

Ross Melnick, **Hollywood's Embassies: How Movie Theaters Projected American Power Around the World**, 2022, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, pp. 528, \$35.00 (paperback).

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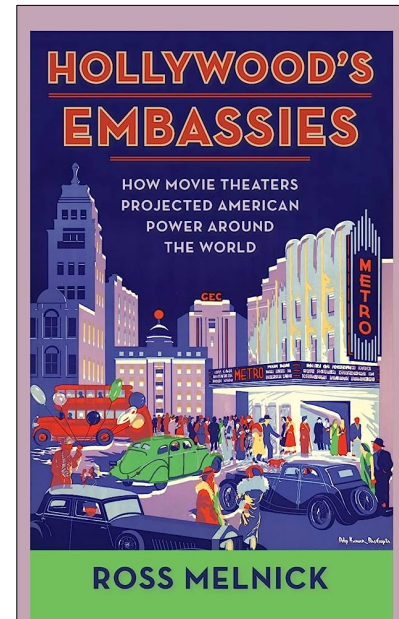
In *Hollywood Embassies: How Movie Theaters Projected American Power Around the World*, Ross Melnick delves into the industrial side of Hollywood's cultural and political presence overseas by looking into the studios' ownership of foreign cinemas and the impact their activities had locally as well as in Hollywood. These cinemas, owned and run by U.S. film studios, served as "cultural embassies" exporting American values and worldviews and introducing audiences worldwide to consumerism, individualism, ideas of capitalism, and the American version of democracy, fostering, as a result, a transgenerational connection between Hollywood and its international spectators and cementing Hollywood's global hegemony.

A book of this scope is unprecedented in media industry studies, as Melnick himself points out, and rightfully so. Scholarship on Hollywood's global presence has reflected more on runaway production and international distribution. There had never been a thorough study of the studios' ownership and operation of theaters on five continents (excluding North America and Antarctica). Here is where Melnick's decade-long meticulous research in the archives of over thirty countries in six regions comes in to fill the gaps. The scrupulous endeavor begins from Hollywood's early international ambitions in 1923 all the way to 2013, followed by an epilogue up to 2019 that lays out the groundwork for future research in relation to COVID-19's impact on cinema ownership.

A professor of film and media studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Ross Melnick is a well-recognized name in the field of media industry studies and that of the American film industry.¹ He acknowledges the American-centered perspective of this book, and refrains from making any claims about the foreign film industries where Hollywood operated exhibition spaces impacting their theatrical infrastructures as well. He gives, nonetheless, a rigorous account of the pushback Hollywood received abroad from local driving forces opposing foreign ownership of their cinemas, from boycotts of American films in the United Kingdom to political violence in Egypt.

In a topic like this, it is difficult to refrain from discussing the U.S. movie machinery's interconnectedness with the U.S. government's foreign political agenda and Melnick does not shy away from

¹ Ross Melnick (2012) is the author of *American Showman: Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908–1935* and coeditor of *Rediscovering U.S. Newsfilm: Cinema, Television, and the Archive* (Cooper, Levavy, Melnick, & Williams, 2018).



it. He shows how large-scale acquisitions, particularly those in colonized countries such as Zimbabwe, Kenya, or Hong Kong, in parallel to places with a strong communist influence throughout the Cold War years, were regarded by the United States as opportunities to expand American supremacy, messaging their ideology through the silver screen. More often than not, American-owned cinemas in foreign lands benefited U.S. tax rolls in profits while aiding the country's ideological agenda as well. Although Melnick captures sentiments of resistance Hollywood encountered throughout its intercontinental expansion, *Hollywood Embassies* is first and foremost a comprehensive analysis of the studios' business practices overseas often producing cultural, infrastructural, and sociopolitical ramifications.

Hollywood's business strategies abroad varied according to country and regional specifics. Every market differs demanding approaches that often appeared contrasting and contradicting to one another. It is precisely this variety that makes this part of film historiography so complex and entangled and yet so enthralling. Among the strategic diversity in how the studios conducted business in foreign markets, two terms that Melnick coined persist throughout the book, helping the reader understand key methodologies used by the studios in their transcontinental "invasion" of cinemas.

The first concept is that of "shop window" cinemas that, similar to the department store window, displays films as merchandise in order to attract viewers as well as local exhibitors who would then book and present the film. Instead of buying cinemas en masse, Paramount, Loew's, and Fox (who later changed strategy), were known to build shop window cinemas throughout the 1920s for exhibitors and audiences alike. "Cultural embassies," the second concept, refers to the cultural and industrial function cinemas had as diplomatic spaces representing the United States and luring the local moviegoer to enter and experience "little America" in their hometown. "Cultural embassies" alludes also to the political role of these cinemas which, in the same way as official embassies and consulates, brought their own managerial personnel to run operations with a mission to spread and underpin American influence.

Melnick adopts a regional lens in his comparative analysis of this multinational phenomenon. He makes sure to remind us throughout his argumentation that Hollywood's exhibition history in a specific country always requires a larger contextualization necessitating a regional framework, which he is careful to chronicle. The book is divided in six parts, each mapping a specific geographical area and chronicling the history of Hollywood's economic and physical presence through movie theaters.

Part I recounts Hollywood's desire to establish "shop window" cinemas in major European capitals ever since the 1920s, despite facing various forms of resistance from European countries such as France, England, and Italy keen to preserve their national cinemas and identity. The regional approach is perhaps more evident in the second part of the book, where Melnick analyzes the role of Australian private and institutional investors in the New Zealand market and Hollywood's tactical attempts to capitalize on both. Part III captures the vibrant political history of South America in which Warner Bros., Twentieth Century-Fox, Paramount, United Artists, and even MGM persisted in securing distribution through operating local cinemas, which also served as tenets of "democracy" and "freedom" expressing ideas of free market capitalism against the backdrop of socialist revolutions. Part IV traces how the exciting cinema-building prospects in Israel enraged a backlash for Hollywood in other parts of the Middle East, inciting politically charged attacks in places like Egypt. Hollywood had perhaps its largest influence on a foreign film market in the pan-African continent, where, as Part V shows,

the studios were not exactly bystanders in the racial segregation throughout the colonial years. Part VI reveals country-specific strategies that MGM, Warner Bros., and Fox had in Asia, which, despite its unsteady political situation as a region, held great promises for Hollywood.

Though brief, the epilogue discusses the current challenges and competitions Hollywood is facing from nascent global powers in the film industry, such as China. It concludes without conclusion, as Melnick puts it, since conglomeration, COVID-19, and the rise of streaming platforms stirred things up in the business of movie theater ownership, suggesting exciting changes in the coming years.

Melnick finds inspiration in Annabel Wharton's (2001) architectural and historical investigation of the Hilton hotels' aesthetic presentation throughout the globe.² While both Hollywood's foreign cinemas and Hilton hotels share commonalities in the way in which they present the United States in the world, Melnick argues that the theaters tend to exoticize America, selling the idea of the foreign to the local, while Hilton hotels do the opposite. The parallel encourages ideas that might lead to interesting spatial theories from an architectural, political economy, and cultural industry perspective. Alas, Melnick does not follow through with the analogy as it falls beyond the scope of the book.

Cultural industry studies is a field that touches on various disciplines, and Melnick recognizes this potential. *Hollywood Embassies* is, therefore, a valuable entry in media studies as much as a thoughtful historicization of business practices with a determined commitment to exploring multilingual archives, extracting and deciphering them for both experts and Hollywood enthusiasts alike.

References

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- Wharton, A. J. (2001). *Building the Cold War: Hilton International hotels and modern architecture*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

² An acknowledged influence on *Hollywood Embassies*, Annabel Wharton's (2001) *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture* chronicles the history of Hilton hotels' global expansion in a similar fashion that Melnick historicizes the growth of Hollywood's theaters all over the world.