

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Drive-In Theaters

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, March 25th, 2020

While reading a recent [article in the *Los Angeles Times*](#) about some drive-in theaters staying open and offering relief to families with children in these times of Coronavirus fear, I remembered being intrigued by this very American institution, that does not exist in other countries, after moving to Los Angeles in the 1970s. Since I was a photojournalist, I decided to create a photographic essay and research the history of drive-ins. My article was published in the travel magazine *Westways* in April 1979. Foreign publications like Italian *Vogue* ran a 2-page spread.



The only drive-in left within the city of Los Angeles was the [Gilmore](#) on Third Street and Fairfax, and in 1977 I did go there with my boyfriend to finally have that experience. By the time I went to photograph it in 1978, it was closed for business, but the Streamline Modern style structure built in 1948 was still standing.



Victory Drive-In. North Hollywood (c) Elisa Leonelli 1978

Many drive-ins were still operating in the greater Los Angeles area, so I mapped them out and went to photograph them all. Only a few are left today. The most fascinating visually were those with a mural painted on the back of the screen, others had colorful neon signs.



El Monte Drive-In. El Monte (c) Elisa Leonelli 1978

In Italy, where I grew up, we had outdoor theaters, in my hometown of Modena we went to Cinema Estivo, still operating to this day. [Click here](#) for the summer 2019 program and a photo. The “hard top” cinemas would close for 3 months in the summer, because of the lack of air conditioning, and these open-air arenas opened. We did not need to get there by car, we just walked and sat in chairs. As children, we loved cracking open and eating “romelline” pumpkin seeds in their salted shells, while watching the movie.



Lakewood Drive-In, Long Beach (c) Elisa Leonelli 1978.

In the opening paragraphs of my article, that the *Westways* editor cut from the published piece, I imagined what the drive-in theater experience would have been like growing up in America. You may read them below.



Valley Drive-In, Montclair (c) Elisa Leonelli 1978

PASSION PITS IN PICTURES

A pictorial survey of Drive-In Theatres In Southern California

by ELISA LEONELLI (c) 1978

“Everyone must have a fond memory of a drive-in theatre experience somewhere in his past, and it most likely happened in the 50s. If you were a teenager in the 50s you probably remember the time you were necking heavily in the back seat with your first boyfriend and you didn’t even know which movie was on the giant screen outside. And maybe your virginity was saved only by the flashlight of the drive-in attendant, who, not seeing any heads above the window, came over to make sure you didn’t go all the way. Or if you were a child maybe you remember that time when your parents put you in your pajamas to go out, and you thought it was strange. Then you drove out to this outdoor playground where you had popcorn and coke and candy, and you played and played with a bunch of other kids you didn’t know, and then you fell asleep before the motion picture show even got started.



Tri-City Drive-in, Loma Linda (c) Elisa Leonelli 1978

“Yes the drive-in theatres were very popular in the early fifties, and more so because they were a novelty. The typical product of a culture based on the automobile and spawned by the postwar boom of the pleasure car. It’s a typically American phenomenon (very few other countries, except Canada and Australia, have many drive-ins), popularized by people who like to go everywhere in the great outdoors sitting comfortably in their cars.

“Interestingly enough the first concept of a drive-in theatre was conceived by a gas station owner, who wanted to entertain his customers while they were waiting in line for gas (we were then in a depression). Still today the gas station is the typical form of drive-in service, among a wide variety of drive-in outfits like drive-in cafes, drive-in banks and even drive-in churches.”



For the complete series of 60 photographs [click on drive-in theaters](#) in the [Elisa Leonelli Photojournalist](#) collection at the Claremont Colleges Digital Library.



Rubidoux Drive-In, Riverside (c) Elisa Leonelli 1978

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