The first thing one notices when picking up Ross Melnick’s new book is the sheer volume of it. Adorned with a striking cover image depicting crowds flocking to the new Metro Cinema in Calcutta, a print by artist Dilip Kumar DasGupta from the late 1930s, Hollywood’s Embassies: How Movie Theaters Projected American Power Around the World runs close to four hundred pages, with one hundred more in notes. The introduction readily reveals the reason for both figures. A “political, cultural, and industrial history of Hollywood’s foreign ownership and operation of hundreds of cinemas in more than three dozen countries from 1923 to 2013,” Hollywood’s Embassies is based on a mind-boggling study of thousands of primary documents, scattered in archives across the world. Its focus on the global infrastructure of Hollywood exhibition, and the complex negotiations with local politics and society this entailed, takes the reader on a riveting global journey that is much more than the sum of its geographic parts.

The cultural influence of Hollywood film on global audiences has been well documented. The extent to which the built infrastructure of cinemas, reflecting US exhibition practices with modern sightlines, seating, and alluring neon lights, contributed to selling the United States to these global audiences has not received as much attention. This is where *Hollywood’s Embassies* dazzles. From Brazil (where a journalist hailed “the bold lines of American architecture”) to Scotland (where Glasgow’s new theater was praised for “the most extensive piece of neon lighting on any building [in the country]”) to Egypt (where the cinema reflected a blending of “Egyptian ideas and those of American showmanship”), Melnick not only reconstructs the existence of US-style cinemas but also proves time and again that local people consciously took notice of these US architectural conventions, often admiringly so. The embassies Melnick writes about were as much symbolic as physical. Movie theaters were integral in selling US ideology, culture, products, and practices to global audiences. Coca-Cola during intermissions and air conditioning complemented cultural messages shown on the screen, creating a consolidated experience in which moviegoers were transported to “little Americas.”

However, Melnick brilliantly illuminates how this imagined political work of “selling America and American democracy overseas,” as Arthur Loew framed his company’s importance, was neither straightforward nor unidirectional. Its implementation and success differed vastly by region—and indeed by country. In Asia, for example, a region that held Hollywood’s interest “more than any other,” studios approached each nation as an individual territory due to the divergent cultural and (geo)political situation in each. As any form of trade, film exhibition was subject to the impact of much larger forces. In Japan, for example, exhibition attempts were frustrated first by a major earthquake in 1923 and a year later by the US government’s immigration reforms, which banned migration from Japan. Cinemas depicting American films were threatened and forced to shut down, while Universal’s offices in Osaka were firebombed. Nevertheless, demand from Japanese moviegoers—who distinguished between US films and US foreign policies—never wavered, and in 1927 Paramount opened its first “shop window” cinema in Tokyo. This episode shows the complex and often contradictory

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4 Melnick, 16. He borrows the phrasing from hotel magnate Conrad Hilton, who like Hollywood studio bosses readily understood the function of his international hotel network as both political and ideological.

5 Melnick, 17.

6 Melnick, 334.

7 Melnick, 336.

8 Shop window cinemas were individual cinemas owned by a US studio, often in a media capital, designed to persuade other exhibition spaces in that country to purchase both the screened films and copy the design. Shop window cinemas were one strategy to promote the exhibition of Hollywood films abroad; the other was for a Hollywood studio to buy and run an entire chain of foreign cinemas. After initial
interplay of geopolitical forces, infrastructural conditions, market forces, and cultural allure.

It is precisely in his meticulous attention to this interplay that Melnick’s book convinces most. There is not a single generalization in *Hollywood’s Embassies*. The result is a remarkably expansive study that, thanks to its clear flow and structure, does not sacrifice an ounce of specificity or context. In fact, one of the many treasures in this book is Melnick’s attention to the profound reverberations that singular episodes could have on US exhibition efforts. Whereas Hollywood in conjunction with the US government labored nonstop for nine decades in their movie theater embassies to sell US dominance abroad, brief ruptures in this carefully managed facade—a look behind the scenes, if you will—where both the overt orchestrations of soft power and irreducibility of US racism surfaced ultimately held longer memories. The section on Africa, where Melnick shows how carefully crafted US foreign policy was undermined time and again by the (infrastructural) racism of exhibition culture, most poignantly captures this paradox. Indeed, as Melnick writes in his opening anecdote, the US government often “struggled for years” to recover from seemingly singular events, such as a theater opening in Southern Rhodesia (contemporary Zimbabwe) where a screening of *South Pacific* (Joshua Logan, 1958) was strictly off-limits to “non-Europeans.”

One such incident could imperil years of lobbying and curated exhibition. His case studies on each continent make visible a complex negotiation between government and film, between foreign policy and propaganda and entertainment. Hollywood’s foreign exhibition was, however, far from incidental: US studios developed a comprehensive strategy to integrate foreign nations into their cultural landscape. This was most evident clearly perhaps in special film programs for children. The Metro Cub Clubs, for example, introduced by MGM in 1947 and quickly implemented in various South American capitals as well as Bombay, were, as Melnick writes, a “cultural seduction.” They were designed to “inculcate the same sensibilities” in local children as in American ones, cultivating pro-American and consumerist habits. Nevertheless, new political realities often caught up with studios’ careful efforts. In India, post-independence nationalism rendered the position of US cinemas fraught, at precisely the time when cinemas were more important than ever to State Department goals. After all, exhibiting US cultural and technological prowess emerges as a primary objective of the State Department in its Cold War with the Soviet Union. Throughout *Hollywood’s Embassies*, Melnick elucidates this ebb and flow of exhibition culture, with foreign nations oscillating between an embrace of US cinemas as exotic embassies in times of “philo-Americanism” and a rejection of them as soft power bastions in times of political tension.

While the level of detail in each chapter eludes comprehensive summary in a short review such as this one, a selection of highlights makes visible the failings of the latter strategy due to local backlash, only Fox continued to operate this way.

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10 Melnick, 355.
11 Melnick, 358.
architecture of the book. Each of the six sections in the book homes in on a specific geographic region. Melnick starts with Europe, where US studios commenced their foreign exhibition adventure in 1923. For each region, he then traces the challenges and progression of Hollywood’s entry into the market, before turning to the next region. He discusses Australasia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. While he adopts a regional analytical framework for some of these sections, such as Australia and New Zealand in part II and Egypt and Israel in part IV—where Hollywood’s actions in these nations were closely related and often interrelated—in others, such as the section on Asia, Melnick analyzes countries individually. A peculiarity of the book is that the temporal range for each geographic region differs vastly; whereas Melnick’s discussion of Australasia, Africa, and the Middle East ends in the mid-1970s to early 1980s, his discussion of Europe extends to 1993, and his discussion of Asia extends all the way to 2013. This chronological deviation is the result of Hollywood’s divergent investments in exhibition in these regions and in part perhaps of archival availabilities. In 2013, when Warner Bros. exited Chinese and Japanese exhibition markets, Hollywood’s ownership of foreign exhibition sites had come to an end. However, as Melnick traces in a compelling epilogue, foreign theatrical exhibition is far from dead. Instead, foreign companies—and in particular China’s Dalian Wanda empire—are now the ones investing in exhibition beyond their own borders. AMC and Regal, the largest exhibitors in the United States, are now owned by Chinese and British companies, respectively. As Melnick concedes, in a world increasingly dominated by streaming (especially post-pandemic), the power inherent in such ownership might not be comparable to Hollywood’s foreign heydays, but it certainly provides food for thought.

_Hollywood’s Embassies_, as the best books do, generates as many questions as it answers. What Melnick has unearthed here is a global dynamic. In doing so, he sketches the contours of a global marketplace overdetermined by geopolitics but ultimately defined by distinctly local responses to US exhibition culture. Melnick’s impressive archival research and the dynamic he reconstructs from that research will undoubtedly form the foundation for numerous nationally and regionally specific studies of exhibition culture. The section on the Middle East, for example, looks at Egypt and Israel, fruitful case studies for the discrete and aligned objectives of the State Department and Hollywood studios. Both parties attempted to stabilize US influence in the region amid pressure from both communists and Arab nationalists. Melnick sensitively traces the engagement of film studios during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He notes, for example, that Twentieth Century-Fox’s investment in Israel was a direct “physical embodiment” of its president’s “cultural, political, and industrial support of Israel.”[^12] These were not the only two MENA countries, however, to capture the attention of Hollywood: direct distribution branches also cropped up in Algeria, Morocco, Greater Lebanon, and Iraq, and it is easy to imagine a regional study that further

[^12]: Melnick, 266.
explores the interconnections and divergences between these and the countries in Melnick’s study.13

The generative qualities of this scholarship are matched by Melnick’s generosity as a scholar. He elaborately credits the global researchers who aided him in completing this feat, both in the acknowledgments and in his introduction. In Hollywood’s Embassies, Melnick has delivered a book that pushes the field of comparative transnational cinema forward significantly. It is the kind of multinational, years-long archival research that seems increasingly impossible in today’s pandemic landscape marked by austerity, which only adds appreciation for the mammoth task that Melnick has accomplished. It is an added bonus that the book is easily adaptable for teaching in a variety of classes both due to its geographically determined chapter structure and elegant and accessible prose. Hollywood’s Embassies is full of treasures and is a monumental addition to the field.

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