Why It's a Wide Wide Wide Wide Screen

By A. O. SCOTT

In 1950, when Norma Desmond, the mad old silent star in Billy Wilder's "Sunset Boulevard," complained that the pictures had gotten small, she knew whereof she spoke. The American film industry was in a period of contraction. Box office revenues, which had soared during World War II, were sinking. The studios were reeling from the impact of the Justice Department's antitrust campaign, which had just stopped distributors of motion pictures from owning the theaters in which their wares were shown and unshackled stars from restrictive studio contracts.

The gravest threat came not from newly liberated actors or aggressive federal trust-busters (nor from Hollywood reds or Washington red-hunters), but rather from television. The cathode ray box, with its diminutive screen, had already begun its conquest of America's living rooms, and its exploding popularity seemed to prophesy the obsolescence of movie-going as a central mode of pop culture consumption.

But then, a few years later, the pictures got big again — quite literally. In 1952, the traveler and radio host Lowell Thomas, together with Mike Todd and Louis B. Mayer, produced a feature-length extravaganza called "This Is Cinerama," which threw images from three simultaneously operating projectors onto a huge, curved screen while sound seemed to emanate from all directions at once. This was hardly an experience that could be replicated by a rabbit-eared floor console with a single miniature speaker hidden behind wicker and mesh, and crowds lined up in city after city. While Cinerama was not a brand-new technology, installing the equipment in theaters was much too expensive to make it anything more than a novelty. But the idea that movies might become more attractive if they were presented on a wider screen sparked a revolution in movie-going and movie-making the consequences of which continue to reverberate in brand-new multiplexes and even, perhaps ironically, in state-of-the-art home entertainment centers.
With the 1953 New York premiere of a Biblical sandal-and-toga epic called "The Robe," Twentieth Century Fox introduced CinemaScope, a proprietary name for a process developed by a French engineer named Henri Chrétien in the 1920's, to which Fox had acquired the rights. Chrétien's "hypergonar" adapters made use of an optical trick called anamorphosis, whereby a curved lens placed in front of an ordinary camera could squeeze a large field of vision into the frame. Another lens, affixed to the projector, would reverse the process, spreading out the image onto an extended screen.

The anamorphic effect had been explored by 19th-century scientists and Renaissance painters, including Holbein, who famously used it to embed secret symbols in "The Ambassadors" (1533). But as far as Hollywood was concerned, Chrétien had found the killer app. His "anamorphoscope," which Fox rechristened with a sexier, if less precise, name, quickly established a new industry standard. Even before the "The Robe" was released, Fox declared that all of its future productions would be in CinemaScope, which it licensed to most of the other major studios. Paramount, meanwhile, decided to develop its own widescreen process, which would be called VistaVision.

The fruits of French scientific research were introduced with appropriately American hype. Lobby posters for "The Robe" proclaimed CinemaScope "The Modern Miracle you see Without Glasses," misleadingly suggesting a new, improved form of 3-D, then enjoying its brief initial vogue. What CinemaScope did was actually much simpler and more adaptable, though less conducive to seductive ad copy: it changed the aspect ratio — the relationship between the screen's vertical and horizontal dimensions — from 1:1.33 to 1:2.66. (The smaller ratio, known as Academy format, is approximated by most television sets. This is why older, pre-scope movies look better on the small screen than their widescreen successors, which in the past were often shown either radically cropped or disconcertingly squeezed, so that people on the edges of the frame looked freakishly tall and emaciated).

Fittingly enough, the anniversary of this radical enlargement of cinematic possibility has inspired not one but two New York retrospectives, stretching from the West Side of Manhattan to Astoria, Queens. There, the American Museum of the Moving Image has devoted weekends to a series called "Eyes Wide Open: The Evolution of Widescreen Cinema," which began last month and runs through Sept. 7. Meanwhile, from Friday through Sept. 4, the Film Society of Lincoln Center is presenting "The Whole Wide World: 50 Years of Widescreen Moviemaking." There is some overlap: both are showing Sergio Leone's "Once Upon a Time in the West," Samuel Fuller's "Forty Guns" and Jean-Luc Godard's "Contempt." You might also glance at their programs and shrug, since most of the well-loved movies being shown — "2001: A Space Odyssey," "The 400 Blows," "Rebel Without a Cause" — are readily available on video and DVD.

And "The Last Supper" is available on a postcard. If you have seen these movies only on ordinary VHS, you haven't really seen them. Until recently, most video transfers were made by a method called panning and scanning, which causes as much as two-thirds of the image to be sacrificed. The rise of letterboxed DVD's, and the popularity of ever-bigger television sets, often with slightly widened aspect ratios, has made it possible to watch Scope pictures without losing the integrity of the image, but nothing can replicate the scale and sublimity of the theatrical experience, especially in a big, cavernous space like Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theater. Widescreen movies, especially those made by masters of the form like Stanley Kubrick, Nicholas Ray and David Lean, are not so much viewed as inhabited.

But what is perhaps most remarkable about the programs is their eclecticism. Since
their organizing principles are formal and technological, the series can draw movies from different styles, nations and periods that convey a wide variety of moods. The windswept Technicolor vistas of Lean, Leone and Andre de Toth (whose "Play Dirty" is a minor classic of hardboiled combat cynicism) are balanced by the claustrophobic black and white of Alain Resnais's "Last Year at Marienbad" or Jack Clayton's "Innocents," a sublimely hysterical adaptation of "The Turn of the Screw" starring Deborah Kerr as the tormented governess.

Then there is "The Girl Can't Help It," Frank Tashlin's dizzy early rock 'n' roll extravaganza, with frames as hectic as the pages of Harvey Kurtzman's original Mad magazine. It stars Jayne Mansfield, a bombshell with a body built for anamorphosis. "She's got a lot, of what they call the most," Little Richard sings in the title song; see it in Scope and you'll see what he means.