed as being already ‘the Greatest Grosser of Our Time’ from its roadshow engagements).³⁴ In June and July of the same year 20th Century-Fox ran a series of advertisements in *Variety* on the theme of ‘The Industry’s New Rallying Cry: Let’s Attack Together!’. The first ad in this series continued: ‘A new fighting spirit’s in the air! A new smile’s on Showmen’s faces! 20th passes the ammo... and the big offensive is on!’.³⁵ The series culminated in an eight-page splash in the 4 July issue, which included the text:

we’ve got the *ammunition!* Powered by the leadership that set off the industry’s showmanship crusade ... and told the world the movies are the greatest of all entertainment! Once again 20th comes through with a tremendous barrage of hits – supported by the know-how that made a showmanship famous! The industry’s biggest offensive is on! Let’s attack together!!!³⁶

This ad series, aside from trailing the studio’s new releases for the rest of the year, including ‘special engagements’ of the biblical epic *David and Bathsheba* (1951), was dedicated to a show of unity with exhibitors, who had only recently been regarded by the formerly integrated studios as the enemy (due to the antitrust proceedings) rather than as allies. The copy for the 4 July ad also included the line: ‘We are determined to back up our exhibitor friends with every resource at our command.’³⁷ This emphasis on friendship rather than enmity, on mutual support rather than rivalry, was undoubtedly an attempt to ameliorate, as per the March 1949 article cited above, a potential ‘exhib-distrib fracas’. It diverted attention from the conflict of interest that saw exhibitors hoping for greater freedom of choice in what films they booked and,

crucially, when and on what terms they were able to book them, and producer-distributors seeking to secure not only a sufficient number of bookings for their product but also favourable rental terms to guarantee a profit on their investment and to compensate for the decline in theatre admissions. The hostility which resulted from the renters' introduction in 1946 of competitive bidding or auction selling was one sign of this conflict, in which movies could be seen not so much as ammunition in a common cause as weapons with which one sector of the industry could do battle with another.

Weapons of Mass Distribution

In order to justify auction selling as a way of driving up rentals, the majors needed to make available films for which exhibitors would be willing to compete with one another and to pay prices favourable to the producer-distributors. In an increasingly uncertain marketplace, with audience tastes no longer as predictable nor their attendance as reliable as in the recent past, the most attractive commodities for exhibitors were those containing proven box-office ingredients, including major stars, 'pre-sold' stories (such as those with a basis in established literary or stage properties, or indeed previously successful films) and high production values (the kind of spectacle afforded by a big budget). Such films could then be sold to audiences at selectively increased admission prices, a practice actively encouraged by the majors even though, legally, they could no longer either set admission prices themselves (unless hiring a theatre outright on a 'four-wall' basis, for which they would need to secure court permission) or dictate prices to exhibitor clients, as they had done previously. Not all films were sold to exhibitors in this way; indeed, besides the inconvenience of the time consumed by receiving and processing bids, only a

relatively small proportion of any major's annual output was suited to it and the practice therefore tended to be reserved for specials and superspecials. One such, though far from the first, was MGM's release of *Quo Vadis*.³⁸

Costing \$7,623,000, *Quo Vadis* was the most expensive production yet made. Following the opening of its premiere engagements in eight key cities including New York and Los Angeles, used by MGM to test the market for exhibition policy, the film was made available for first-run bookings after 1 January 1952 under strictly specified conditions. Exhibitors were required to stipulate guarantees for the minimum total sum they would remit to MGM as rental; the minimum length of the run they would give the picture; the minimum amount the exhibitor was prepared to spend on local advertising following the first week, which MGM would pay for; control figures for 'holdovers' (that is, the minimum weekly take that would justify the booking being retained for a further week); and the admission prices, before tax, at which tickets would be sold. MGM's trade advertisement announcing the sales plan carefully set out the justification for its policy on ticket prices:

We cannot and will not have anything to do with the fixing or determination of admission prices; they will be decided by the theatre operators and no-one else. [...] The sole purpose in asking for admission prices which the exhibitor intends to charge is to enable us to evaluate the offers received and thus award the picture on the basis of the best bid.

Any offer which contains a participation in the gross requires an estimate of such receipts for proper appraisal. This estimate, of course, necessitates a knowledge of the admission prices prevailing during the engagement.

The failure to include proposed admission prices in an offer will not

disqualify the bid, but their inclusion will enable us better to evaluate the bids.³⁹

Distribution agents were not permitted to suggest admission prices but could indicate prices charged by other theatres showing the film as a guide for exhibitors making the bid.

Initially, only theatres situated in communities of over 100,000 in population were permitted to bid and even exhibitors not in competitive situations were required to submit a satisfactory offer in order to be able to play the picture. As the release progressed the film was to be made available for first run to theatres in successively smaller communities that would then be invited to bid for it on the same basis, and for second and subsequent runs in localities where the film had already played. Under no circumstances was it allowed to be shown as part of a double bill, but as *Quo Vadis* ran nearly three hours there was not likely to be any dispute in this particular matter. Indeed, although MGM's sales plan drew protests and even questions as to its legality from some exhibitor organisations there was little actual resistance from theatre owners themselves. MGM reported being 'deluged' by offers, many of them from exhibitors outside the largest cities or in other ways contrary to the stipulations of the plan.⁴⁰ As rental, theatres were effectively required to pay around 70 per cent from the first dollar of the box-office gross (the top rate paid for the most in-demand pictures in the past, including *Gone with the Wind*, *Samson and Delilah* and *David and Bathsheba*). Such high terms in effect obliged them to increase their prices for the length of the engagement in order to ensure a profit on their operating costs (standard booking deals stipulated a rental figure after deduction of costs) and the average admission price charged in most first-run theatres was reported as \$1.25 at a time when the average admission price was under 50 cents.⁴¹ Nevertheless, by the end of

1957 domestic rentals totalled \$11,143,000 with overseas earnings of \$9,894,000 for a total gross of \$21,037,000 and a profit of \$5,440,000 (thus distribution, marketing and other expenses over the six years of first release amounted to \$7,974,000).⁴²

The success of *Quo Vadis* and other ‘big pictures’ in the early 1950s set the pattern for others still to come, in ever greater numbers and on ever larger budgets. If *Variety*’s designation of the film as a blockbuster in its review of 14 November 1951 was not the first instance of the use of the word to mean a purpose-built box-office giant, it undoubtedly marked a point by which it had become widely recognised and accepted into the industry’s vocabulary, and not only in the trade press. The week before the journal ran its review, it had quoted MGM production head Dore Schary’s disdain for going into partnership with television because of the far greater rewards available from the theatrical market:

‘forgetting those \$5,500,000 blockbusters, or even the \$3,000,000 and \$4,000,000 top grossers we’ve been turning out, it’s obvious that [...] the millions in potential from orthodox theatre boxoffice exhibition makes TV a peanuts operation for the majors anyway. [...] That’s why Metro is maintaining its 40-picture schedule. We’re upping the ratio of the so-called “blockbusters” to 20, that is in color and more costly, and naturally hope the other 20, despite the more modest budgets, will likewise measure up.’⁴³

Thus in the space of a single interview Schary used the term to refer both to high-grossing movies and to high-cost films designed for high earnings, confirming that its dual modern sense had already been accepted into the Hollywood lexicon.

In February 1952 Schary was again reported, this time according to a *Variety* interview with RCA’s David Sarnoff, as stating that MGM was opposed to dealing

with television or ‘to further building up “the monster”, which is inimical to the film boxoffice; and that the main objective is to produce boxoffice blockbusters or any other type of film which will lure them out of the home.’⁴⁴ This is now the commonplace or commonsensical view of the role of the blockbuster in 1950s film economics, but it was not regarded without some scepticism or ambivalence at the time. In *Variety*’s anniversary issue (the journal’s annual forum for retrospective and topical overviews of showbusiness affairs) of 2 January 1952, no fewer than four articles made the point that ‘every entertainment – be it film or round actor – can’t be a blockbuster’.⁴⁵ James R. Grainger, Executive Vice-President of Republic Pictures, argued that ‘theatres must have a steady flow of product to keep their screens occupied, and every picture can’t be a “blockbuster.” All the producing companies together barely make 52 pictures in that category.’ Understandably, given his company’s longstanding commitment to B movies and other low-budget entertainment, he felt that it was not ‘only “big” pictures [that] do business. In my opinion, the picture that does business, whether it is a so-called blockbuster or not, is the one which has the entertainment value to which the public responds.’⁴⁶

This point was echoed by veteran producer Hal B. Wallis, now an independent based on the Paramount lot, whose current productions included the popular Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis series of musical comedies.

Undoubtedly, the so-called ‘blockbusters,’ colossi like *Quo Vadis*, *Samson and Delilah*, *David and Bathsheba* and *Greatest Show on Earth* are great for the business. They attract customers who haven’t been around for years and their very exploitation is a stimulant for our industry, which thrives on excitement.

However, I do not subscribe to a full program of multi-million-dollar negative costs. For one, too frequent repetition of this type picture would very quickly sate the public. Then consider the grosses rolled up by any Martin and Lewis picture [...] and you see why there is still profit possible in films that are brought in for a million or less.

Wallis articulated a widespread concern in the industry over rising production costs – the result, variously of the increasing cost of materials, increasing union demands for minimum wages and minimum crewing levels, and increasing demands by talent for participation in film revenues – at a time when income and profit were under threat. He questioned also the value of big budgets as far as the audience was concerned: ‘In more than 20 years in this business I have never heard a passing patron at a theatre ask, “How much did this picture cost to make?”’⁴⁷

Another highly regarded producer, Stanley Kramer, similarly resisted the imminent prospect of industry-wide commitment to the production of the type of films designated by the term blockbuster, to the possible exclusion of other kinds of product aimed at other kinds of audience, such as the more discriminating over-25s:

Obviously the film industry as it has been constituted couldn’t long survive just producing blockbusters, which I assume mean pictures that are replete with thousands of plunging horses and necklines, plus gigantic, spectacular, lavish situations and expenditures of millions of dollars. In the final analysis, we are a story-telling medium, and our success depends directly on our ability to select and tell stories well. If we must substitute size for all of the other well-tested elements that comprise expert story telling, we belong to the circus business instead of motion pictures. It is possible that a wave of the super-colossal will engulf the industry.⁴⁸

‘Colossal’ or ‘super-colossal’ – terms long associated with the scale, spectacle and lavish expenditure now identified with ‘blockbuster’ – were also used in the trade press to describe *Quo Vadis*, *David and Bathsheba* and *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952), among others. These were indeed just the kinds of production upon which Hollywood was poised to embark in unprecedented numbers and at unprecedented expense over the next two decades.

Coda: The Nuclear Alternative

I have tried to show that the adoption of the word ‘blockbuster’ into film-industry discourse was occasioned by the context of industry conflict and aggressive competition between media for both economic dominance and audience loyalty at a time of great instability in the field of entertainment. It could reasonably be asked why, given the usual ephemerality of slang terms, it has survived to remain in common use for more than sixty years. Why have alternative, more up-to-date words not emerged to replace it, at least in common parlance? One reason, I would suggest, is precisely that the original meaning of the term, its etymological root, has been forgotten, making its appropriation by colloquial, industrial and indeed academic discourse all the easier. Even by the 1950s awareness of its original sense was fading, and this was seemingly a condition for its subsequent ubiquity. The point is made clearer if we briefly compare it to another postwar expression which has not survived.

Intermittently throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, ‘atomic’ was used in *Variety* as an adjective to describe the power of particular performers or films. For example, the earnings of *The Outlaw* (1943) on its long-delayed release in Los Angeles were said to be an ‘Atomic 70G’; Broadway columnist Radie Harris referred to the imminent return to the ‘Gay White Way’ of tempestuous star ‘atomic Tallulah’

Bankhead; Martin and Lewis were said to be ‘readying an atomic sock’ for an upcoming nightclub appearance; and a headline reported ‘Broadway Biz in Atomic Boom’ over the New Year holiday of 1949-50.⁴⁹ But these were atypical iterations of a word that was more commonly, and extensively, used in its literal sense to refer to developments in the use and abuse of nuclear fission. Although there was an abundance of explosive imagery in trade advertising around this time – such as references to United Artists’ *The Sound of Fury* (1950) making a ‘Boom at the Boxoffice’ and *He Ran All the Way* (1951) as ‘Boxoffice Dynamite’; or MGM’s *Lone Star* (1952) being ‘Box-office Combustion’ and *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956) ‘Bursting on the Industry like a Bomb-Shell!’⁵⁰ – references to the more topical nuclear bomb were scarce except where the subject demanded it. This was the case with Republic’s serial *The Purple Monster Strikes* (1945), concerning a secret weapon: ‘See ... the “Electro-Annihilator” at work ... disintegrating all before it ... as it harnesses the tremendous energy of the sun ... just like the ATOMIC BOMB!’. The serial itself was further said to possess ‘the power of an Atomic Bomb’.⁵¹

When the film industry launched its own ‘secret weapons’, in the form of the various new screen technologies of the 1950s, their description in the trade press sometimes invoked nuclear analogies. Todd-AO, the 70mm widescreen process developed by the American Optical Co. for showman Mike Todd, was said to have been called ‘the T-bomb of the picture business’ by interested exhibitors.⁵² In the field of popular music, a trade advertisement placed by RCA Victor Records for singer Tony Martin proclaimed ‘New “M” Bomb Explodes! Tony Gets Direct Hit ...’.⁵³ Yet again, these are not at all typical. I would suggest that the very immediacy of the threat posed by the atomic bomb in the age of nuclear anxiety prevented such vocabulary and its associated imagery catching on except as an occasional gimmick

and that protocols of taste and tact militated against their continued use. The call by Robert M. Weitman, vice-president of United Paramount Theatres, ‘for the film industry to “set off its own atomic bomb” in the entertainment world in order to rekindle public interest in theatre-going’⁵⁴ must have seemed insensitive even in 1950. ‘Blockbuster’, however, though its literal namesake undoubtedly caused a greater loss of life than the A-bomb during the years of its active use in World War Two, was ultimately rendered safe not only by the fact of its obsolescence as a military weapon, but also by its very pervasiveness as an expression during the postwar period. Continual use detached the word from its linguistic origins and ensured that it came to be associated primarily with popular entertainment in general and with the big-budget, high-impact Hollywood hit in particular.

Notes

¹ Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), p. 1.

² *Variety*, 14 November 1951, p. 6. This and subsequent references to *Variety* are for the weekly edition unless otherwise stated. See also Hall and Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters*, p. 139; and Steve Neale, 'Hollywood Blockbusters: Historical Dimensions', in Julian Stringer (ed.), *Movie Blockbusters* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 48-49.

³ Jeffrey Richards, *Hollywood's Ancient Worlds* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 99.

⁴ Archival editions of *Variety* are available on microfilm at the British Film Institute Library and in some university libraries, including my own at Sheffield Hallam University. The journal's digital archive is available online for individual (but not institutional) subscription. It includes both weekly and daily editions and is fully searchable. See < <http://www.varietyultimate.com> >.

⁵ *Variety*, 4 August 1954, p. 15; 20 February 1957, p. 7.

⁶ *Variety*, 6 January 1954, p. 5; 7 January 1959, p. 59.

⁷ For the record, 'buster' originally meant 'an accidental or bad fall' (of the type which gave rise to Buster Keaton's professional name when he was a vaudeville child performer) or more generally a breakage of some kind, as in 'bucklebuster': 'a scream or laugh line that would receive a large reaction from the audience' (Don B. Wilmeth, *The Language of American Popular Entertainment: A Glossary of Argot, Slang, and Terminology*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, pp. 35, 40).

⁸ See, for example, the article 'Hays Must Not "Railroad"' in *Variety*, 5 October 1927, p. 5, which actually includes the subheading 'Block or Bust'.

⁹ See, for example, the advertisement for *Her Jungle Love* (1938) headlined ‘Block Sock!’ in *Variety*, 20 April 1938, p. 14.

¹⁰ For reports of the Allies’ use of blockbuster and factory-buster bombs, see *The Times*, 22 December 1943, p. 4; 31 December 1943, p. 4; 4 March 1944, p. 4; 16 October 1945, p. 7; and *Variety*, 10 November 1943, p. 88. I am indebted to Matthew Wilelm Kappell for the *Chicago Sun-Times* reference.

¹¹ See, for example, *Variety*, 12 May 1943, pp. 14-15, and 26 May 1943, p. 24.

¹² *Variety*, 1 March 1944, p. 19.

¹³ *Variety*, 8 November 1944, p. 22.

¹⁴ *The Lion’s Roar*, vol. 18, no. 34, 20 August 1943, p. 3. This item is headlined ‘Bataan Block-busts All Records since Easter’.

¹⁵ *Boxoffice*, quoted in trade advertisement, *Daily Variety*, 18 January 1944, pp. 8-9.

¹⁶ *Variety*, 25 October 1944, p. 12.

¹⁷ *The Lion’s Roar*, vol. 19, no. 2, 21 January 1944, p. 1.

¹⁸ It should also be pointed out that *Block Busters* (1944) was the title of an episode in the Bowery Boys series of B pictures released by Monogram; that advertisements for ‘Blockbuster Popcorn’, distributed by the Mellos Peanut Co., appeared in *Variety* throughout 1947-48; and that a song entitled ‘Blockbuster’, by songwriter and composer Frank DeVol, was published by his company Derby Songs in 1950.

¹⁹ E.J. Rosenwald, Account Executive, Blow Company, quoted in advertisement, *Daily Variety*, 29 May 1946, pp. 12-13 (capitalisation as per original).

²⁰ *Daily Variety*, 16 October 1946, p. 4.

²¹ *Daily Variety*, 27 April 1948, p. 3.

²² *Daily Variety*, 2 December 1948, p. 14. *The Black Rose* was not produced until 1950 and *Lydia Bailey* not until 1952, undoubtedly for budgetary reasons. Their

eventual negative costs were \$3,735,000 and \$1,775,000 respectively (Aubrey Solomon, *Twentieth Century-Fox: A Corporate and Financial History*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002, pp. 245-6).

²³ Among the other films labelled a blockbuster in the next few years was Sam Katzman's Columbia production *Bomber Command*, 'a Technicolor blockbuster' (*Daily Variety*, 19 December 1950, p. 4).

²⁴ *Variety*, 28 April 1948, p. 5.

²⁵ *Variety*, 1 August 1951, p. 5. As this brief report points out, there were no official figures available for cinema attendance and estimates of 90 million or even 100 million for weekly admissions in 1946 were unsupported by evidence. The figures reported had been agreed upon by the Audience Research Institute (the Gallup poll) and Paramount executive and industry economist Paul Raibourn, based on audience polls and 'studies of theatre and distribution takes' respectively.

²⁶ *Variety*, 12 June 1946, pp. 1, 4.

²⁷ *Variety*, 15 December 1948, pp. 5-6.

²⁸ *Variety*, 26 May 1948, pp. 1-2.

²⁹ *Variety*, 2 January 1952, p. 112.

³⁰ *Daily Variety*, 4 April 1949, p. 4; 3 October 1949, p. 6.

³¹ *Variety*, 22 August 1951, p. 31.

³² *Variety*, 30 March 1949, p. 5. The report continues in similar militaristic vein: 'In a string of explosions, five groups riddled the campaign in bulletins', and so on.

³³ *Variety*, 9 August 1950, p. 7.

³⁴ *Variety*, 3 January 1951, pp. 25-28.

³⁵ *Variety*, 20 June 1951, p. 8.

³⁶ *Variety*, 4 July 1951, p. 10. The preceding page carries a photograph of a 'showman' passing out cans of film as a graphic illustration of the ammunition in question.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

³⁸ See the discussion in Hall and Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters*, pp. 128, 137-9. The first film to be sold on a competitive-bidding basis was MGM's musical *Holiday in Mexico* (1946). Although the Supreme Court antitrust ruling in 1948 discouraged the use of competitive bidding because of its complexity, it remained legal and the Department of Justice was unable to prevent its continued use by the major distributors, who saw its financial advantages.

³⁹ *Variety*, 21 November 1951, pp. 16-17 (advertisement). On the distribution of *Quo Vadis*, see *Variety*, 10 October 1951, pp. 5, 13; 7 November 1951, pp. 7, 53; 14 November 1951, pp. 5, 13; 21 November 1951, pp. 5, 23; 28 November 1951, pp. 5, 12; 26 December 1951, pp. 14-15 (advertisement).

⁴⁰ *Variety*, 23 January 1952, pp. 5, 24.

⁴¹ *Variety*, 2 October 1952, p. 7. According to Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story* (London: Octopus Books, 1988), p. 288, the average ticket price in 1951 was 43 cents, in 1952, 46 cents and in 1953, 48 cents.

⁴² Cost, revenue and profit figures for *Quo Vadis* are from the E.J. (Eddie) Mannix ledger, Howard Strickling papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Earnings from reissues brought the film's domestic rental to an eventual total of \$11,901,662 by 1991 (*Variety*, 6 May 1991, p. 96).

⁴³ *Variety*, 7 November 1951, p. 22.

⁴⁴ *Variety*, 6 February 1952, p. 18.

⁴⁵ *Variety*, 2 January 1952, p. 4. This editorial goes on to point out that ‘give ’em good shows in theatres and nothing will keep them home this side of a honeymoon’.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28. Republic ceased producing theatrical films in 1956.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53. Kramer’s article is headlined ‘Pix Can’t Live by Bigness Alone’.

⁴⁹ *Variety*, 10 April 1946, p. 20; *Daily Variety*, 8 October 1948, p. 6; *Daily Variety*, 5 August 1949, p. 4; *Variety*, 4 January 1950, p. 3.

⁵⁰ *Variety*, 3 January 1951, p. 55; 4 July 1951, p. 26; 20 February 1952, p. 16; 30 May 1957, p. 10.

⁵¹ *Variety*, 15 August 1945, p. 15 (ellipses and capitalisation as per original). A firework sold in Britain in 1952 was named “The Atomic Block-buster” (*The Times*, 5 November 1952, p. 9).

⁵² *Variety*, 24 June 1953, p. 5.

⁵³ *Variety*, 20 June 1951, p. 45.

⁵⁴ *Variety*, 8 March 1950, p. 3.