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How Hollywood Cinemas Conquered the World

When Ross Melnick landed in Los Angeles in 1996, his first apartment overlooked the historic Fox Theatre in Westwood. Taking a break from unpacking his boxes, he would go out on his balcony and watch the hundreds of people below who were queued up to see the hit alien-invasion drama *Independence Day*.

“Between the neon-lit tower and lines around the block, the Fox became, for me, the personification of the magic of the movies,” he recalled. “To somebody moving to Los Angeles for the first time in their lives, seeing this was not only impactful — it was transformative. I never really lost that sense of excitement.”

Melnick would go on to become a highly respected film scholar and a professor of film and media studies at UC Santa Barbara. He delves into a little-known but fascinating part of cinematic history in his latest book “Hollywood Embassies: How Movie Theaters Projected American Power Around the World.”

Published by Columbia University Press, it examines the hundreds of cinemas that were operated by MGM, Paramount, Twentieth Century-Fox and Warner Bros. from 1923 to 2013 in cities across the globe. Hugely profitable and enormously influential, they hooked generations of fans on Hollywood fare.

Before Starbucks, McDonalds or Hilton Hotels, these theaters — many of them architectural gems, and some of which survive to this day — served as de facto

cultural missions for the United States. They were outposts of Americana in downtown Paris, Johannesburg and Buenos Aires — friendly, inviting places where locals could get a taste of the American lifestyle, attitudes, and values — *if* they were allowed inside due to locally enforced racial or class barriers.

“These venues, just like the Disneylands that came later, were ways in which the U.S. came to global media capitals,” Melnick said. “This exotic place had the allure of Hollywood, but over time it became a habitual space for a certain kind of moviegoer. So there was both a sense of comfort and a sense of excitement.

“The theaters transmitted a kind of consumerist fantasy, and had all the trappings of the American moviegoing experience upon which they were based.”

For example, many offered Saturday matinees where youngsters were enticed by “Nabisco cookies and Coca-Cola and Tom and Jerry cartoons,” Melnick noted. A lot of those kids developed a taste for American products, and were encouraged to see the U.S. as a friendly, welcoming place — an attitude diplomats leveraged during the Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s.

But the cinemas also became the focus of global protests by domestic exhibitors featuring direct competition, and by nationalists who felt these cinemas were spreading unwelcome foreign ideas and values. “The Cairo MGM cinema was attacked in 1945, 1947 and 1952, with the rise of anti-British and anti-Israel protests,” he said. “While those issues weren’t directly related to the U.S., the American movie house was one of the most prominent symbols of the West. Through the exhibition of Hollywood films and newsreels, the American movie house became a loudspeaker.”

Growing up on the East Coast, Melnick fell in love with movies — and movie theaters — at a very young age. He has vivid memories of a trip he and his parents took to the Ziegfeld in New York City when he was 7. Among their adventures was a screening of the decidedly kid-unfriendly drama *Gandhi*.

“I remember very well the sumptuous lobby and the opulent fixtures,” he said. “Before that, I had only gone to mall theaters. Here there was an intermission, and people dressed up. It was a glamorous experience.”

Melnick ultimately moved to Los Angeles, where he worked in the film industry in marketing and distribution before returning to school to earn a Ph.D. in film and

media studies from UCLA. He joined the UC Santa Barbara faculty in 2012.

The film industry has, of course, changed radically since the era Melnick investigates in his book. It's far more international, as any viewer of Netflix will quickly realize. That also goes for the theaters themselves: He notes that a number of prominent cinema chains in the U.S. are, or have been, owned by foreign-based conglomerates.

Of course, whether movie theaters are a good investment is an open question in the wake of the global COVID pandemic. Melnick said he is cautiously optimistic that people will eventually return to cinemas in big numbers, "especially as a greater variety of films return to theaters."

"The consensus is that moviegoing will be here forever, but it will be more of a special event —more like going to the opera, or a sporting event," he said. "I'm hopeful we can do a little better than that, since the price of seeing a movie is so much lower than going to a concert."

Asked if he's a romantic about cinemas, Melnick paused. "I am romantic about the idea of movie theaters keeping our fractured nation in place," he said. "If we see each other and engage each other in this public forum, where we can enjoy something together, we are at least gathering in one place. That's not something we do online, where the algorithms send us in one direction or another.

"If you watch a movie at home by yourself or with one other person, that's a very different experience than sitting with 200 strangers," he added. "At the movie house, you're spending time with people who aren't necessarily like you. That's a good thing, especially after the pandemic, which sent us further into our rabbit holes."

So whether you're in Mumbai or Milwaukee, Melnick sees real value in communal spaces that require us to turn away from our phones for a couple of hours.

"Growing up in a small town, the way I traveled was through moviegoing," he recalled. "It also spurred me to imagine my future. Today, it serves an entirely different function for me. In a digital age, it's an analogue experience that unplugs me from the world, while simultaneously connecting with it."

About UC Santa Barbara

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