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Los Angeles’ Ethnic Cinemas

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Abstract

The author investigates ethnic movie theatres in Los Angeles in the mid-20th century, situating them in the city’s cinema landscape. By tracing the history of the LA German-language theatre, the La Tosca Filmbühne, she highlights how the cinema attempted to create a community of Germanness through its exhibition practices. She positions the audiences’ draw to these movie theatres in the context of Alison Landsberg’s notion of prosthetic memory, regarding the films screened there as evoking images and reminiscences of the viewers’ home countries. Through extensive archival research, the author also highlights the other Angeleno ethnic cinemas – Spanish language cinemas in particular – to examine what role foreign language theatres played in the cinemagoing communities of immigrant populations.

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During the mid-twentieth century, Los Angeles was home to myriad cinemas that predominantly exhibited foreign language, i.e., non-English, films. Instead of appealing to an arthouse crowd looking to catch the newest French New Wave or Italian neorealist film, these 'ethnic theatres' focused on the regular presentation of popular films currently or previously exhibited in their countries of production. The term 'ethnic theatre' stems from Douglas Gomery's seminal work on movie presentation in the United States and sets itself in contrast to arthouse cinemas. Instead, ethnic theatres focused on both linguistic ties and ethnic identity in dictating the types of movies shown, which originated primarily from countries outside the US.¹ This article will examine ethnic cinemas in Los Angeles during this period to illustrate how some Angeleno theatres capitalized on ethnic identity vis-à-vis their programming and marketing. After a historical overview of LA's ethnic cinemas, a brief discussion of Spanish-language cinema and a more in-depth focus on one German-language theatre – the La Tosca Film-bühne (*Filmbühne* is German for movie stage or movie theatre) – will highlight differences between two foreign language cinema cultures as they functioned in relation to their communities.

Because neighbourhood theatres were not large movie palaces (often well documented by journalists of the time or, later, fiercely guarded by preservationists after they ceased operation as cinemas), the histories of these places and their audiences are often obfuscated and rely on disparate pieces of information. As Alice Lovejoy has noted in a different cultural context, tracing the narratives of such histories is a daunting task,² relying on memories, searches in periodicals, or chance encounters in archives. The absence of this material also belies its importance and pushes against the dominant narrative of a monolithic Hollywood, both as the site of cinematic experience (moviegoing) and film production. This cinematic history of Los Angeles is significant for the cultural and physical history of the city's many ethnic cinemas.³

A useful concept in considering mid-century Angeleno foreign language cinemas and the cultural identities they helped shape is Alison Landsberg's notion of prosthetic memory. She argues that *through the technologies of mass culture, it becomes possible for ... [collective] memories to be acquired by anyone.*⁴ In the perspective of prosthetic memory, exhibition sites, e.g., movie theatres or museums, enable people to adopt memories of events, times, and places they did not experience themselves. The images a person encounters in such spaces become embedded in their memories and thus become their own: *prosthetic memory emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site.*⁵ The theatres, their advertisements, the films they showed to their patrons, and, occasionally, the items they sold in their lobbies all contributed to creating images of home (whether real or imagined), thereby allowing theatres to help solidify or even construct the ethnic identities of their patrons – who in the mid-twentieth century were often first-, second-, or third generation Angelenos – and create communities of cinema.⁶ Prosthetic memory could look very different in the Spanish- versus German-language ethnic cinema communities of LA.



Fig. 1. The erstwhile La Tosca theatre as seen in 2013

Although Hollywood originated as its own municipality within Los Angeles County in 1903,⁷ it was not until the early 1910s that the burg became synonymous with the motion picture industry.⁸ With the growing popularity of the fairly new medium and the rise of the studio system, Hollywood, the mecca for the industry's stars and hopefuls, eventually became metonymical with Los Angeles (though perhaps not the other way around), illustrating the city's close ties to the movie industry from its relative infancy. From the earliest days of filmmaking, theatres abounded, growing exponentially throughout the first quarter of the 20th century. Los Angeles city directories contained no listings for movie theatres in 1908 but listed 21 'moving pictures and machines' in 1909, 54 'moving pictures theatres' in 1912, and 87 'motion pictures theatres' by 1920. In these listings, we see the quick growth of popularity of moving pictures, the ongoing assessment and evolution of the medium, and where and for whom it occurred – from machine to theatre, from technology to public space.

As the movie industry grew, so, too, did exhibition spaces in Los Angeles. Already in 1927, LA boasted of itself as *the motion pictures capital of the world*.⁹ At the height of the Golden Age of Hollywood (the 1930s through the early 1940s), LA laid claim to 265 moving picture theatres.¹⁰ Alongside the plethora of movie palaces that existed in Los Angeles in order to showcase Hollywood's latest fare,¹¹ the city also hosted a large number of so-called neighbourhood theatres. These cinemas occupied smaller houses (seating usually only a few hundred) and catered to the neighbourhoods in which they were situated. While also often screening Hollywood movies, some of them came to offer films connected to particular ethnic groups.

LA's ethnic theatres: An overview

In the postwar period, Hollywood enjoyed a boom in film exhibition in both the United States and across the Atlantic.¹² However, the growing prevalence of television in American homes and its popularity would soon have a negative impact on the well-being of the film industry. Thousands of movie theatres closed in the early 1950s due to competition with television.¹³ Indeed, even technological advances, such as Cinemascope and surround sound, could do little to boost revenue during this period.¹⁴ A comparison of sixteen Angeleno metro theatres from 1935 to 1962 shows a consistent decline in box office admissions between 1948 and 1953.¹⁵ Gomery's impressive study of movie presentation in the United States suggests that small foreign language theatres could survive, especially after World War II, by catering to ethnic Americans and their interests.¹⁶ In his exhaustive analysis of Los Angeles' minor cinemas, David James illustrates this principle in that geographic region: *The same period [the 1950s] saw a major revival of public theatres specializing in classic or foreign films. ... Other theatres screened foreign films, not so much for a cosmopolitan intelligentsia, but for the city's immigrant populations, which they reached through mailing lists.*¹⁷ While plenty of theatres in the LA metro area could be found to show foreign films in the mid-20th century, those that did so for a local, ethnic audience were rarer than those interested in arthouse prestige.¹⁸

The LA ethnic theatres seem to adhere to this notion of serving a neighbourhood community. La Tosca stood just southwest of Downtown Los Angeles, blocks away from the University of Southern California (USC) campus, and existed in a neighbourhood that welcomed a community of cinemas over the course of the last century. At least twenty-five theatres stood within a three-mile radius of La Tosca's building.¹⁹ La Tosca's early history reflects a similar trajectory to smaller cinemas in the vicinity, though with an important divergence of longevity. It operated into the 1980s, whereas two nearby theatres, for example – the Trojan and Fox Adams Theatres – had very different trajectories. The Trojan closed in the early 1950s after beginning as a silent movie house and surviving multiple ownership changes. This was when La Tosca pivoted from showing popular American movies to highlighting popular German-language films, primarily without subtitles.²⁰ La Tosca worked hard to capitalize upon its linguistic and cultural offerings to build a bridge to the German-speaking community of LA.

The Fox Adams underwent a similar overhaul during the same period, changing its name to the Kabuki Theatre in the early 1960s and touting itself as an ethnic theatre for the community. Los Angeles hosted as many as four Japanese-language theatres throughout the 20th century. The Kabuki served as a forum for Japanese-language cinema before closing in the early 1970s.²¹ It catered to the 9,000 Japanese Americans in its Mid-City neighborhood in the mid-1960s. The nearby Kokusai, which closed in 1986, also presented Japanese-language films.²² In Little Tokyo was the Fiji Theatre (324 E. 1st Street), the first Japanese-language film theatre in LA.²³ When it closed in 1986, Little Tokyo Cinemas was the last Japanese-language movie house in the country.²⁴

What came to be known as the Grand International Theatre (730 S. Grand Avenue) in Downtown LA screened many international films. Throughout the 1930s and until its demolition in 1946, Russian, Yiddish, French, German, and Spanish-language films were shown there.²⁵ During this period, the now-defunct Laurel Theatre on Beverly Boulevard also hosted international films in German, French, and Spanish. The pivot to showcasing films in only one non-English-language occurred around the mid-century point, with most theatres assuming new iterations. In addition to the Japanese-language theatres in the Los Angeles metro, there was a mix of movie palaces (e.g., Million Dollar) and – mostly in Downtown LA – neighbourhood cinemas (e.g., Brooklyn), which focused exclusively on Spanish-language features.²⁶ The programmatic shift of the theatres met the need of a changing regional demographic. The Orpheum Theatre, for example, switched from vaudeville in the mid-1950s to capture the interest of Spanish-speaking patrons. According to LA theatre historian Stephen Silverman, *by then [the 1960s], too, suburbia was stretching out, and movies in general were losing their adult audience.*²⁷ Attending to the interests of the Spanish-speaking community was at the same time a survival strategy for many of those cinemas. The trajectory of Japanese, and particularly Spanish-language cinemas (the latter because of increasing scholarship on the intersection of this site and population), provides a parallel for La Tosca's development.

Spanish-language cinema in LA

Already in 1920, the Million Dollar Theatre premiered the Spanish-language film *Cuauhtémoc* (dir. Manuel de la Bandera, 1918). With the city having two of the largest Spanish-language theatres in the country, Mexican Angelenos flocked to the cinema, which, in the 1920s and 1930s, was at the center of *Mexican middle- and working-class life*.²⁸ By the mid-1940s, Spanish-language cinema had gained a strong foothold in Los Angeles. Throughout the mid-century period, nine theatres consistently presented Spanish-language films, most of them clustered in Downtown LA or within three miles of it.²⁹ Although the all-time popularity of Mexican film in LA was during World War II, there were still over 600 screens presenting Mexican productions in 1951.³⁰ Theatre managers acknowledged moviegoers' hunger for Spanish-language films from Latin America.³¹ Films were advertised in the local press, specifically targeting the Spanish-speaking population, mixing English and Spanish to appeal to their patrons. The desire to see images and scenes from the 'land of their ancestors' and visual cultural markers from Latin America drove the popularity of Spanish-language cinema. Indeed, spectators saw their time in the theatre, as one editorial put it, as connecting them to their national heritage and contemporary social themes.³² To refer to Landsberg, watching Spanish-language films from Latin America and Mexico could help audiences at these Angeleno theatres imagine themselves as part of the cultures that both produced the films and were represented on screen, thereby strengthening both the spectators' connection to – and 'memories' of – other cultural identities and their connection to the physical spaces that engendered that feeling and identification. Even as immigrant moviegoers remained far away from their home country, such representations could reignite recollections of home and extend their authentic experiences by supplementing them with new but familiar images to create a continuity of identity and experience.

Two main forces influenced Spanish-language film presentation in LA in the mid-20th century. Frank Fouce, an LA exhibitor, began presenting Spanish-language movies in March 1949 when he leased the Mayan Theatre. In addition to showing films, he occasionally included stage shows with Mexican stars appearing in person.³³ Indeed, Fouce's era of Mexican cinema exhibition defined the appeal of Mexican cinema, cultivating a public with an *extraordinary indulgence* toward anything produced south of the border.³⁴ He employed a *spectacle that was more akin to their lore and customs*.³⁵ With growing immigrant labor from Mexico in Los Angeles, Mexican films dominated Spanish-language cinemas in LA.³⁶ Fouce replicated Mexican entertainment culture in order to recreate the Mexican community of cinema in the US. He further claimed that this virtue alone accounted for the success of many of the films shown at his theatres: *For these people there are no bad movies*.³⁷ Part of his success can also be attributed to his dedication to offering new programming, bringing a different or new Spanish-language feature to the screen each week.³⁸ Sherrill Corwin of the Los Angeles-based Metropolitan Theatres chain (often advertised as La Cadena Metropolitana Los Angeles) also began marketing heavily to Spanish speakers in 1963. The Metropolitan Theatres featured both American-produced

films with Spanish subtitles and Mexican features, first at the chain's Orpheum Theatre and later at the California Theatre.³⁹

The reign of Spanish-language programming came to a close in the mid-1980s with the closure of the Teatro California and the vast programmatic shift of the Mayan Theatre.⁴⁰ Archivist and Mexican film historian Rogelio Agrasánchez Jr. attributes the declining popularity to a decentering of Spanish-language culture and the increasing affordability of videocassette recorders (VCRs) and direct consumer marketing of video tapes.⁴¹ As the opportunity to experience cinema in an intimate space arose, Landsberg's experiential site of the movie theatre could be supplanted with the spectator's living room, allowing the film viewer to curate their own experience and shape the images, histories, and memories they would acquire through film spectatorship.

From *Theatre* to *Filmbühne*: La Tosca and German film in LA

There are few traces of the La Tosca theatre, located at 2930 South Vermont Avenue (sometimes listed as 2928 S. Vermont) in Los Angeles. The theatre first opened as a MacIntyre & Pollard PhotoPlay Theatre in 1912, screening silent films with live accompaniment. In the following decades, the theatre changed hands several times. One of the first ownership changes occurred when B. H. Lustig and the Gore Brothers, Angeleno movie theatre owner/operators, merged businesses in the early 1920s and formed a partnership, Lustig & Gore, which included management of La Tosca.⁴² The theatre space had been renamed in 1920 and would bear the La Tosca moniker until its closing.⁴³ Little is known about the theatre between the Lustig & Gore period and the 1950, when a couple named Hermann and Meta Kleinhenz re-opened the theatre as La Tosca Filmbühne. This iteration of the cinema showcased popular German films (in German, without subtitles) until closing its doors as a theatre in the early 1980s.⁴⁴

When the Kleinhenzs took over operations of the La Tosca, they turned from the theatre's practice of primarily screening popular American features to focus on programming popular German-language films. Considering the national background of the couple, this choice was hardly a surprise. Hermann was born in 1915 and immigrated with his parents in 1924 to the United States from Germany, where the family spoke German at home.⁴⁵ Meta also was born abroad (likely in a German-speaking country) in 1902.⁴⁶ By the time the couple opened La Tosca (the first Angeleno German cinema) in 1950, Los Angeles boasted a large and thriving German population.⁴⁷

Between 1950 and 1960, more than half a million Germans immigrated to the United States.⁴⁸ By 1960, almost one million German-born people lived in the country.⁴⁹ In Los Angeles city, 17,302 people indicated having been born in Germany on the 1950 census.⁵⁰ American soldiers stationed abroad returned with German brides,⁵¹ and the German-born who settled in California joined Midwestern citizens of German heritage who flocked to California, especially LA and Hollywood, contributing to its multiple population booms.⁵² As the years passed, multiple generations of heritage German speakers emerged from these

native German speakers. Other German speakers came from local universities (including the University of Southern California), which offered German language and culture classes and stocked their faculties, especially their German departments, with émigré scholars. There was also a large exile community of Jewish and political refugees within the German-speaking population. From 1945 to 1950, the population of Jews in Los Angeles (city) rose from 150,000 to 250,000. By 1953, 10,000 more refugees were part of that population.⁵³

The composition of 'German' Los Angeles in the mid-20th century is a complex notion, made up of many who might claim – or reject – identification as German or German American. For example, in the prewar period, LA was home to Germans who, in the 1930s, were part of the German American Bund, an organization that supported a pro-Nazi agenda, as well as Jewish refugees, and, of course, German immigrants and their descendants who claimed no connection to Hitler or the Third Reich.⁵⁴ Those who spoke German and attended La Tosca had diverse reasons for doing so, which will be briefly touched upon later.

When the Kleinhenzs (re)opened La Tosca, they focused on engaging a German-speaking audience through advertisements, film programs, and, of course, films – usually a double feature with a new release and a *Reprise*, i.e., an older film. They also cultivated a loyal following by partnering with businesses with a German bent, e.g., *Przybilla Wurst-Fabrik* [Sausage Factory] or Peter Teichmann's *Deutsch-Amerikanischer Rundfunk* [German-American Radio], to advertise in their film program. For a time, they even hosted an import business adjacent to their lobby to provide patrons access to German goods. Hermann would preside over the theatre, Meta over the shop.⁵⁵ The inclusion of the latter to sling goods 'from home' was a tactic utilized by similar ethnic theatres on the East Coast that were part of the same German-language film distribution network. The Casino Theatre in New York City served as the primary importer of German-language films to the twelve German-language theatres in the United States, as well as the nexus for a network screening these films across the country.⁵⁶

Although German films could be seen at different cinemas (e.g., occasional screenings at the aforementioned Laurel Theatre, as well as the Sunset and Coronet Theatres, and even the Hermann-Söhne Halle, a central meeting point for the German community), the opening of La Tosca meant the only consistent presentation of popular contemporary German-language productions. The popular postwar West German *Heimat* genre dominated the Casino's import from the West German film industry (East German films did not grace the screens of the Casino or La Tosca theatres). The word *Heimat* has no direct translation but can mean home, homeland, a home country, or how one feels connected to or at home. As a film genre, *Heimatfilme* (*Heimat* films) referred to West German film productions, mainly from the 1950s and early 1960s, that set love stories within bucolic and rural German landscapes. These films contained traditional costumes and music and veered away from any mention of Germany's recent past and the atrocities committed during the Third Reich. La Tosca's double-features mainly presented *Heimat* films, new and old, with an opening screening of a newsreel program. They first screened one of the first newsreels, *Blick in die Welt* (from the French-occupied section of West Germany), and later replaced it with the Ham-

burg-based *Neue Deutsche Wochenschau*. In addition to announcing their programmatic choices for the year and advertising to the German-speaking Angeleno community, the theatre's published program often reproduced newspaper ads-cum-editorials. In one such editorial, when the theatre first began publishing its program semi-annually, the Kleinhenzs displayed a cognizance of the critical reputation of postwar films, stating: *Recently, one hears a lot about the stagnation in German film production, however, that has no influence on our coming season, as we have the best on offer for the coming year.*⁵⁷ The statement is at once a justification and defense for the theatre's programming, which would remain surprisingly consistent throughout La Tosca's lifespan – popular West German films, with an emphasis on *Heimat*, with a constant focus on films from the 1950s through early 1960s. Even once the more critically acclaimed films of the New German Cinema filmmakers, e.g., Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, Alexander Kluge, Helma Sanders-Brahms, etc., were released in the 1960s and 1970s, La Tosca steadfastly adhered to the mainstream (and often formulaic) films of the previous decade.

Indeed, this tactic was perhaps not the most business savvy. La Tosca patron Jon Lellenberg recalls how, in the late 1960s, the theatre's *audiences usually filled only a small percentage of the seats.*⁵⁸ Most of the audience at that time consisted of middle-aged Germans, and the films were mostly without subtitles, an ideal condition for a USC student of German, but maybe not for attracting a broad audience.⁵⁹ The German films' content and the marketing materials all worked to try to call into being a discrete and homogenous German community when the realities of audience composition worked against a strong, unified ethnic identification. The content of *Heimat* films could only play at constructing a German identity: the genre largely showed an imagined Germany that called upon nostalgia for a non-existent prewar idyll.⁶⁰ Utilizing *Heimat* films to convey a connection to Germany works against the creation of prosthetic memory precisely because the life such films conveyed did not exist in Germany. These films would thus not have been able to connect the viewers – neither through screenings at La Tosca nor through narrative content – to a cinematic community the way Frank Fouce and others tapped into with Spanish-language film presentation. What the concept of home meant in a German-speaking community attending the movie theatre was too disparate and contentious to undergird a community of the *Filmbühne*.

This was not for lack of trying, though. In La Tosca's film program, the Kleinhenzs attempted to assert themselves and their theatre in the German and German American communities in Los Angeles, claiming familiarity with their audience. This is apparent in the different tones of address in their marketing materials. In the aforementioned article, published originally in a newspaper and reprinted in their calendar, the couple are careful to use the formal second person singular pronoun in German, i.e., *Sie*. That, however, morphs into the informal tone of address in their direct outreach to patrons, where they use *dir* (the informal second person singular) and the informal imperative (*Denk daran – mach dir ein paar schöne stunden – geh ins kino [sic]*⁶¹) on the same page. In the materials that directly connect them to their customers, this simple linguistic change marks the relationship between patron and proprietor as more than transactional; it places

La Tosca and their patrons within the German-speaking community in a friendly exchange, connoting at least some intimacy. These familiar moments dot each year's programs in little editorial asides, reminding La Tosca patrons to patronize German businesses (especially those advertised in the theatre's film program) or wishing them Easter or Christmas greetings. The Californian German American weeklies (LA's *California Staats-Zeitung* /CSZ/ and the San Francisco-based *California Freie Presse* /CFP/) utilized similar tactics in communicating with and advertising to their audience.

When the *Filmbühne* first opened, the German community seemed to be more concentrated (at least geographically) than in the theatre's later years. Looking at the advertisers in the CSZ shortly before La Tosca opened as a German-language theatre, there is a clustering of businesses supporting the German American paper, the majority (ca. 95 percent) advertising in German. Sixty-two percent of the businesses that advertised with the CSZ in 1945 were located within a three-mile radius of Downtown Los Angeles. In 1971, only fourteen percent of the businesses advertising in the CSZ were within the same area.⁶² While this observation is neither conclusive nor comprehensive, it does point to a gradual dispersal of the community with an interest in German culture over time. And although not at the epicenter of the German-speaking Angeleno community, as graphed below, La Tosca lay firmly within close proximity to other German-interest businesses.

No matter how strongly the Kleinhenzs proclaimed a connection to their German community, the strictly German programming was not enough to maintain the theatre. The rapid decline in German immigration is mirrored in the increased exhibition of films from other countries to other foreign language-speaking audiences (see footnotes 48 and 68). La Tosca started screening Czech films as early as 1953, shortly after opening as a German cinema (Figure 3).⁶³ However, irrespective of their presentation of films from other national cinemas, the Kleinhenzs still saw La Tosca as a German theatre. In lieu of their regular advertisement and editorial in the CFP, a 1960 *Mitteilung* [announcement] defended their position as the only German movie theatre, arguing that there was no room for a rival venue that intended to present the same or similar German features. It clearly positioned the cinema as part of – indeed, serving – the German community in LA. They painted themselves as trailblazers in the presentation of German culture and as one of the only places to be entertained in the German language and to advance and adhere to German values. La Tosca, they contended, was opened in spite of extreme hatred for *alles Deutsche* (everything German).⁶⁴ Rather than an amicable appeal to their German-speaking community, this letter reads as a threat. The theatre claimed it could not brook competition for the thousands of Angeleno German speakers.

Perhaps, unlike the Spanish-speaking community with its multiple cinemas in the LA metro, the German community would only support one theatre, dooming others to financial ruin. After all, as mentioned, the theatre's business for German films was not exactly booming. This appeal was possibly an attempt

to block competition and secure La Tosca's role in the community. However, the theatre's tactic to position itself as solely allied with and providing kindred service to the German community was clearly self-serving. Although the dominant programming throughout most of its existence as a German ethnic cinema consisted of popular German films, the theatre showed films from other parts of the world throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. While projecting its image as the soul of German culture in Los Angeles, La Tosca was, in part, a theatre with an international screen. A 1970 program reveals that German film showtimes in May of that year (*On the Green Meadow / Auf der grünen Wiese*, dir. Fritz Böttger, 1953/ and *Yes, Yes, Love in Tyrol / Ja, ja, die Liebe in Tirol*, dir. Géza von Bolváry, 1955/) would end early in favor of an *Indische Vorstellung* (presentation of an Indian film),⁶⁵ with a *Los Angeles Times* theatre listing confirming this practice of screening Indian films with English subtitles a year later. At the very end of the theatre's run, it added Korean films to its programming, calling itself a foreign-language arthouse.⁶⁶

As the years passed, English, too, began creeping into La Tosca's programming and, on occasion, onto its screen. Gilbert von Studnitz, who watched movies at the theatre in the 1950s, noticed that more and more English was spoken as younger Germans (the immigrants' children) learned English. With time, English became more dominant in 'German circles,' particularly as the older, first-generation community members passed away.⁶⁷ This had a marked impact on the vitality of La Tosca, and the program calendar began to reflect this change. For example, a 1964 ad for the double program of *The Confessions of Felix Krull* (*Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull*, dir. Kurt Hoffmann, 1957) and *Eternal Love* (*Heideschulmeister Uwe Karsten*, dir. Hans Deppe, 1954) listed the films' titles in German while promoting the (rare) English subtitles. Short reviews of both films in English were included, which even anglicized the name of the actor playing the title character in the first film from Horst Buchholz to Henry Bookholt.⁶⁸

Since interest in movies from 'home' dwindled as generations became more and more removed from German-speaking Europe, La Tosca had to adjust its own image of Germanness to accommodate those still interested in that old film fare. Conflating German-speaking with German identity in the theatre space became less and less of a successful tactic, both in theory and in practice. Just as the decentering of Spanish-language culture and the rise of home video in the 1980s adversely affected Spanish-language film presentation at cinemas in LA, so, too, did the German-speaking community see a decentering of its population. Although ethnic theatres here had strong support throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, they, too, felt the impact of changing technologies and interests, with video supplanting film.⁶⁹ And, while German immigrants flocked to the United States in the 1950s and 60s (approximately 790,000 people), in the 1970s that number fell dramatically to only 65,000 people.⁷⁰

Both migratory and technological trends greatly impacted the dwindling success of the *Filmbühne*, which would eventually close. Afterward, Hermann filled the theatre with canisters of the films he showed at La Tosca and ran a distribution service, mainly supplying Alpine Village – a German-themed entertainment village in Torrance, CA – with *Heimatfilme* throughout the 1980s and until his murder in 2001.⁷¹ Nothing now remains of La Tosca Filmbühne, which was

demolished so that an apartment building could be built in its place. While still a German theatre, Venetian murals of its earlier incarnations adorned the interior of the house. Through the 2010s, the building stood on the corner of West 30th and Vermont, its façade visible under cell phone carrier advertisements and a barber's sign. It remained a sort of architectural palimpsest, retaining just a hint of what came before. Memories and traces of La Tosca remained but were only visible with the scrutiny that historical context can provide.

As an ethnic cinema, La Tosca was full of contradictions, which perhaps hint at its ruin. While trying to manifest a robust German patronage, the theatre always struggled to maintain a loyal and constant base to support its fanciful programming, and in its later years, resorted to trying to attract other cinema tastes under-represented in Hollywood, all while trying to maintain its integral standing in the German American community. As cinematic tastes changed, the German-speaking community outgrew the unchanging landscape of the *Heimatfilm*, and the screen darkened in this cinema. However, lacking an involved community that identified with the films screened did not disadvantage La Tosca any more or less than it did the aforementioned Spanish-language cinemas, all of which have ceased operations in that capacity.⁷² Ethnic cinemas across the US are a relic of the 20th century. As with the twilighting of ethnic newspapers (*CFP* and *CSZ*) and the gradual closing of German businesses, such ethnic cinemas as La Tosca could only briefly preserve and forward notions of ethnic identity in the communities that patronized them.



Fig. 2. La Tosca in 1981.
Photo courtesy of Gerald DeLuca



Fig. 3. Photographer Julius Shulman, known for his iconic images of Los Angeles, shot this photo in 1953 while on assignment #1557 for Bank of America. Source: © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10)

- ¹ D. Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, British Film Institute, London 1992, p. 171, p. 195. Gomery's chapter, "Ethnic Theatres and Art Cinemas," provides an overview of ethnic cinemas in relation to non-English-language films presented throughout the United States.
- ² A. Lovejoy, "'Video Knows No Borders': Samizdat Television and the Unofficial Public Sphere in 'Normalized' Czechoslovakia", in: *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism*, eds. F. Kind-Kovács, J. Labov, Berghahn, New York 2013, pp. 206-218.
- ³ There are countless histories on the rise of Hollywood and the film industry, as well as the development and theorizing of Los Angeles. See for example: O. Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940s*, Harper Perennial, New York 1987, or *The American Film Industry*, ed. T. Balio, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1985.
- ⁴ A. Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York 2004, p. 2.
- ⁵ Ibidem.
- ⁶ J. Forsher, *The Community of Cinema: How Cinema and Spectacle Transformed the American Downtown*, Praeger, Westport 2003. In his book, Forsher looks closely at the communities that patronized small, neighbourhood movie theatres and the role these theatres played in that community's life, as well as the marketing tactics, the building's function, and other aspects of new cinema history.
- ⁷ [NN], "Hollywood is a Municipality", *Los Angeles Herald*, Los Angeles 15.11.1903, Sunday morning, p. 6.
- ⁸ L. Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film*, Harcourt, Brace and Co., New York 1939, p. 85.
- ⁹ LA City Directory 1927, p. 8.
- ¹⁰ See: LA City Directory 1942, p. 12. By way of comparison, Los Angeles only had 60 stage theatres in 1942.
- ¹¹ Among the best known are the still operational Million Dollar Theatre in Downtown LA and the Grauman Egyptian and Chinese Theatres (now the Netflix Egyptian and TCL Chinese Theatres) in Hollywood. Such movie palaces seated well over 1,000 patrons, some accommodating as many as 2,500. For more information, see the Los Angeles Historic Theatre Foundation's website; S. Tarbell Cooper, A. Ronnebeck Hall, A. M. Wanamaker *Theatres in Los Angeles*, Arcadia Publishing, Charleston 2008; or R. Berger, A. Conser's *The Last Remaining Seats*, Hennessey & Ingalls, Santa Fe 2004.
- ¹² J. Stokes, *On Screen Rivals: Cinema and Television in the United States and Britain*, St. Martin's Press, New York 2000.
- ¹³ W. Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1990. Frequent articles in *Variety* from 1951-1953 confirm this, repeatedly reporting on massive theatre shutterings and ways in which the industry attempted to drive the public back into cinemas.
- ¹⁴ Tom B'hend and Preston Kaufmann collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, f.281. First accumulated by Tom B'hend and then later maintained by Preston Kaufmann, this collection contains extensive material about hundreds of movie theatres throughout the United States from the late 19th century through the late 20th century, with a strong emphasis on metropolitan areas, including Los Angeles. John Miller of the Los Angeles Historic Theatre Foundation comments in a 1954 timeline excerpt on the Alexander Theatre in Glendale: *This new technology [Cinemascope, surround sound] boosts business, which is slackening off due to impact of television*. This note was however quickly followed by showing the continuing decline in the latter part of the decade: *1960s: Balcony closes due to smaller audiences, following the trend of theatres nationwide*.
- ¹⁵ B'hend and Kaufmann collection, op. cit.
- ¹⁶ D. Gomery, op. cit., pp. 171-173.
- ¹⁷ D. E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*, University of California, Berkeley 2005, p. 221.
- ¹⁸ B'hend and Kaufmann collection, op. cit., f.148. For example, the Beverly Hills Fine Arts Theatre showed 'fine art' foreign films in the late 1950s.
- ¹⁹ B'hend and Kaufmann collection, op. cit. By mapping the theatres identified in the Los Angeles portion of this collection, the city's cinematic topography could be determined.
- ²⁰ N. Neuman, "Images of Germanness and L.A.'s Mid-twentieth Century German-Speaking Community", *Jewish Culture and History* 2016, vol. 17, no. 1-2, pp. 152-168.
- ²¹ [NN], "Independent Theatre Guide", *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles 12.06.1971, p. A5 and 1.04.1964: n.p.
- ²² [NN], "Theatres in Los Angeles Escape as Riots Wreck nearby Buildings", *BoxOffice*

- 23.08.1965, n.p. See also: K. Thomas, "Last Picture Show in Little Tokyo", *Los Angeles Times* 31.10.1990, n.p. The Kabuki was at 4413 West Adams Boulevard, and the Kosukai stood at 3020 Crenshaw Boulevard.
- ²³ B'hend and Kaufmann collection, op. cit., f.385. See Bruce LaLanne's notes: "Theatres of Los Angeles – 1870-1994".
- ²⁴ K. Thomas, op. cit.
- ²⁵ B'hend and Kaufmann collection, op. cit., f.840. See Bruce LaLanne's notes, op. cit.
- ²⁶ For information on theatres that presented Spanish-language films, see B'hend and Kaufmann collection, op. cit., f.382, f.386, f.441, f.443, f.449, f.664, and f.705.
- ²⁷ S. Silverman, "Introduction", in: R. Berger, A. Conser, *The Last Remaining Seats: Movie Palaces of Tinseltown*, Hennessey & Ingalls, Santa Fe 2004, p. 8.
- ²⁸ R. Agrasánchez Jr., *Mexican Movies in the United States: A History of the Films, Theaters and Audiences, 1920-1960*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson 2006, p. 4, pp. 47-48. In 1930, the population of Mexicans in LA was 123,800.
- ²⁹ The following movie theatres, for a time, all consistently presented Spanish-language films. None have survived into the 21st century as presenters of Spanish-language programming. Broadway Theatre (428 S. Broadway), now closed; Olympic Theatre (313 W. 8th Street), closed; Orpheum Theatre (842 S. Broadway), open as an stage and events theatre; Brooklyn Theatre (2524 E. Cesar E. Chavez Avenue, formerly Brooklyn Avenue), closed in 1989; Mayan Theatre (1040 S. Hill Street), open as a nightclub and event venue; California Theatre (810 S. Main Street), closed and building demolished in 1990; Mason Theatre (127 S. Broadway), closed; Million Dollar Theatre (a 1918 Sid Grauman movie palace at 307 S. Broadway), open primarily as an events center; Victor Theatre (1718 S. Main Street), closed. See also: B'hend and Kaufmann collection, op. cit., f.441, f.449.
- ³⁰ R. Agrasánchez Jr., op. cit., p. 58, p. 2.
- ³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.
- ³² *Ibidem*, p. 39, pp. 8-12.
- ³³ B'hend and Kaufmann collection, op. cit., f.664. See Bruce LaLanne's note on the Mayan Theatre.
- ³⁴ R. Agrasánchez Jr., op. cit., p. 15.
- ³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 47.
- ³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 50.
- ³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 15.
- ³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 53.
- ³⁹ B'hend and Kaufmann collection, op. cit., f.386, f.449, f.705. See also Metropolitan Theatres' company history: "About Us", *Metropolitan Theatres*, <https://www.metrotheatres.com/about-us/> (accessed: 24.11.2023).
- ⁴⁰ R. Agrasánchez Jr., op. cit., p. 60. B'hend and Kaufmann collection, f.664. See Bruce LaLanne's notes on the Mayan's switch from presenting Spanish-language films to adult films.
- ⁴¹ R. Agrasánchez, Jr., op. cit., p. 68.
- ⁴² The Gore Brothers merged holdings with another theatre owner, Sol Lesser, in 1921 in a multi-million-dollar deal to become the West Coast Theatres Company. La Tosca was part of that merger, which included several *neighborhood house[s]*. BH Lustig's and Michael Gore's merger (as Lustig & Gore, already by 1923) had offices adjacent to the theatre, where, until that time, a number of confectioners had operated businesses. See: LA City Directories, 1921-1923, and: "Many Theatres in Big Merger", *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles 11.01.1921, p. 1.
- ⁴³ See: LA City Directories, 1915-1918, 1920. The cinema was a PhotoPlay Theatre until at least 1918. No directory information from 1919 is available.
- ⁴⁴ See: N. Neuman, op. cit. As a small neighbourhood theatre, La Tosca did not garner the same preservation efforts as large and well-known LA film palaces (e.g., The Chinese Theatre). In the early 2010s, the theatre space still stood but contained four other storefronts and businesses. Information gathered here stems from the Kinemathek's document collection, as well as from the Los Angeles County Library, the Margaret Herrick Library, and personal interviews with former patrons.
- ⁴⁵ "United States Census, 1930", *FamilySearch*, 14.04.2001, <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.3.1/TH-1942-22822-29636-85?cc=1810731> (accessed: 29.03.2016). The 1930 census data listed his name as "Herman," which was likely an anglicizing of his German name. Though his death certificate also listed his name as "Herman" he reclaimed the Germanic spelling "Hermann" in the theatre's programs, and this is how he is referred to in this text.
- ⁴⁶ "United States Social Security Death Index", *FamilySearch*, 25.07.1993, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JTHV-V3V> (accessed 29.03.2016).
- ⁴⁷ LA City Directory, 1942, p.12. The 1942 LA City Directory lists German as one of

- the most dominant immigrant nationalities in Los Angeles. [NN], "Programm der 'Neuen Deutschen Filmbühne'", *California Staats-Zeitung* 1.12.1950, p. 5.
- ⁴⁸ A. Ebert, "California Staats-Zeitung begeht ihr Goldenes Jubiläum", *California Staats-Zeitung* 4.05.1968, p. 2; [NN], "The Germans in America", *The Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/european/imde/germchro.html> (accessed: 15.11.2023).
- ⁴⁹ E. M. Grieco and others, *The Size, Place of Birth, and Geographic Distribution of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 1960-2010*, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C. 2012. In 1960, 989,815 people living in the U. S. identified as German-born, accounting for approximately 10 percent foreign-born citizens. This number was second only to those born in Italy. An earlier census report indicated that most immigration from Germany occurred before this year. See: S. J. Lapham, *We the American... Foreign Born*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1993.
- ⁵⁰ This number does not include the greater metropolitan area of Los Angeles and, thus, is much lower than if including adjacent areas. See: H. G. Brunsman, *United States Census of Population, 1950. Census Tract Statistics. Los Angeles and Adjacent Area*, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 1952.
- ⁵¹ A. Ebert, op. cit.
- ⁵² *History of Los Angeles County*, ed. J. S. McGroarty, The American Historical Society, Inc., Chicago 1923. In the early 1920s, the Midwest contributed heavily to LA's population boom. See also: J. Heimann, K. Starr, D. Ulin, *Los Angeles Portrait of a City*, Taschen, Cologne 2009, p. 184.
- ⁵³ M. Vorspan, L. P. Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1970.
- ⁵⁴ For information on the German American Bund and pre-WWII activities in Los Angeles, see: Steven Ross, *Hitler in Los Angeles: How Jews Foiled Nazi Plots Against Hollywood and America*, Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., New York 2017.
- ⁵⁵ J. Lellenberg, personal communication, 25.04.2015.
- ⁵⁶ [NN], "Eine Mitteilung an unsere staendigen Besucher! Ein deutsches Kino oder gar keines!", *California Freie Presse* 12.12.1960, p. 10.
- ⁵⁷ *Man hat in letzter Zeit des öfteren von der Flaute in der deutschen Filmproduktion gehört; das hat jedoch auf unsere kommende Saison keinen Einfluss, denn wir haben für das kommende Jahr das Beste, was zu haben war.* See Deutsche Kinemathek's "Hausprogramme USA" and "Los Angeles, CA – La Tosca" folders in their document collection.
- ⁵⁸ J. Lellenberg, op. cit.
- ⁵⁹ Ibidem. Agrasánchez echoes both points in his text, claiming that the cinematic fare in the Angeleno Spanish-language cinemas allowed non-Latinx and non-Hispanic patrons to practice their passive Spanish skills since few of the Mexican films had English subtitles. R. Agrasánchez Jr., op. cit., p. 12, p. 23.
- ⁶⁰ N. Neuman, op. cit., pp. 163-164. See this article for a more detailed discussion of the German identity in the Los Angeles area in the mid-20th century.
- ⁶¹ Eng.: *Remember this – Take a few lovely hours and go to the cinema!*
- ⁶² To create these maps, I catalogued every advertiser in the first January issue of the CSZ in 1945 and 1971. Copies of the CSZ are scant, and only random years are available through the Library of Congress and the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen in Stuttgart. In 1945, 34 out of 55 businesses were near Downtown LA; in 1971, 17 of 121 were in the same area.
- ⁶³ Showing Czech films in 1953 may have also been a complicated gesture by a German theatre. Though originally part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (the Kingdom of Bohemia) during the early 20th century, a separate country (Czechoslovakia) formed in 1918 and remained a democratic republic until 1937, before portions (the Sudetenland) being accessioned by the Third Reich in 1938. In the post-WWII years, the country was a socialist republic under the influence of the Soviet Union. Germans were considered an ethnic minority in Czechoslovakia, with the Sudetenland primarily consisting of German speakers. Today, German is recognized as a minority language in the Czech Republic.
- ⁶⁴ [NN], "Eine Mitteilung an unsere staendigen Besucher! Ein deutsches Kino oder gar keines!", op. cit.
- ⁶⁵ "Hausprogramme USA" and "Los Angeles, CA – La Tosca" folders, op. cit.
- ⁶⁶ The exact date of La Tosca's demise is unknown, though it was likely in 1981. The image in Figure 2, however, was taken that year. The photographer claimed the theatre still screened films at the time but was winding down. The Los Angeles County Library

has a gap from 1975 to 1982 in its LA City Directories. La Tosca is listed in the 1975 edition but not in 1982.

⁶⁷ G. von Studnitz, personal communication, 8.07.2013.

⁶⁸ See Deutsche Kinemathek's "Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull 1957 dir. Hoffmann 1836" sleeve; "Hausprogramme USA"; "Los Angeles, CA – La Tosca", op. cit.

⁶⁹ D. E. James, op. cit., p. 298. See also: David N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 26.

⁷⁰ [NN], "The Germans in America", op. cit.

⁷¹ M. Tau, personal communication, 15.03.2014; "The Homicide Report", *Los Angeles Times* 14.04.2001, <http://homicide.latimes.com/neighborhood/beverly-crest/year/all>, (accessed 23.03.2015).

⁷² The Mayan is now primarily a live event venue, though it still maintains a rich Spanish-language events calendar. To the author's knowledge, there are no contemporary Angeleno movie theatres presenting exclusively or partially Spanish-language films.

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Słowa kluczowe:

Los Angeles;
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kino;
kina etniczne;
historia filmu
niemieckiego;
Amerykanie
niemieckiego
pochodzenia

Abstrakt

Nichole Neuman

Kina etniczne Los Angeles

Autorka bada kina etniczne w Los Angeles w połowie XX w., umiejscawiając je w szerszym krajobrazie kinowym miasta. Śledzi historię niemieckojęzycznego kina La Tosca Film-bühne, podkreślając, w jaki sposób próbowało ono stworzyć wspólnotę niemieckości poprzez praktyki repertuarowe. Autorka odczytuje duże zainteresowanie widowni kinami etnicznymi przez pryzmat koncepcji pamięci protetycznej autorstwa Alison Landsberg i wskazuje, że filmy wyświetlane w tych miejscach przywoływały obrazy i wspomnienia z krajów pochodzenia widzów. Szeroko zakrojone badania archiwalne pozwalają jej przyjrzeć się również innym kinom etnicznym w Los Angeles – w szczególności hiszpańskojęzycznym – w celu zbadania roli, jaką kina obcojęzyczne odegrały dla widzów ze społeczności imigrantów.