

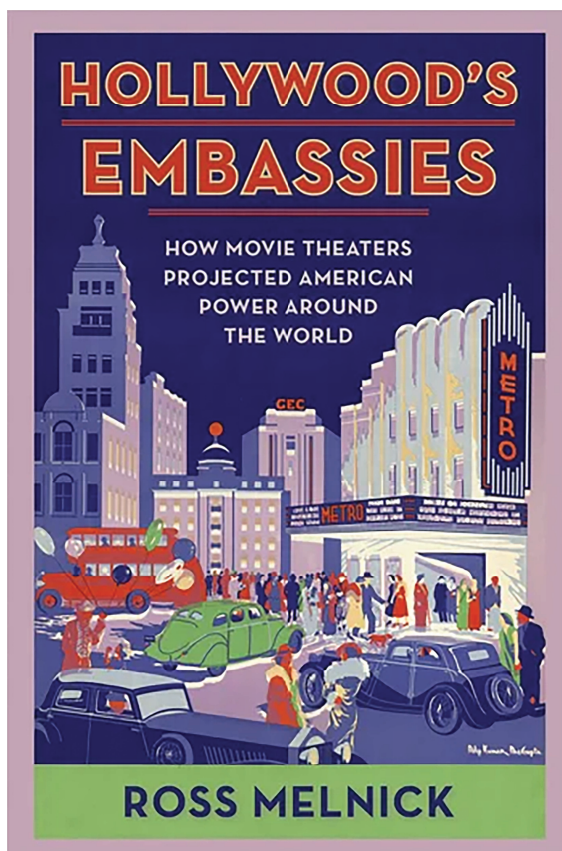
## Book Review:

# Melnick, Ross. *Hollywood's Embassies: How Movie Theaters Projected American Power Around the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022)

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Ross Melnick's expansive and richly detailed book *Hollywood's Embassies* opens at the Royal Cinema in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia (colonial-era Harare, Zimbabwe).<sup>1</sup> It's September 7, 1959, and the Twentieth Century-Fox-owned theater is premiering *South Pacific*—a film largely about racial tolerance—to a whites-only crowd. The segregated screening was protested by integrationists calling for the government's stated policy of “multiracial partnership” to be enforced at the Royal. Executives at Fox and its Johannesburg-based subsidiary, African Consolidated Theaters, didn't see integration as a priority.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it would be two more years until “non-Europeans” could patronize all cinemas, including the Royal, in Southern Rhodesia. This incident stands as an evocative example of the industrial, political, and ideological currents Melnick brings together throughout his thrilling history of Hollywood's international exhibition expansion. The book extends across nearly a century, from the silent era to the contemporary conglomerate-dominated industry, providing

a necessary exhibition-focused complement to existing studies of global Hollywood.<sup>3</sup> Pulling from a diverse set of archival sources as well as interviews with exhibition executives and their surviving relatives, Melnick complicates our understanding of post-Paramount Decree Hollywood while constructing a persuasive argument: that Hollywood's international cinemas stood as literal and metaphorical sites of political and cultural contestation over wartime occupation, (post)colonial struggle, American-style consumerism, localized film culture, racial division, and more.

Melnick lays out the reasons for Hollywood's aggressive push into international exhibition in the 1920s in the book's introduction. Unsatisfied with international box office revenue, US film executives reasoned they could secure a "premiere exhibition" of their own pictures by owning and operating extravagant movie palaces in cultural capitals around the globe. Melnick uses the historical trade press term "shop windows" for these luxurious cinemas, generally owned and operated by Loew's or Paramount, which "used the highest level of showmanship to 'sell' a picture to local audiences" and encourage other exhibitors to follow their lead in presentation and marketing.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, these shop windows, along with the regional and national film circuits that the majors, particularly Fox, owned (in whole or in part), were meant to influence competing exhibitors into upgrading technology and services like air conditioning, synchronized sound, widescreens, and more. Hollywood executives hoped that improvements in exhibition technology would raise box office revenue across the board, even from non-US-owned cinemas.

Central to Melnick's argument is the notion of Hollywood's international cinemas as "cultural embassies." Like diplomatic outposts, Hollywood's embassies projected American political, economic, and cultural ideologies around the world. These cinemas were "'little Americas' that drew local moviegoers to 'enter' the United States on foreign soil."<sup>5</sup> Managed by Americans but largely staffed by local populations, Hollywood's theaters translated American exhibition practices into local cinema cultures. And just as the State Department coordinates activity across regions, the majors approached their international exhibition expansion with regional strategies. Melnick follows suit, organizing his book into six regional parts.

Part I tells the history of Hollywood's exhibition strategies in Europe, focusing most on Paramount's and Loew's shop windows in London, Paris, and other Western European capitals, as well as the spread of American-style filmgoing in the wake of World War I. Melnick argues that every "new [cinema] acquisition required massaging local distributor-exhibitor relationships" in order to forestall boycotts of Hollywood films by native exhibitors,<sup>6</sup> a lesson learned in Paramount's 1927 scuffle with the Midlands branch of the Cinematograph Exhibitors Association of Great Britain and Ireland. The trade group organized a two-and-a-half-month-long boycott of Paramount films after the company leased Birmingham's Scala and Futurist theaters, evidence for many exhibitors that American companies were gradually invading the English exhibition market.<sup>7</sup> The spread of war throughout the 1930s and 1940s led to Hollywood losing most of its European theaters outside of England. In fact, World War II proves a consequential period throughout the book, with its effects on Hollywood's foreign cinemas differing based on region. (The war also provides Melnick the opportunity to tell the fascinating story of Le Paramount in Paris and its utility in organizing clandestine resistance during the Nazi occupation.)<sup>8</sup>

Part I wraps up with the postwar re-expansion of Hollywood in Europe and then the gradual petering out of the industry's physical presence on the continent as the studios sank deeper into financial precarity during the 1960s. Here, Melnick details the increasingly complex conglomerated and joint ventured international exhibition market for Hollywood during the 1970s and 1980s, led by United Cinemas International—begun as Cinema International Corp., a joint venture between Universal and Paramount that eventually bought up MGM's foreign holdings—and Warner Bros. International Theaters, steered by Salah Hassanein. These massive exhibition companies return at the end of each of the book's parts, demonstrating that the studios' practices changed over time from varied regional approaches to more unified global strategies, relying upon joint ventures with local exhibition chains.

Part II focuses primarily on Twentieth Century-Fox, its domination of Australian and New Zealand exhibition circuits, and the pivotal role banking and financial institutions played in both these markets. Melnick reminds us that, by 1930, Hollywood's studios were "controlled by investment bankers, lawyers, financiers, and other businessmen steering their growth for large annual returns on invested capital."<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, Fox's acquisition of significant stakes in both Hoyts Theatres (Australia) and Amalgamated Theatres (New Zealand) in the 1930s can be seen as part of a larger debt strategy taken up by Chase National Bank and other Fox investors. This paralleled Fox's desire for greater international box office revenue through control of exhibition circuits. The strategy worked in Fox's favor. It dominated theatrical exhibition in the region for decades before selling off its stake in these theaters in the 1970s.

Latin America and the Caribbean are the focus of Part III, with Melnick's historical account particularly attuned to the symbolic power of Hollywood's cultural embassies in these postcolonial states. Brazil's massive population kept the country a focus for Hollywood's studios, even United Artists, which otherwise expanded very little outside the United States.<sup>10</sup> For Loew's, Brazil was a market for "glocalization." The company contracted with local architect Robert Prentice to design and build their Cine Metro in Rio de Janeiro, an important shop window in the Cinelandia district.<sup>11</sup> MGM also had *News of the Day*, its newsreel, as well as its films narrated and dubbed in Portuguese. Melnick asserts that all these combined to project soft power in favor of the United States and in direct opposition to fascism in the lead up to and during World War II. Things were more fraught in the Caribbean for Hollywood, however. While American films dominated the screens of Cuba in the late 1940s, persistent issues between Warner Bros. and local workers and the Ministry of Labor over the Plaza Theatre in Havana meant constant headaches for executives and uneven box office grosses.<sup>12</sup>

In good times for Hollywood, the major studios' theaters in Latin America and the Caribbean stood as sources of tremendous revenue. But they were also the targets of hostility and resentment in more politically fraught times. Melnick's analysis returns to this theme in Part IV, which looks to Hollywood's exhibition strategies in the Middle East, but specifically in Egypt and Israel. MGM's and Twentieth Century-Fox's experiences in these two states reveal how cinemas stand as symbolic icons of culture and politics. The Cinema Metro in Cairo was the site of protests multiple times, even when general unrest in the country was directed at Britain rather than the United States.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Fox president Spyros Skouras saw Hollywood's presence in the new socialist state of Israel as key to advancing anti-communist and

anti-Soviet sentiments on behalf of the United States and capitalist ideology more broadly. Melnick quotes Skouras on Fox's "solemn responsibility" to the "free world" and motion pictures' utility "in indoctrinating people into the free way of life."<sup>14</sup> Skouras plays as prominent a role as any other individual in Melnick's narrative of Hollywood's foreign exhibition, and he illustrates the complex ways Hollywood studio heads navigated international relations and operated on behalf of US foreign and economic policy.

The *South Pacific* incident at the Royal Cinema in Southern Rhodesia was yet another example in which Skouras found himself at the center of an imbroglio with wide-ranging racial, industrial, and political implications for a number of stakeholders, this time in sub-Saharan Africa, the region at the center of Part V. Thanks to its 1956 acquisition of African Consolidated Theatres (ACT), a circuit of 150 cinemas in South Africa, Kenya, and Southern Rhodesia,<sup>15</sup> Fox dominated exhibition in the region. Accordingly, its theaters in Africa had to navigate conflicting and evolving local policies on segregation, all while trying to sell "its mythology of a post-racial America."<sup>16</sup> Fox, and other Hollywood studios operating cinemas in the region generally relied upon a strategy of sit-and-wait for local governments to change racial policies. Melnick effectively argues that besides not wanting to stoke the ire of potentially hostile local exhibition associations and regulatory bodies, Fox also was working to invest in broadcasting companies and licenses for the burgeoning television industries in South Africa, Kenya, and colonial Zimbabwe. Refraining from controversial integrationist policies at their theaters in these territories was a strategy to not rock the boat of governments "by not following their written *and unwritten* racial laws."<sup>17</sup> (This was mostly all for naught, as Twentieth Century-Fox was ultimately denied the chance to invest in South African and Southern Rhodesian television.) Also of note in this section are the ironic results of protectionist measures taken by the National Party in South Africa. The regime instituted a policy that blocked Fox from taking any of its revenues made in South Africa out of the country. The result was that Fox reinvested its box office grosses in acquiring and building new cinemas, further entrenching its domination of and influence over the South African exhibition market. This sort of unintended consequence is a running theme within the book, with similar protectionist policies of repatriation of funds or nationalization of cinemas actually facilitating the further takeover of local exhibition by Hollywood while depressing efforts of indigenous production in Australia, Latin America, and Egypt.<sup>18</sup>

*Hollywood's Embassies'* final section, Part VI, looks toward Asia. Focusing on Japan, the Philippines, India, and China, Melnick illustrates how the continent fueled dreams of massive box office grosses for Hollywood throughout the twentieth century. But attempts at expansion across the continent were met with significant political and cultural barriers. With the onset of World War II, Japan—along with the Philippines and, briefly, China—ceased to be an available market for the Hollywood majors. In India, Melnick argues that the studios had to contend with robust local film cultures centered on the country's Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu film industries. This meant shop windows in Bombay and Calcutta were the extent of penetration for MGM, Fox, and even RKO. In China, Hollywood films dominated screens before World War II, but only Loew's had a real foothold in exhibition, operating Shanghai's MGM-Roxy Theatre before and after the conflict. But by the fall of 1950, American businesses and films were completely shut out of China. Not

until 2003—with a Warner Bros. International Theaters multiplex in Shanghai—was the market opened up to Hollywood investment. But rapidly shifting regulations restricting foreign ownership of Chinese screens meant Warner Bros. exited the country just three years later. Melnick ends the book by highlighting non-US-owned exhibition behemoths' (China's Wanda Group and Mexico's Cinépolis) domination of the international exhibition market in a turn of the historic tables.

With *Hollywood's Embassies*, Melnick manages to narrate a massive, near century-long tale of global exhibition expansion through tremendous detail culled from a host of archival sources. Newspapers and film industry trade publications from around the world, the annual reports of Hollywood and international exhibitors, diplomatic documents from national archives, blueprints and applications for building and licenses from state and municipal archives, the personal papers of architects and film executives, and interviews with key figures and their surviving relatives are all skillfully woven together to offer a foundational industrial history of Hollywood's majors and the many locales in which they operated shop window cinemas and nationwide or regional circuits. In Melnick's study, historians and industry scholars are presented with a critical starting point for understanding Hollywood's evolving global ambitions and operations, the history of transnational exhibition and the symbolic power of cinemas as sites of cultural contestation, and the varied negotiations of American cultural expansion by local individuals, trade organizations, regulatory bodies, and national industries.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross Melnick, *Hollywood's Embassies: How Movie Theaters Projected American Power Around the World* (New York: Columbia University Press).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: John Trumbour, *Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920–1950* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Toby Miller et al., *Global Hollywood 2* (London: BFI Publishing, 2005); Tanner Mirrlees, “Global Hollywood: An Entertainment Imperium, By Integration,” *cineaction* (October 2018), <https://cineaction.ca/issue-99/global-hollywood-an-entertainment-imperium-by-integration/>.

<sup>4</sup> Melnick, *Hollywood's Embassies*, 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 42–45.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 66–75.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>11</sup> Melnick's attention to architectural design and the physical conditions of movie-going in this section add to important work on the materiality of film exhibition. For a particularly vibrant account within the US context, see Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Melnick, *Hollywood's Embassies*, 197–203.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 222–223.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 103, 171, 257.