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REFERENCES


1 Ross Melnick’s *Hollywood’s Embassies: How Movie Theaters Projected American Power Around the World* is a very welcome addition to the exploration of the act of moviegoing around the world. Focusing on how American cinema spread its influence and values around the globe as studios sought to secure international markets, Ross Melnick examines how the major US studios controlled exhibition by building, owning, and operating lavish movie theaters that would both give foreign audiences a taste of American theaters and force local exhibitors to adapt. Studios were very well-aware of how offering the experience of US picture palaces with the latest technologies was part of the experience of going to the movies, and of how their control of exhibition would add significant revenue to the films. In this very well-documented and ambitious book, which builds upon extensive and often unexplored archives in Australia, Brazil, Europe, Israel, New Zealand, and the United States, Ross Melnick retraces the history of four major studios’ exhibition practices around the world from 1923 to 2013: Warner Bros., MGM/Loew’s, Paramount, and Twentieth Century-Fox.

2 Ross Melnick demonstrates that American theaters sold a specific cinematic experience and acted as “shop windows” for American films and American culture. Lobbies were opulent, marquees would draw crowds in from the sidewalk, and
American cinemas were often the first to feature air-conditioning, allowing them to remain open during the summer months. As such, the author’s central argument is that American theaters acted as “cultural embassies” (9) in major foreign metropolises, from Rio de Janeiro to Paris and Johannesburg. These “cultural embassies” brought together audiences of various social and cultural backgrounds and acculturated them to American mythology and culture. Foreign audiences went through a quintessential American experience as they watched Hollywood films within an Americanized space outfitted with the latest American innovations, making the values of American culture fully global. The shop window theaters were also an extension of American soft power diplomacy, playing a key role during WWII and the Cold War. Melnick’s work however also describes the resistance that local exhibitors displayed towards Hollywood shop window cinemas, how the industry faced booms and busts, and how it needed to negotiate with local actors to establish itself in foreign cities. Hollywood’s shop window cinemas forced local exhibitors to upgrade to compete, which studios reasoned would increase the price of the ticket and bring more revenue from foreign locations.

Film scholars have studied exhibition practices before, but there has been little research to date on comparative exhibition practices of Hollywood studios across different regions of the world. Though there has been a significant amount of research done on Hollywood’s marketing choices for foreign countries, the space of the theater and its position and function within major world cities have not been examined comparatively, which allows Ross Melnick to replace national exhibition practices within larger regional frameworks. For instance, Twentieth Century-Fox’s exhibition operations in Egypt were influenced by its operations in Israel. The book is organized into sections which reflect these regional frameworks: Europe, Australasia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. In each section the endeavors of each studio are examined separately and chronologically because each studio’s strategy differed from region to region, city to city. As Ross Melnick points out, Hollywood studios were careful in their strategies and sought to adapt to local audiences and include foreign personnel in their ventures, while at the same time providing an American experience. During the silent era, Japanese cinemas employed benshi, actors who would perform alongside a film and interpret it for the audience, and Paramount hired famous Japanese conductors to lead its orchestra for its Hogaku-Za theater in Tokyo. Le Paramount’s construction in Paris was overseen by a Frenchman. In Australia, Fox purchased Australian-owned Hoyts but announced that it would begin making Australian talkies in the region, to appease the worries of the local film industry.

Though the resistance of foreign nations to American expansionism is not the focus of the book, Melnick shows that many countries often tried to retaliate against what they saw as American invasion. Some chose domestic protectionism, passing laws or creating commissions that sometimes prevented studios from building their shop window cinemas, such as Warner Bros. in Sydney. Other methods included boycotts, as with the “Battle of Birmingham,” when British exhibitors boycotted Paramount films to protest the studio’s expansion in the city, fearing that the US film industry would take over the national film industry. A further study of bottom-up resistance to Hollywood cinema in foreign countries could be the focus of future research in film history.

Regarding the structure of the book, the first part concerns the first wave of European expansion, starting with Paramount’s ventures into London, Paris, Barcelona, and...
Stockholm, followed by MGM’s agreement with Gaumont to operate their cinemas in France, North Africa, and the Middle East, and ending with Warner Bros.’ European expansion in the late twentieth-century. This part includes a most interesting history of Le Paramount in Paris, which became a base for the French Resistance stronghold during WWII even as it showed Nazi-approved films. The second part is focused on the financial negotiations that took place in Australasia, as the studios were pushed by investment banks to acquire stakes or purchase local companies. Part 3 explores Hollywood’s successful expansion in Latin America, as it built and maintained numerous shop window cinemas across the region – an operation that became complex in Cuba and Puerto Rico. Part 4 focuses on Egypt and Israel and shows how MGM and Fox’s strategy for expansion over there was marred by geopolitical turmoil, as American theaters gradually became the symbols of Western expansion throughout the forties and fifties and were the target of violent protests. In Israel, Spyros Skouras at Fox sought to contain the influence of communism and socialism during the Cold War. Africa is the focus of the fifth part, as Fox in particular set out to acquire theater chains over the continent. The theaters were racially segregated, and many accepted whites only, which led Fox to navigate tumultuous waters as local efforts to end segregation and apartheid increased. The last section concerns Asia and details Hollywood’s efforts to expand in India, Japan, China, and the Philippines, an endeavor that was made difficult when protests against MGM’s Bombay cinemas occurred in India and the US film industry was thrown out of China with the Chinese Revolution.

Ross Melnick’s work is a definitive history of Hollywood studios’ exhibition practices across the globe, tracing the contours of American soft power, resistance to that power, and showing how Hollywood’s history is also the history of the world in the twentieth century. Today Hollywood studios are faced with a stark drop in attendance, with audiences having deserted theaters due to the coronavirus crisis and preferring to watch movies on streaming platforms. They are also facing major upheavals, with mergers that are changing the audiovisual landscape. Melnick’s *Hollywood’s Embassies* shows that Hollywood cinema has remained resilient, time and again. Though we may not know what will happen to theaters and exhibition in the future, Melnick’s work outlines the power that Hollywood studios had and still have, even as they navigate stormy seas.

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