

# A Global Cinematic Experience: Cinépolis, Film Exhibition, and Luxury Branding

by JUAN LLAMAS-RODRIGUEZ

**Abstract:** Luxury cinemas, an exhibition format that adapts older movie palaces for the multiplex era, are experiencing a transnational proliferation given the rise of middle classes in the Global South. Cinépolis, the fourth-largest film exhibitor in the world, introduced luxury cinemas to Mexico in 1999 and has since included them in its multiplexes around the world. Two notable cases are considered here: the United States, where Cinépolis operates mostly luxury cinemas, and India, where Cinépolis is the only foreign-owned exhibitor. In analyzing luxury cinemas in these contexts, I argue that Cinépolis's strategy depends on creating a modular cosmopolitanism that appeals equally to upper-middle-class patrons across different nations. Yet this modular format focused on luxurious theater design comes at the expense of audience satisfaction. Cinépolis's failed attempts to create a "global cinematic experience" illustrate the challenges facing film exhibition and critical theory in an era of multiplex expansion and media platform proliferation.

**Film Exhibition Diary:** Cinépolis Victory Park—Dallas, TX, United States (September 2018). I visit my local multiplex. Arriving half an hour early, I walk past the automatic ticket booths straight to the pristine lobby and spot a bar-lounge on my left. I bought my assigned-seating tickets in advance so I am not worried about getting to the theater right away. I approach the bar and order a drink, something sweet. For the next twenty minutes, I sit at the lounge on a midsize modern couch, listening to the low-bass house music of the lobby and watching the muted LCD screens across the way. Some are playing the latest soccer match; others, trailers for upcoming summer blockbusters. Eventually I make my way toward the theater, half a drink in hand. I find my numbered seat, a black leather recliner, put my feet up. I place my drink on the service table next to my seat and grab the menu standing atop it. A waiter approaches me and introduces himself. Despite browsing the dinner options, I settle for an appetizer and another drink. As the theater lights begin to dim, the waiter scurries away to get my order. I lean back and enjoy the show.

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If you have attended a luxury cinema before—whether in Guadalajara, Jalisco; Thane, Maharashtra; or Dallas, Texas—the visit to the movie theater probably unfolded in the manner described above. That is because luxury cinemas, which are on the rise, are also increasingly standardized in aiming to provide an equally luxurious experience regardless of the country, or where in a particular country, you happen to be. As transnational film exhibition corporations expand their luxury cinema offerings across multiple countries, they are attempting to replicate this notoriously elite experience around the world, and in doing so, to make luxury cinemas aspire to a truly global cinematic experience.



Figure 1. Lobby, ticket counter, and bar area of the Cinépolis Luxury Cinemas, Victory Park, Dallas, Texas, United States. Photo by the author.

What is a “global cinematic experience”? On one level, the question that lies at the heart of this article is an admittedly ambitious enterprise, one that from the outset cannot expect to deliver many decisive conclusions. That is why, on another level, this question is also a provocation, far more generative in the issues it raises than in the conclusions it engenders. It asks where would we begin and how would we proceed if we were to conceptualize a kind of cinematic experience that is global in scale and scope. At the outset, asking what a global cinematic experience is opens up at least three distinct avenues of inquiry, each suggested by the loaded terms in the formulation: “global,” “cinematic,” “experience.” “Global” asserts the simultaneous interplay of the generalizable and the situated, as well as the necessity of theorizing these in tandem. “Cinematic,” especially in contrast to filmic, responds both to the increasing heterogeneity of contemporary media ecologies and to the particularities

of cinema (in this case, its form of exhibition) in light of the collapse of medium specificity. “Experience,” finally, points not only to the activity of watching a film but also to that of going to see a film—that is, to the events and places that precede the film watching, as well as the embodied spectator who undertakes such an activity. These three concepts, in turn, inflect one another. The case study of the luxury cinema provides an entry into these conceptual meshes and speculative provocations. What follows is a material and theoretical investigation into the luxury cinema as a global cinematic experience.

Theorizing a global cinematic experience must begin with a fundamental concern of contemporary cinema and media studies: how to account for the global in the study of film. It is a concern that has inspired countless collections tackling the closely related subjects of world cinema, global Hollywood, and transnational film.<sup>1</sup> At stake are two core questions: first, how to contextualize the global against its counterparts of the local, the national, and the regional; and second, how to interpret the processes of globalization, calibrating a middle ground between the heavy pessimism of cultural imperialist models and the hollow optimism of active locality models. It is in the mediation between these two concerns, and in the dialectical mediation, that “the programmatic Formula [*sic*] of globalization studies,” as William Mazzarella calls it, emerges.<sup>2</sup> What this means for cinema and media studies is continuous negotiation between broad themes and specific examples, between case studies and explanatory contexts.<sup>3</sup> Yet as the prominent subfields of media industry studies and infrastructure studies demonstrate, these negotiations must increasingly be theorized in sites beyond—that is, before, besides, or around—the film text.<sup>4</sup> Films, especially those produced for a global audience, undoubtedly provide an entry into these contemporary concerns. But studying cinema’s industrial and infrastructural grounds reveals that these sites are not only conditions of possibility for the production and consumption of media but also locations of global mediations themselves. The specificity of these sites arises precisely from the bringing together of macro-level questions with on-the-ground encounters. To conceptualize a global cinematic experience, we must first contend with the material forces that shape particular instances and then further those insights into generalizable theories. In doing so, we can capture the various registers of global processes, national structures, and local articulations that give form to individual experiences.

The specific case of the Mexican film exhibitor Cinépolis provides a starting point for such an investigation. The fourth-largest film exhibitor in the world as of 2018,

1 See, for instance, Nataša Durovicová and Kathleen Newman, *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, Richard Maxwell, and Ting Wang, *Global Hollywood 2* (London: BFI, 2004).

2 William Mazzarella, “Culture, Globalization, Mediation,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 350.

3 For a sustained argument on the importance of these negotiations, see Bhaskar Sarkar, “Tracking ‘Global Media’ in the Outposts of Globalization,” in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Nataša Durovicová and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2009), 34–58.

4 See Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, *Media Industry Studies: History, Theory, and Method* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

Cinépolis holds a substantial market share in nine countries across Latin America. The exhibitor is also known for its promotion of “luxury cinemas” in most of its multiplexes. Indeed, in its entry into the US market, Cinépolis developed only luxury cinemas. In India, where Cinépolis is the only foreign-owned exhibitor, these luxury cinemas have joined an already on-the-rise trend toward “lifestyling” the act of cinema going.<sup>5</sup> Analyzing luxury cinemas in these distinct contexts reveals how Cinépolis’s strategy depends on creating a modular cosmopolitanism that holds a similar appeal for upper-middle-class patrons across different nations. Yet, often this modular approach to luxurious theater design comes at the expense of audience satisfaction. Centering an investigation into a “global cinematic experience” on Cinépolis’s successes and failures illustrates the challenges facing both film exhibition and critical theory in an era of multiplex expansion, industrial consolidation, and media platform proliferation.

**Introducing Cinépolis.** In 1956 Enrique Ramírez Villalón founded the independent Cinema Morelia in Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico. Over the subsequent decade and a half, the Ramírez family came to own and run two dozen theaters in the state, until the Mexican government bought these in 1971. Following the deregulation of ticket prices in 1992 and the eventual privatization of Mexican cinema exhibition in 1993, Organización Ramírez bought back its theaters and undertook the technological conversion and partition of old movie houses into multiple smaller theaters in major cities across the country under the banner of Cinépolis.<sup>6</sup> Along with the foreign-owned Cinemark and Cinemex, Cinépolis was responsible for the multiplex boom in Mexico that started in 1994.<sup>7</sup> Cinépolis CEO Alejandro Ramírez Magaña frequently frames the company as a small family business, referring back to his experiences watching films in his grandfather’s first theater.<sup>8</sup> Nowadays, Cinépolis is a transnational player. By 2014, a decade after opening its first theater outside of Mexico, it was the largest film exhibitor in Latin America and the fourth largest in the world, with theaters in global key markets such as the United States and India.<sup>9</sup>

The company is thus not unlike other Mexican-born, internationally recognized conglomerates, such as broadcasting and telecommunications giants Televisa and

5 Cinépolis became interested in the Indian exhibition market when Miguel Mier, the company’s chief operating officer, met Indian entrepreneurs Milan Saini and Deepak Marda while pursuing an MBA degree at Stanford University, a fact that demonstrates the role of cosmopolitan networks in global capital expansion. See “Alums Give Indian Cinema Its Hollywood Moment,” *Stanford Graduate School of Business*, January 28, 2014, <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/stanford-gsb-experience/news-history/milan-saini-ms-07-alums-give-indian-cinema-its-hollywood-moment>.

6 Ana Rosas Mantecón, “New Processes of Urban Segregation: The Reorganization of Film Exhibition in Mexico City,” *Television & New Media* 4, no. 1 (February 2004): 19.

7 Mostly American investors funded Cinemark, whereas Cinemex had Mexican, American, and Australian investment. Rosas Mantecón, 12.

8 Andreas Fuchs, “Global Family: Cinépolis’ Alejandro Ramírez Discusses Outreach and Opportunity,” *Film Journal International*, April 15, 2013, <http://www.filmjournal.com/content/global-family-cinepolis-alejandro-ramirez-discusses-outreach-and-opportunity>.

9 John Hopewell and Emiliano de Pablos, “CinemaCon Honoree Alejandro Ramirez Sees Innovation as Key to Global Growth,” *Variety*, April 15, 2013, <https://variety.com/2013/film/features/alejandro-ramirez-sees-innovation-as-key-to-global-growth-1200333691/>.

América Móvil. The Mexican government's increasing deregulation and privatization in the late 1980s and early 1990s allowed these national companies to expand their reach and economic power in the domestic arena, which they then translated into an advantageous position for global expansion. Ramírez Magaña himself admits that the company's international expansion came about because it had reached saturation in Mexico. The rise of Cinépolis, like that of Televisa and América Móvil, was facilitated by what Saskia Sassen calls the "partial unbundling" of the national, which gives rise to new supranational formations grounded in existing national frameworks.<sup>10</sup> Global processes are often located and instigated in national spaces, taking advantage of the legal and political affordances granted by specific state institutions, then using that advantageous position to move into other national arenas. Although shaped by global agendas, the material and legal infrastructure that makes possible the global circulation of financial capital is created by state projects intended to bring the nation into global competition.<sup>11</sup>

Thanks to this "partial unbundling," Cinépolis today operates in ten countries besides Mexico. Although its Latin America strategy consisted primarily of building its own multiplexes, Cinépolis diverged from this model in the case of the United States and India. The company's first incursions into the US market in 2011 focused on multiplexes with only luxury cinemas, and it opted to build these in suburban outdoor shopping centers in Southern California and Florida.<sup>12</sup> India, where Cinépolis began operations in 2009, presented the exhibitor with both significant gains and crucial setbacks. In its first six years in the country, Cinépolis expanded to more than thirty cities and almost two hundred screens, but a great number of these came from refurbishing existing multiplexes, such as Fun Cinemas's eighty-three screens, which Cinépolis acquired in December 2014.<sup>13</sup> The company's shift toward acquisitions came about as a response to India's regulatory restrictions on foreign entities building new real estate. Despite the country's boom in multiplexes over the past two decades,<sup>14</sup> the government's loosening of restrictions on new development and foreign investment was slower in the exhibition sector. Ramírez Magaña repeatedly bemoans India's higher entertainment taxes and longer waiting periods for permits, challenges his company did not face when moving into most Latin American countries.<sup>15</sup> Cinépolis nonetheless holds the distinction of being the only foreign-owned major player in the Indian exhibition market, ranking as the nation's fourth-largest exhibitor by the end of 2014 and trailing powerful corporations such as PVR and Carnival Cinemas.<sup>16</sup> The

10 Saskia Sassen, "Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global: Elements for a Theorization," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 219.

11 Sassen, 218.

12 By late 2018, it will have luxury and regular multiplexes in operation in Connecticut, New Jersey, New York City, Ohio, and Texas as well.

13 Nandini Raghavendra and Vinod Mahanta, "India Most-Challenging Market, Permits Take Long Time: Cinépolis CEO Alejandro Ramirez Magana," *Economic Times*, March 2, 2015, <http://www.ecoti.in/H7DAa>.

14 Adrian Athique, "Leisure Capital in the New Economy: The Rapid Rise of the Multiplex in India," *Contemporary South Asia* 17, no. 2 (2009): 123–140.

15 Raghavendra and Mahanta, "India Most-Challenging Market."

16 Nitin Tej Ahuja, "State of the Union," *Box Office India*, December 20, 2014, <http://www.boxofficeindia.co.in/state-of-the-union/>.

meteoric rise of Cinépolis in the global arena contrasts to its beginnings four decades ago in Morelia, Mexico. The company's change in scale reveals the many ways that the local, national, and global interface with one another. For example, Cinépolis is able to mobilize its local origins as a brand despite its national foothold and the global springboard such foothold provides. Another is how the company's global aspirations will be met with national restrictions elsewhere, which it navigates by reproducing its locally grown formats of exhibition.

Besides the company's origins in the Mexican film exhibition market, Mexico remains central to Cinépolis's company profile because it is an arena where the company continues to thrive. Cinépolis now controls more than 65 percent of the Mexican film exhibition infrastructure,<sup>17</sup> a market dominance that has afforded it the freedom to test and implement new strategies in film exhibition. For instance, in response to the marked contrast between urban and rural access to cinema in Mexico, beginning in 2004 Cinépolis pursued a campaign that took inflatable screens, projectors, and speakers to small towns without movie theaters. The company installed stadium seating in its Mexican multiplexes in the late 1990s, piloted IMAX and 3-D in the early 2000s, converted all theater screens into digital projection, and became the first exhibitor in Latin America to offer the 4-D viewing system.<sup>18</sup> Notable among Cinépolis's strategies for national and transnational expansion is its development of Luxury Cinemas. Cinépolis introduced this concept, also called VIP Cinemas,<sup>19</sup> in 1999 in Mexico City. It has since expanded the concept to the major markets it participates in, making the company the largest operator of luxury cinemas worldwide.<sup>20</sup>

It is within the case of Cinépolis's Luxury Cinemas that we can locate this investigation into a global cinematic experience. The luxury cinema is both a historical standard of film exhibition and a newly reconfigured feature of the multiplex era. It is a form designed for global consumption and premised on the conjuring, marketing, and fulfillment of an "experience." Focusing on its most ardent proponent delineates the ways that the luxury cinema is symptomatic and constitutive of the processes of late capitalism as they emerge in the film exhibition context. At the same time, the specificity of Cinépolis's case allows for the fissures, frictions, and failures of this model to materialize, thereby illustrating how any attempt at a global cinematic experience is bound to be laden with "awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection."<sup>21</sup> This investigation focuses on the transformations that gave rise to the luxury cinema format, its relation to global economic changes of the past two decades, and the ways it opens up avenues to rethink cinematic experiences in the twenty-first century.

17 Fuchs, "Global Family."

18 Fuchs.

19 For clarity, I refer to Luxury Cinemas and VIP Cinemas interchangeably. Lowercase "luxury cinemas" refers to the model generally, and the capitalized "Luxury Cinemas" refers to Cinépolis's brand specifically.

20 Hopewell and de Pablos, "CinemaCon Honoree."

21 Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 4.

## Genealogies of the Luxury Cinema

**Film Exhibition Diary:** Cinépolis Valle Oriente—Monterrey, NL, Mexico (August 2016). It has been almost a year since I last visited this theater. The box office attendant says she cannot sell me a ticket; there is now a separate box office for the VIP screens. I make my way to the back of the complex, past the buoyant, busy concession stands and the regular screens 1–10. I turn left to a hallway with only three screens; they are the small ones showing weeks-old films and the “Focus on France” selection. Finally I arrive at the new VIP box office. There is nothing special about it except it is darkly lit. Five young men are debating whether or not to buy tickets. Beyond the VIP box office is another concession stand and a small waiting area. Except for the men, no one is around. The cacophony of the rest of the multiplex fades, leaving the hum of the popcorn machine and the muted flat-screen TV as the only companions until it is time to enter the theater.

Cinema going across the world has always been marked by differences in class access, with the marker “luxury” signaling a preferred type of patron and mode of conduct. For instance, Ross Melnick notes the increased attention that Fox’s Cinema Tel Aviv garnered in 1957 because it was considered the “most luxurious, most artistic and elaborate theatre ever built in Israel.”<sup>22</sup> The Cinema Tel Aviv featured upholstered seats and plush carpeting, a deluxe lounge, stereophonic sound, air-conditioning, and the largest CinemaScope screen in Israel at the time. The theater was considered so upscale that one Fox representative argued that, “with all of these modern luxuries, even ‘primitive’ people would ‘behave properly in pleasant surroundings if given the opportunity.’”<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Himpele notices a similar trend in the film theaters in and around La Paz, Bolivia, that were remnants of national hierarchies extending back to the 1920s. Himpele argues that the “architecture of the exhibition site also served as a means of encircling social class by designating its patrons’ social status.”<sup>24</sup> The early cinemas in the downtown area were large spaces featuring ornate and spacious lobbies, making attendance at the cinema a prestige event. In contrast, *cines populares* found in the working-class areas at the outskirts of the city were smaller, generally undistinguished buildings. These theaters could not show movies at night because they were too cold, and their cramped design marked the viewers’ social class on their own bodies.<sup>25</sup> Focusing on the 1990s, Walter Armbrust describes a hierarchy of moviegoing in Cairo between the high, middle, and lower classes, each distinguished by the selection of films, the composition of the crowds, and the decor of the theater. Although the most expensive theaters would usually be prohibitive for Cairo residents and therefore reserved for tourists only, middle-range theaters would also include a hierarchization

22 Ross Melnick, “Hollywood’s Muddle East: Political Change in Egypt and Israel and the Consequences for Hollywood’s Middle Eastern Movie Theaters,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* (2016): 16.

23 Melnick, 16.

24 Jeffrey D. Himpele, “Film Distribution as Media: Mapping Difference in the Bolivian Cinemascope,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 50.

25 Himpele, “Film Distribution as Media,” 50.

within them.<sup>26</sup> The cheapest seats were in the *sala*, or the main floor of the theater, and the most expensive seats were in the *loj*, or the first few rows of the balcony. Often in Cairo there was even a two-tiered balcony arrangement where an intermediate price would be charged for the *balakon*, or the seats above the *loj*.<sup>27</sup>

The luxury embedded in these sumptuous movie theaters was both symbolic and performative. It was meant not only to entice a certain kind of patron but also to transform the patron once inside. The Fox representative in Tel Aviv in 1957 accorded a transformative potential to the cinema theater by suggesting that the materiality of luxury could result in embodied behavioral changes. In addition to these bodily effects, the symbolic value of luxury regulated the “social sorting” of filmgoers.<sup>28</sup> The high ticket prices for these theaters, as well as their geographical location, often acted as a disincentive for large sectors of the population. Even for those who succeeded in getting in, different sectors defined a second-order hierarchization. Different classes might end up watching a film in the same theater, but the differences between them were bound to be replicated within the theater’s own design. In her ethnographic work on cinema going in India, for instance, Lakshmi Srinivas notes how prices of entry are labeled as distinctly class based. In turn, the areas to which each ticket level allows entry modulate the behavior of the patrons, including wardrobe, gender composition, and whether they bring food into the theater.<sup>29</sup>

Cinépolis’s Luxury Cinemas follow on these traditions and adapt them to the multiplex era. As opposed to single-screen theaters especially designed for the more opulent classes, the Luxury Cinemas were just another screen in a multiscreen complex, yet their design, service, and cost is intended to set their patrons apart from those of the other screens. In this regard, the contemporary luxury cinema follows the genealogy of old luxurious movie palaces and that of the contemporary multiplex, the current standard in cinema exhibition. Dating back to the late 1960s in North America, the multiplex arose when some exhibition companies began to “twin” their cinemas, converting single-screen theaters into two smaller auditoriums, while new theaters eschewed the single-screen model completely.<sup>30</sup> The problems with these early conversions, such as cramped seating and sound leakage, spurred new multiplex construction in the 1990s, which led to the “deeper entrenchment” of the multiplex “as part of a common sense about the film environment and cinemagoing.”<sup>31</sup> Notably, the multiplex became embedded in the consumption habits of late capitalism, giving rise to the

26 Walter Armbrust, “When the Lights Go Down in Cairo: Cinema as Secular Ritual,” *Visual Anthropology* 10 (1998): 420.

27 Armbrust, 421.

28 On social sorting, see Steve Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities, and the Urban Condition* (London: Routledge, 2001).

29 Lakshmi Srinivas, “Ladies Queues, ‘Roadside Romeos,’ and Balcony Seating: Ethnographic Observations on Women’s Cinema-Going Experiences,” *South Asian Popular Culture* 8, no. 3 (October 2010): 294–295.

30 Charles Acland, *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 103; Christopher Meissner, “‘A Revolutionary Concept in Screen Entertainment’: The Emergence of the Twin Movie Theatre, 1962–1964,” *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 30, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 64–76.

31 Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 104.

“multiplex,” which takes advantage of commercial space to lure shoppers into the theater, and the megaplex, an ostentatious structure of more than a dozen screens that includes other diversions, such as arcade games. India exemplifies this transition in its culture industries, which adapted to global standards following the country’s economic liberalization in the 1990s. In the case of film exhibition, new multiplexes depend on “lifestyling,” or branding consumption as a way of expressing oneself, to attract a different kind of spectator from the male lower-class audience that frequented cinema in the past and to convince these new patrons to spend more than three times as much as they would buying a readily available pirated video CD.<sup>32</sup> Finally, the standardization of the multiplex not only results in similar environments for film consumption across national contexts but also has implications for the production of films themselves.<sup>33</sup>

The movie palace and the multiplex provide two genealogies for luxury cinema within the sphere of cinema history. Yet this exhibition format is also the result of the global rise of affluent middle classes in erstwhile developing nations. Niche economies that target these classes, particularly in the service sectors, have intensified over the past two decades. The rise of the multiplex luxury cinema shares many of the business and promotional strategies of what is termed the “luxury branding economy,” a sector premised on selling exclusivity and sumptuousness to a distinctly cosmopolitan class. Notoriously, the branding of luxury is intrinsically tied to the creation of an experience, one that Cinépolis capitalizes on to promote its multiplexes.

### Global Luxury as Modular Cosmopolitanism

**Film Exhibition Diary:** Cinépolis Viviana Mall—Thane, Maharashtra, India (November 2014). It is blue all over: a cobalt blue light runs along the walls and in strips around the main columns; white and blue balloons hang around the lobby to mark the recent opening of the multiplex. Nine LCD screens set up above a lounge area are showing the trailer for the new Sushant Singh Rajput film. Two attendants in a small stand in the middle of the waiting area try to convince filmgoers to sign up for the rewards club. The box office is to the left, but these two Indian young men head towards the back, where a bright sign advertises IMAX and signals the way to the theater screens. If the video had not specified where it was shot, you could bet that this was your local multiplex and not one that was half a world away.<sup>34</sup>

The luxury cinema must be understood as one instance in an extensive transnational market known as the luxury sector, which has experienced unprecedented growth over the past twenty years, from a value of US\$20 billion in 1985 to \$180 billion

32 Athique, “Leisure Capital in the New Economy,” 134.

33 As Tejaswini Ganti explains, the targeting of multiplexes to middle-class audiences in India has reinscribed an air of respectability to films that, in turn, shapes the types of stories and styles that filmmakers choose to employ. Tejaswini Ganti, *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 121.

34 Deepak Patil, “Cinépolis Viviana Mall Thane,” YouTube, November 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Axo00cM1VE>.

in 2009.<sup>35</sup> These market dynamics help explain the global cinematic experience engendered by luxury cinemas in two ways: they signal the affordances and limitations of economies of scale in providing a luxury commodity, and they articulate the connection between a luxury experience and a privileged form of global belonging. The luxury economy is necessarily a global one, as any given national market is too small for its economic scale. Key players in these markets profit from the rise of a cosmopolitan wealthy class and of speculative markets, primarily those emerging in countries previously considered as developing. It is not surprising that industry insiders credit the acceleration of global finance as the key component driving this growth. A 2014 report on the future of the luxury economy by the financial consulting company Deloitte predicts that the luxury markets in emerging economies such as Brazil, India, China, and some countries in the Middle East will surpass the established markets in Europe, North America, and Japan over the coming decade.<sup>36</sup> Branding analysts suggest that these emerging markets will represent the transformation of luxury branding from “occidental luxury culture imposition” to “oriental luxury consumption style.”<sup>37</sup> The shift from Western markets to developing economies in the luxury sector is a material synthesis of the contradictory theories of globalization, cultural imperialism, and active locality models, as localities now express their consumption desires by adhering to a distinctly global trend.

The luxury sector is also illustrative of the insidiousness of the contemporary form of global belonging known as cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism carries with it a “sense of a cultural elite with the means to rise above the petty concerns of the everyday.”<sup>38</sup> Paul Grainge further notes that, in the commercial sphere, “cosmopolitan” has become a buzzword for “the promotion of services, products, and atmospheres that draw upon a notion of international variety.”<sup>39</sup> Feeling cosmopolitan intersects with the luxury economy in that both tie a sense of internationalism to class privilege. As diagnosed by Pheng Cheah, current forms of cosmopolitanism have become “a set of strategies for the biopolitical improvement of human capital.”<sup>40</sup> In lieu of a transnational solidarity, global elites invoke cosmopolitanism to justify the improvement of a select class within Global South nations at the expense of their disenfranchised compatriots. A developing nation’s inclusion in the global trade—for example, by fostering a luxury market—merely represents the success of a limited stratum of that nation’s population, often on the backs of the rest of its people.<sup>41</sup>

I propose that luxury branding rests on “modular cosmopolitanism,” a privileged form of global belonging that is transposed around the world through a set of standard technologies and practices. Modular cosmopolitanism relies on the foundational work

35 Uché Okonkwo, “The Luxury Brand Strategy Challenge,” *Journal of Brand Management* 16 (2009): 287.

36 Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, *Global Powers of Luxury Goods 2014*, <https://www2.deloitte.com/tw/en/pages/consumer-business/articles/global-powers-of-luxury-goods-2014.html>.

37 Okonkwo, “Luxury Brand Strategy Challenge,” 287.

38 John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), 189.

39 Paul Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2008), 160.

40 Pheng Cheah, “Cosmopolitanism,” *Theory Culture Society* 23, no. 2 (2006): 495.

41 Cheah, 493.

of Benedict Anderson and postcolonial critiques of his work. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson develops an account of nationalist movements as modular forms, in which specific characteristics like the circulation of print media signal the emergence of modern nationalism.<sup>42</sup> Despite its usefulness for conceptualizing nationalism in a global sense, Anderson's formulation has inspired numerous critiques for the way it effaced local variations of nationalism. Most famously, Partha Chatterjee objected to the foreclosure of difference within the framework of modular nationalism, pointing out that if "the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain 'modular' forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?"<sup>43</sup> Subsequent iterations of this critique sought to synthesize Anderson's arguments with Chatterjee's concerns. Seeking to trace both the local contours of specific nationalist movements and the transnational production of the local, Manu Goswami argues for the transposability of modular nation forms, noting that the circulation of these models must be understood within the structural constitution of the modern interstate system.<sup>44</sup> For Goswami, the modularity of national forms rests not on the effacement of local practices but on the acknowledgment that similarities still exist among otherwise distinct nations. Besides attending to local differences, we must also realize that the current global system creates conditions of possibility similar in kind across different locales. Despite local variations, the economic changes in nations such as Mexico, Brazil, and India, including their growing social inequalities in favor of a select group of affluent nationals, produce comparable arenas in which these luxury brands can emerge. Following the critiques of Chatterjee and Goswami, I argue that the luxury marketplace capitalizes on these modular similarities across nations and on the capacity of modularity to efface difference in favor of a global standard.

In the case of film exhibition, the multiplex era therefore represents not only a homogenizing force in cinematic experiences but also a condition of possibility for variations on modes of exhibition, the most lavish of which is the luxury cinema. Indeed, as Charles Acland argues, multiplexes foster a "sensibility about the global," a sense of allegiance and affiliation with imagined populations across the world.<sup>45</sup> It is therefore not surprising that most of the key players in global exhibition have already begun creating their own versions of a luxury cinema, evidencing the presumed rise of a wealthier class of filmgoers across developed and developing nations. AMC premiered its Cinema Suites theaters in the United States in 2010 as part of an extended dine-in theater option.<sup>46</sup> Over the past few years, Vox Cinemas has expanded its Gold cinemas across the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and Egypt. In India, PVR introduced its own brand, Director's Cut, in 2011. Cinépolis first

42 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983).

43 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 216.

44 Manu Goswami, "Rethinking the Modular Nation Form: Toward a Sociohistorical Conception of Nationalism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44, no. 4 (October 2002): 783.

45 Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 237. In this regard, see also Paul Grainge, *Brand Hollywood*, esp. chapter 7.

46 Jason Perlow, "AMC's Dine-In Theaters: The Movies' Last Stand at the Box Office?," *ZDNet*, November 17, 2010.

inaugurated its Luxury Cinemas in Mexico under the brand VIP Cinemas and has now exported these to India under the same name and to the United States under the Luxury Cinemas brand. The Mexico-based company is therefore only one example in a broader trend toward targeted luxury movie theaters, a constellation of venues that all contribute to a sense of modular cosmopolitanism.

Still, Cinépolis is a significant case to consider given both its increasing prominence in the global marketplace and its targeted incursion strategies in the foreign markets. One such strategy, particularly notable in the United States and India, is that Cinépolis has remained focused on small cities and suburbs rather than metropolises. The company's entry in the United States was limited to a few theaters in Southern California and in Florida, all under the Luxury Cinemas brand, in 2011. These were located not in metropolises such as San Diego or Miami, but in affluent adjacent municipalities. Similarly, as of 2015, its two VIP screens in India were located in the western state of Maharashtra, in Thane and Pune, districts nearby but still significantly apart from the capital city of Mumbai.

By avoiding bigger cities, where local options may have already saturated the market, this strategy allows Cinépolis to target areas that have few multiplexes, inserting its luxury brand for select customers and profiting from the niche market created therein.

Furthermore, this strategy for the expansion of VIP cinemas echoes what Phil Hubbard has called the "ambient fear" that saturates everyday social experiences.<sup>47</sup> Hubbard posits that fear and anxiety, already deeply embedded in the fabric of contemporary capitalist cities, shape the social practices of cinema going. People engage in strategies of risk avoidance that create boundaries between themselves and others, causing spatial divides that mimic social distinctions.<sup>48</sup> The fear of the Other incites practices that reinforce these distinctions. In the case of film exhibition, this is



Figures 2 and 3. Sectioned-off entrances to the VIP section of two Cinépolis multiplexes in Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico (taken in 2016). Photo by the author.

47 Phil Hubbard, "Fear and Loathing at the Multiplex: Everyday Anxiety in the Post-Industrial City," *Capital & Class* 80 (Summer 2003): 52.

48 Hubbard, 53.

most notable in the decisions to visit one cinema over another, even one screen within the cinema over another. The inclusion of a VIP screen within the multiplex is a cost-effective way for Cinépolis to replicate the socio-spatial divides that permeate contemporary moviegoing. It takes advantage of existing commercial infrastructures, such as the malls where these cinemas are located, but it still promises a distinctive exhibition experience for people who would rather watch films with those who are “like them” and exclude those seen as Other. By opening luxury cinemas in affluent suburbs, it also furthers the increasing social sorting between groups that can and those that cannot afford to live there. On a localized level, these geographical distinctions replicate the same biopolitical controls qua social distinctions that the luxury brand enables on a global scale: the experience of feeling part of an exclusive economic class across dispersed geographies.

### Luxury and/as Experience

**Film Exhibition Diary:** Studio Movie Grill Citycentre—Houston, TX, United States (December 2014). The multiplex is located in a newly renovated outdoor shopping center. The theaters are on the second floor, through the escalator next to Anthropologie. The automated box office and the long, silver decorated bar near the entrance promise that this might be a luxury cinema in disguise. The inside of the theater screen disabuses me of that notion. The seat is merely a desk chair with wheels, fake leather cover, and cushions—like one I would have in my home office. The screen is big enough, but I never get to see it completely. The waitstaff continually walk in front of me, trying to duck but failing. The parents in the row in front order multiple rounds of chicken fingers for the half dozen children they brought to the movies. The waiter cannot possibly bring all of them at once, so he keeps coming and going. One of the young children raises her voice and starts to cry; she does not want chicken fingers.

VIP Cinemas promises a deluxe visit to the cinema around the world, but how do local patrons perceive this purported luxury experience? According to my analysis of customer comments and amateur reviews, audiences across the United States, Mexico, and India laud the design of Cinépolis’s Luxury Cinemas, but they often balk at the disappointing service had therein.<sup>49</sup> Patrons in Mexico and India appreciate the menu, which includes food that would normally not be available in a movie theater, such as sushi. American patrons remark less on the food options, possibly because the United States has other styles of dine-in movie theaters that are not considered luxury cinemas. The consensus among all three regions is on subpar wait service. Audience

49 This analysis consists of all the Yelp, Foursquare, and TripAdvisor reviews logged until 2015, as well as blog and newspaper reviews from the openings of Cinépolis Luxury Cinemas in Southern California. Undoubtedly, relying on audience impressions from social media sites provides a selective and partial portrait of the audience. Indeed, conventional wisdom dictates that only those consumers who most like or dislike a brand will take the time to write a review about it. As such, this selectiveness contributes to the argument of this section precisely because it concerns the best and worst characteristics of the Cinépolis Luxury cinemas. It is meant not as a holistic portrait of the luxury cinema audience but as an index of its most distinguished features for analysis.

members complained that during busy periods, orders would take too long, that the staff was often not friendly or accommodating, and that staff movement across the aisles was distracting during the film. Cinépolis markets its VIP Cinemas as a holistic experience of comfortable seating, fine dining, and full catered service, yet the most remarked-on feature, and often the only one that receives praise, is the seating. Customers are most attracted to the leather reclining chairs with footrests and a pivoting table for food, and, according to reviews, it is the chairs that make patrons most willing to pay the extra price of admission. This trend of paying more remains consistent across all countries. Despite its popularity, the extra space for seating, reclining, and stretching out comes at the expense of communal forms of watching. All the theaters have assigned seating, which assures patrons that if the film is not sold out, they can choose seats away from other parties. These pods of comfort create the isolationist experience of domestic film watching, albeit in a setting large enough to include a big screen. Given the distracting element of the waitstaff moving around, this seating design affirms that the luxury model is more focused on moviegoing than on movies themselves. VIP cinema, it seems, is not for filmgoers but for patrons who are willing to have a movie play in the background while enjoying two hours of luxury treatment.

Sometimes the luxury experience mirrors the diegetic world of the film, as when Cinépolis offered a special \$100 “Valentine’s Loveseat” promotion at all of its Southern California theaters in 2015; the package consisted of two movie tickets for the film *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Sam Taylor-Johnson, 2015), a limited-edition bottle of wine, a Cinépolis blanket, and a dessert of the patron’s choice. The special presumably was banking on “date night” as an incentive to splurge on a night out at the movies. Providing these plush amenities as part of the cinema-going experience speaks to Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece’s claim that the contemporary theatrical experience of film “increasingly considers the necessity of satiation,” of promoting and satisfying a visual, gastronomic, and affective sense of consumption.<sup>50</sup> Especially given the widespread availability of film content across mobile and on-demand platforms, film theaters must capitalize on their last arena for specialization: their design. Focusing on this design is therefore essential for understanding contemporary spectatorship. Design even represents a kind of film form itself. In Szczepaniak-Gillece’s words, theater spaces become their own kind of body genre in that they grant “promises beyond the screen” that directly influence the spectator.<sup>51</sup> The luxury experience is constituted not only by the corporation’s branding but also by the bodies of the spectators and the staff. In some ways this is hardly a newfound feature; as Jeffrey Himpele’s account of cinemas in Bolivia demonstrates, the spectators’ bodies have always already been constitutive of and inseparable from the atmosphere of the theater.<sup>52</sup> Yet, for Amit Rai, the inclusion of bodies into the theatrical experience is compounded in the era of the multiplex because its proprioceptive technologies “bring together more and more finely calibrated regimes of sensations,” seeking to affect bodies to an unprecedented

50 Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece, “Space, Satisfaction, and the Screen,” *2ha* 7 (2014), <http://www.2ha.ie/issue-07.html>.

51 Szczepaniak-Gillece.

52 Himpele, “Film Distribution as Media,” 50.

qualitative and quantitative degree.<sup>53</sup> To produce these regimes, transnational corporations depend on modular technologies of sound, sight, and tactility, which can be transposed to different contexts to engender an identical “bodily experience of synaesthetic sensation.”<sup>54</sup>

This new bodily experience of synesthetic sensation suggests a strong affective dimension to the creation of the experience of luxury. The environment created by



Figures 4 and 5. Leather reclining seats at (a) Cinépolis Luxury Cinemas Victory Park in Dallas, Texas, United States (in 2018), and (b) Cinépolis VIP Valle Oriente in Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico (in 2015). Photos by the author.

plush seating, attentive service, and relaxed bodies represents a particular orientation toward film watching beyond, and before, the film itself. As Sara Ahmed explains, orientation is a matter of how we reside in space and how space, in turn, shapes difference.<sup>55</sup> We perceive worlds through action in relation to the “proximity” between bodies and objects. Bodies are turned toward the objects around them, and this “direction” matters in understanding orientation. We gather objects in this space, but the objects also create the space our bodies inhabit. The orientation of luxury cinema audiences is, then, a function of their relation to the objects that constitute this space. The “ease of use” emblematic to luxury cinemas is evident not only in the comfortable amenities but also in the continued reliance on mobile devices for ticket purchasing and, in some cases, ordering food. The spectator in a luxury cinema is already a networked consumer. Besides the political and economic dimension, the modular cosmopolitanism of this form of

exhibition emerges from the sensations it engenders and from the technological means that bring forth such sensations.

53 Amit Rai, *Untimely Bollywood: Globalization and India's New Media Assemblage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 139. Rai considers here the technologies of the film theater such as expanded screens with higher image resolution and hi-fi surround sound. For our purposes, we might also consider the leather recliners.

54 Rai, 139.

55 Sara Ahmed, “Orientations Matter,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 246.

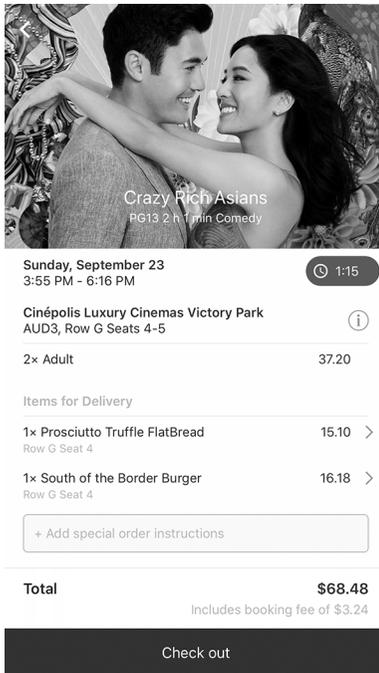


Figure 6. Screen grab from Cinépolis Luxury USA app, which provides the option of ordering food to be delivered to your seat while you buy the tickets.

The gamut of available reception experiences is also related to the infrastructural characteristics of film exhibition. Such is the case of Cinépolis’s VIP Cinemas. Its Southern California locales favor outdoor malls and stand-alone buildings, whereas the Maharashtra cinemas are part of existing multiplexes. Despite the distinct architectural exteriors of the theaters in different countries, walking into a Cinépolis Luxury Cinema guarantees a similar sensorial atmosphere. Theaters boast pristine lobbies with seating areas featuring modernist couches and chairs, an adjacent lounge and full bar, and LCD screens on the walls, alternatively displaying movie show times, Cinépolis ads, and restaurant specials. This same design appears in all the Cinépolis luxury cinemas, even as differences emerge in different contexts. The warm amber lights of the lobbies in the Southern California theaters, for example, contrast with the cool neon-blue ambiance that characterizes VIP Cinemas in Thane and Pune. Other regional differences include menu options, such as the level of spiciness of the popcorn. Differences emerge, then, in details but not in design. The technological modularity that Rai theorizes begets two important implications for conceptualizing a global cinematic experience. On the one hand, it guarantees the branding of the theatrical experience

This set of sensations exceeds the site of the local multiplex, traveling across geopolitical boundaries toward global forms of identification. In strictly affective terms, it is a circulation of intensity that travels through bodies and sometimes concretizes into distinct worlds.<sup>56</sup> That affect exists as intensity means that it has both an intraindividual and a transindividual dimension. First, there is an environment that primes a body for certain orientations of reception. Second, there is a force that emerges from the concatenation of bodies orienting themselves to the same form of reception.<sup>57</sup> This conceptualization of affective reception could extend to the concatenation of bodies across regional and national boundaries. If luxury film exhibition amounts to a modular cosmopolitanism, then, it is because “feeling cosmopolitan” contains an irreducible affective dimension that transcends traditional forms of identification such as nationality. It is a dimension that emerges from the confluence of environmental factors in exhibition settings that are technical and material in nature.

56 Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

57 Brian Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 40.

beyond the screen across national contexts. On the other hand, modularity allows for marketable difference: small, adaptable changes to a homogeneous global standard.

At the same time, the case of Cinépolis and its normativization of the VIP experience illustrates how this modular design can easily slip into a mass-produced, functional, albeit unremarkable, standard for global film exhibition. This conclusion draws on a study by the University of San Diego School of Business Administration wherein researchers evaluated the company's Southern California branches in terms of a dialectic of service theater and service factory. "Service factory" refers to a provider that has managed to mass-produce its service at high volume and low cost, thereby maximizing efficiency, dependability, and standardization. A "service theater" instead depends on niche production at low volume and higher cost, thereby allowing for customization and an individualized customer relationship. Service factories have less flexibility in changing the experience they provide, but they often offer higher perceived value for each service to their customers.<sup>58</sup> The study concludes that Cinépolis's Luxury Cinemas function as a service factory, with standardized practices across various VIP Cinemas, thus minimizing the cost of adding these types of screens to the multiplexes the company buys or builds. Notably, the study authors suggest that Cinépolis's Luxury Cinemas are "designed as a theater, [but] run as a factory."<sup>59</sup> Akin to the complaints in the customer reviews mentioned earlier, this study found that the service at these luxury cinemas was underwhelming in comparison with the purported comfort offered by the seating. Because the quality of the service had yet to match the quality of the theater design, Cinépolis's attempts to construct a "luxury experience" ended up interfering with the cinematic experience that the company first intended to create. The modularity of the luxury brand, which enables its easy transposing from one national context to another, thus betrays its fundamental commonality. Moreover, it exposes the limits of the "promises beyond the screen" that contemporary theatrical experiences seek to develop: in aiming for more glitz besides the film screening, theaters run the risk of such fanfare overwhelming, or even displacing, the original incentive for going to the theater: movies.<sup>60</sup>

The characterization of Cinépolis's modular luxury experience as service factory proves generative beyond the context of managerial science. It functions as an iteration of the autonomist Marxist conception of the social factory as an organizing principle in the age of late capitalism. Also referred to as "firms without factories" or "factories without walls," social factories mark a post-Fordist moment in which the economic logics once limited to the factory are increasingly spread out into society as a whole, turning the mass worker into a "socialized worker."<sup>61</sup> Although the social factory does not produce commodities in the same way factories do, the service economy nonetheless functions with similar precepts, minimizing costs to maximize profits by efficiently

58 Simon Croom and Enzo Baglieri, "Connecting Factory to Theatre: Lessons from a Case Study," in *Managing Consumer Services*, ed. E. Baglieri and U. Karmarkar (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2014), 64.

59 Croom and Baglieri, 62.

60 Szczepaniak-Gillece, "Space, Satisfaction, and the Screen."

61 Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, "In the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work," *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 7 (2008): 6–7.

producing modular services. Often these service providers attempt to obfuscate the mass production undergirding their services by branding them as unique, individually pleasurable experiences. The case of Cinépolis illustrates that these efforts are not always successful.

The luxury exhibition experience extends the social factory model not only in terms of its production, or the service it provides, but also in terms of its consumption, or the type of consumer it creates. In packaging comfort, ease of use, and interconnectivity as valued characteristics of the luxury experience, this form of exhibition gives rise to a film spectator for whom the “comforts” of the cinematic rival erstwhile pleasures of viewership. In the consumption-based era of cinema, it is not the film that determines viewership, but the material, affective, and technical conditions of its exhibition. Tracing the emergence and vicissitudes of these conditions proves crucial, as film exhibition increasingly resembles an extension of the social factory, thus representing the political-economic logics of contemporary society in synecdochical form.

Indeed, film exhibition continues to represent the conditions of contemporary society, including social changes in other domains. A robust body of scholarly work has already addressed the myriad ways that cinema represents, intersects with, or is implicated in modernity.<sup>62</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, Siegfried Kracauer explored the connections between film exhibition and the conditions of modern life. In the “distracted mode of reception,” a mode arising from the screen but extending to the entire process of film consumption, Kracauer diagnosed an emancipatory potential, a way of accounting for new forms of sensation intrinsic to modernity.<sup>63</sup> As Miriam Hansen would later argue, going to the cinema marked a “signature of modernity” for Kracauer because it attracted and represented the masses and because it allowed for the constitution of new forms of publics.<sup>64</sup> The technological and sociopolitical differences of our current moment require accounting for these modes of reception within a broader “new media assemblage,” as Amit Rai puts it, yet the intrinsic elements of this connection between the cinema and the phenomenon known as modernity remain.<sup>65</sup> The experience of (post)modernity becomes articulated and embodied in the multiplex, particularly its sublimation of previous forms of film exhibition. Thus, as a form of service factory, the Cinépolis luxury exhibition model reveals a parallax perspective on modernity and experience that addressed in classic and contemporary critical theory.

Consider Thomas Elsaesser’s elaboration of two forms of experience proposed by Walter Benjamin, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, as a way to parse out this parallax perspective. While *Erlebnis* marks “immediate, passive, fragmented, isolated, and unintegrated inner experience,” *Erfahrung* stands for a “cumulative, totalizing accretion of

62 See, e.g., Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

63 Siegfried Kracauer, “Cult of Distraction,” in *The Mass Ornament*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 323–330.

64 Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 54.

65 Rai, *Untimely Bollywood*, 4.

transmittable wisdom, of epic truth.”<sup>66</sup> For Elsaesser, insofar as cinema is “unthinkable outside the sensory and affective conditions of modernity,” the only mode of experience possible is that of *Erlebnis*—that is, singular, intermittent, discontinuous, transitory. A cinematic experience akin to *Erfahrung* would be “an ideological construct, a nostalgic or reactionary shoring up of the fractured nature of modern experience.”<sup>67</sup> Although Elsaesser departs from this distinction to work through the features of melodrama and trauma—that is, he implies a general form of filmic reception determined by the film’s content rather than the site of exhibition—his conclusions on the contemporary articulations of these two forms of experience are instructive. He contends that a mode of *Erfahrung* without *Erlebnis* would be the new “experience economy,” that is, “the themed environments of carefully controlled narratives, where distant pasts are made present and faraway places brought near.”<sup>68</sup> As an instance of this experience economy, the luxury multiplex cinema likewise acts as a “contemporary space of *Erfahrung* devoid of *Erlebnis*,” an instance of theatrical experience in which the singularity of cinema is secondary to the space of the theater itself and events and identities are made safe, familiar, and (en)closed. The appeal to an *Erfahrung* is, as Elsaesser points out, an ideological construct, but it remains a powerful one. Fashioned in response to the fractured nature of contemporary experience, the luxury cinema provides carefully controlled narratives of development and progress for the aspiring cosmopolitan audience that frequents it. At the same time, it ensures a safe, enclosed space for this audience because of its geographical and economic methods of biopolitical control.

Ultimately, this luxury experience signifies a foreclosure of the emancipatory potential that Kracauer once diagnosed as intrinsic to cinema going. The history of cinema is laden with implicit and explicit forms of segregation.<sup>69</sup> Yet the modularity of the multiplex perfects the parceling of publics along class lines and across national spaces. Miriam Hansen once argued that cinemas were Foucauldian “heterotopias” because they systematically intersected two different types of space, the local space of the theater and the deterritorialized space of the film.<sup>70</sup> Today, film theaters remain heterotopic in name only, as different screens within a multiplex sort and seclude otherwise diverse audiences with modular forms that aid in extracting value from the cinematic experience. As Sarah Banet-Weiser notes, contemporary culture is predicated “not on the separate domains of individual experience, everyday life, and the market but rather on their deep interrelation.”<sup>71</sup> It is this increasing interrelation that makes

66 Martin Jay, *Cultural Semantics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 48–49.

67 Thomas Elsaesser, “Between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*: Cinema Experience with Benjamin,” *Paragraph* 32, no. 3 (2009): 295.

68 Elsaesser, 309.

69 Robert Jackson, *Fade In, Crossroads: A History of the Southern Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Garth Jowett, “Apartheid and Socialization: Movie-Going in Cape Town, 1943–1958,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 26, no. 1 (2006): 1–20; Richard Schroeder, *Lone Star Picture Shows* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001). See also Rosas Mantecón, “New Processes of Urban Segregation.”

70 Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 55.

71 Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 9.

the luxury cinema a pointed index of the forces of late capitalism as they intersect with and influence contemporary cinematic experiences.

At the Financial Times Business of Luxury Summit 2014, Alejandro Ramírez Magaña gave a keynote address that celebrated his company's success in the transnational film exhibition market. Central to this success, Ramírez Magaña concluded, was Cinépolis's focus on emerging markets and on technological innovation. The film exhibitor's future thus lay in innovating to "try to keep the moviegoing experience relevant," where relevancy was tied to the speedy adoption of new technologies and the incorporation of new business trends such as luxury.<sup>72</sup> It is possible that this future will prove successful for Cinépolis on the business end. More prescient, however, is the resolve that the future moviegoing experience Ramírez Magaña and his company envisions will resemble little of the cinematic experiences critical theorists of modernity once knew. Modular forms of exhibition such as the luxury cinema may rely on a standardization of experience, but at the same time they allow for a view into how late-capitalist formations multiply experientially across distinct localities. New modes of exhibition require us to fashion new versions of spectator theories along with genealogies that trace continuities across space and time. Ultimately, what remains clear in Magaña's comments and in the overview of theorists of cinematic experience is that modes of media reception will adapt to global economic and social flows even as they actively continue to shape forms of being in the world.

**Conclusion: Beyond a Global Cinematic Experience.** "Is there life after the multiplex?" asks a special report in the Mexican newspaper *Reforma* on the state of national film exhibition in the mid-2000s.<sup>73</sup> Responding to the rapid spread of multiplexes across Mexico City, the author of the report notes two alternatives to this form of exhibition. On the one hand are the rapidly disappearing independent theaters that still screen foreign and auteur cinema but are small, rundown, and uncomfortable. On the other hand are the VIP Cinemas controlled by Cinépolis, which feature the same programming as multiplexes but provide a vastly more comfortable experience. The multiplex remains the standard, and therefore devalued, form of theatrical exhibition in the twenty-first century. Its alternatives could offer a preferred experience with the same content or an inferior experience with different content: one goes to the independent and repertory cinemas for the film, but one goes to the luxury cinemas for the sense of luxury. Like the customer reviews discussed previously, the *Reforma* reporter concludes that the comfortable experience provided by the VIP cinemas represents a substantial difference that makes it worth the higher ticket price, but notes that this is the only salient feature of the luxury cinemas.

In some ways, the report's opening line portends conclusions far more monumental and irrevocable than those it delivers. The search for "life after the multiplex" posits this form of exhibition as a sort of death knell, a marker that, as film exhibition runs into

72 Alejandro Ramírez Magaña, "Opening Keynote Address," Financial Times Business of Luxury Summit, Mexico City, May 12, 2014.

73 Noé Sotelo, "El confort de los 'nuevos palacios,'" *Reforma*, August 4, 2006, E18, my translation.

its second century, it has been reduced to a model that strips the cinematic experience of all granularity. Undoubtedly this claim is overstated. Film scholars continually remind us that theatrical exhibition is only one among a plethora of forms of media consumption.<sup>74</sup> Cinépolis itself continues to experiment with different theatrical models, introducing features such as a children-focused screen that includes beanbag chairs, ball pits, and a candy cart.<sup>75</sup> These variations indicate that the multiplex, like capital, proves endlessly adaptable, changing and subsuming modular forms of experience as it moves across the world.

*Reforma's* dialectic between a content-based and a context-based theatrical experience, albeit a false distinction, proves indicative of the theoretical and conceptual adjustments required to attend to the consumption of films within the broader media ecology of the twenty-first century. In particular, this bifurcation returns the specificity of film to the particularities of its exhibition. There may be characteristics of a film, like its run time or narrative economy, that make it more appropriate for theatrical exhibition than most other media. In turn, the diversification of exhibition models continues to shape the industrial forces and formal practices that influence the production of films.<sup>76</sup> Instead of a death knell, the current moment proffers an overabundance of new models of cinematic experience rising, and falling, at extraordinary speeds. These endless variations are nothing if not a new form of "life" for cinema in the multiplex era.

The intellectual task thus remains accounting for, and adequately thinking through, these myriad forms of experience. Accounting for what makes each form distinct requires that we attend to the infrastructural dimensions and the affective components that shape these experiences. Experience in the increasingly technology-mediated world of the twenty-first century includes "a patchwork of exhortatory hype, gleaming promise, highly technical gestures, and baffling or bland materialities."<sup>77</sup> The entanglement of infrastructure and affect as constitutive of experience speaks to scholarly calls for thinking about mediation more inclusively within media studies. Mediation, as Richard Grusin argues, needs to be understood ontologically as a process that is not reducible to media technologies.<sup>78</sup> The different modes of mediation that emerge from entanglements of infrastructures, affects, and bodies constitute and continually shape our experiences of media. It no longer suffices to claim that cinema begets a particular form of experience, because what cinema *does* shifts across differently located material, symbolic, and phenomenological circumstances.

74 Kevin J. Corbett, "The Big Picture: Theatrical Moviegoing, Digital Television and beyond the Substitution Effect," *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 2 (2001): 17–35; Chuck Tryon, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013); Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Useful Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

75 See "Sala Junior," at the Cinépolis website, <http://cinépolis.com/sala-junior>.

76 A recent example of this recursive effect is the concomitant advent of digital projections and resurgence of 3-D films. See David Bordwell, *Pandora's Digital Box: Films, Files, and the Future of Movies* (Madison, WI: Irvington Way Institute Press, 2012).

77 Adrian Mackenzie, *Wirelessness: Radical Empiricism in Network Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 17.

78 Richard Grusin, "Radical Mediation," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (Autumn 2015): 126.

Experience also passes through many different states, from the impersonal to the personal and from the singular to the general. In this article I have foregrounded the question “What is a global cinematic experience,” the seemingly innocuous article “a” signaling both the specificity of one instance among many and the exemplarity of any one instance. There are characteristics specific to the example of Cinépolis, such as its implication in luxury branding or the Mexican national context, that have allowed the exhibitor its current global stature. There are also generalities, like the appeal of multiplexes to a particular economic sector of the nation’s population or the controls over audiences that arise from multiplexes’ locations and sorting technologies. Gesturing toward a universal from the particular remains a crucial strategy for critique, even if, or especially because, the universal remains an unattainable dimension.<sup>79</sup> The universalizing gesture is a feature that resonates both with corporations’ globalizing strategies and with scholars’ theorizing endeavors. In this regard, the globalizing enterprises of Cinépolis also stand as a cautionary tale for critical theory projects that aim for a totalizing globality. Theory travels, but the nature of this travel must remain under scrutiny, lest it replicate modular cosmopolitanisms.

Ultimately, this study of Cinépolis’s VIP Cinemas is one example of how new forms of cinematic experiences are molded and instantiated, particularly those that appeal to a global audience. Nonetheless, it illustrates three facets that will be crucial in further efforts to theorize any global cinematic experience. The first is reimagining the relation between global and local (or national or regional) as project dependent. For instance, the Wanda Group, the world’s largest operator of cinema chains, owns Wanda Cinema in China, AMC Theaters in the United States, and Hoyt Cinema in Australia.<sup>80</sup> Its global competence is similarly dependent on its clout in each national context, but its regional expansion and its focus on industries besides film exhibition will require of scholars vastly different approaches to the global-regional dimension. A second facet is methodological eclecticism. As is increasingly evident, no one method allows for a fully rounded perspective on any global issue. Mixing methodologies, particularly conflicting ones, helps generate a better understanding of emergent cinematic forms. In the case of Cinépolis, for example, the inclusion of the interpretive methods of critical theory allows for a theorization of experience beyond that which industry analysis can reveal. Finally, there is the question of medium specificity, adapted to the realities of today’s multimedia convergence moment. A medium is not reducible to its social uses, nor is it separable from them.<sup>81</sup> Attending to cinema, or any of the media compiled into the category “media studies,” requires accounting for its material and discursive

79 Francois Jullien, *On the Universal, the Uniform, the Common and Dialogue between Cultures*, trans. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014), 2–3.

80 Matthew Miller and Shu Zhang, “China’s Dalian Wanda Buys Australian Cinema Chain Hoyts,” *Reuters*, June 2, 2015.

81 Despite the variety of influences and projects, it is notable that contemporary media theory seems committed to overcoming the long-standing false distinction between technological and social determinism. For instance, this goal is one point of connection between the otherwise distinct media theory propositions of John Durham Peters and Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska. See John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); and Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska, *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

affordances in tandem, even as these continue to fluctuate in increasingly disparate ways. It is through these three facets (the global-local relation, mixed methodologies, and medium affordances) that we can begin further investigations on new, diverse global cinematic experiences. \*