
The Architecture of the Illusive Distance

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Sounding Space

From early to mid 1930s, movie-theater design in the United States underwent a profound transformation. By the end of the decade, new movie-theaters bore little resemblance to the movie-theaters of the preceding decade (Figure 1 & Figure 2). The call for change had come at least as early as 1927 from, among others, Seymour Stern, the noted film critic. However, it was not until the early 1930s that the movie palaces of the preceding decade were supplanted by a new movie-theater design, of which Benjamin Schlanger's Thalia Theater of 1932 was a pioneering example.

The call for change in movie-theater design and its eventual realization coincide all too conspicuously with the introduction and eventual widespread adoption of sound in movies. Although introduced to a wider audience in 1927, it was not until the early 1930s that the initial technological challenges were overcome, the novelty dissipated and the "talkies" became merely movies.¹

The initial Vitaphone or sound-on-disk technology proved notoriously unreliable for keeping image and sound in sync.² It was not until the early 1930s, when it was abandoned in favor of sound-on-film technology that the synchronization problems that besieged early "talkies" were finally overcome.³ It took equally long to realistically reproduce the human voice. It is approximately at this latter date that a new movie-theater design comes into vogue. In the meantime, Alexander Bakshy's complaint about being "treated to hollow and squawking and lisping voices, and even to imperfect synchronization" remained commonplace.⁴

Significant as the introduction of sound was and closely as it was followed by calls for change in movie-theater design, besides their temporal coincidence, movie-theater historians have found no apparent connection between the widespread adoption of sound and the advent of a new movie-theater design. For instance, "the rise of the talkies and the simultaneous demise of the Atmospheric Theater," Richard Stapleford notes, "seem too coincidental to be unrelated. Yet a clear causal link between the two phenomena is difficult to establish."⁵ The link is indeed difficult to establish insofar as it is posited as a technological and/or acoustic question.

"Equipping an auditorium for 'sound movies' is," the RCA engineer Harry Braun noted in a 1932 issue of *Architectural Forum*, "a simple procedure, being merely a



Fig. 1 - Thomas W. Lamb, B. F. Keith Memorial Theatre, Boston MA, 1928

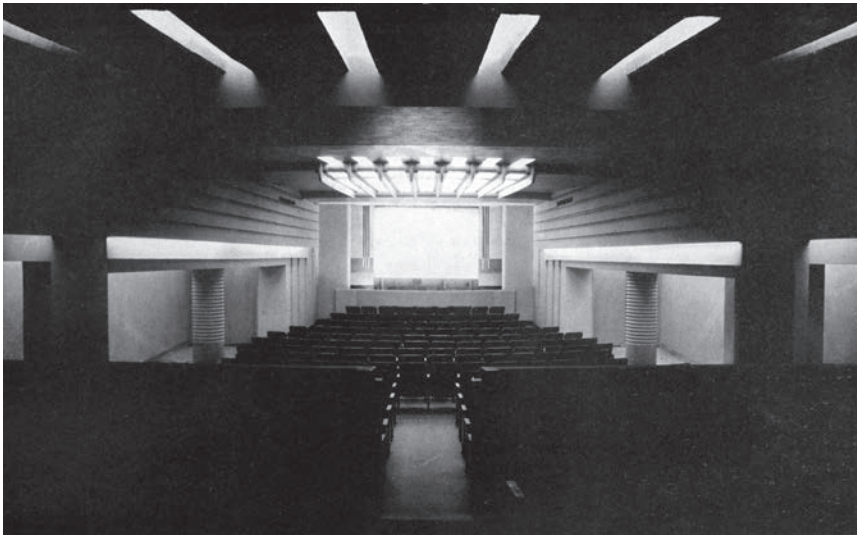


Fig. 2 - Benjamin Schelanger, Thalia Theater, New York, NY, 1932

matter of selecting the necessary equipment and making provision for proper installation in conformation with applicable laws or ordinances and in accordance with manufacturers' specifications."⁶ This procedure was the same for movie-theaters designed

before or after the introduction of sound. Along with new theaters, the movie palaces of the 1920s were retrofitted for mechanical sound, and many remained in operation for decades to come. The change was not, in other words, a technological mandate.

Whereas the movie-theaters of the 30s could rely from the outset on mechanical amplification of sound in the auditorium, the movie palaces of the 1920s had to rely solely on the auditorium design to ensure ample and even distribution of sound throughout their very large auditoria (upwards of 5000 seats). In this respect, the architects of the movie palaces largely excelled.⁷ Aside from placing sound horns behind the movie screen and related mechanical equipment in the projection room, the movie palace auditoria required little to no modification. In other words, if the movie-theater design changed in the 1930s, it was not to achieve better acoustics. In fact, the redesigned auditoria of the new movie-theaters were, to a degree, acoustically regressive. Whereas an auditorium that is “high, rather than deep,” as Edwin Newcomb noted in 1930, allows “the preponderance of melody from a multitude of voices and musical instruments to rise and blend into a pleasing consistency before reaching the listener,” the longer, narrower, and smaller auditoria introduced in the 1930s taxed the audio technology of the day.⁸ It presented a distinct challenge to the even distribution of sound throughout the auditorium. As Fredric Pawley noted in a 1932 issue of *Architectural Record*, “the volume of sound sufficient to reach distant seats is generally too great for seats near the screen.”⁹

Although the American movie-theater’s transformation in the 1930s had not to do with acoustics per se, it had much to do with sound, or more to the point, the talking image in motion. The link appeared evident at the time, though it has become obscure since.

As one of a handful of prominent architecture firms specializing in the emerging field of movie-theater design in the early nineteen teens, the work of the architecture firm Rapp and Rapp for Balaban and Katz (later Paramount) played a seminal role in the transformation of the nickelodeon into the movie palaces of the late teens and twenties, as it would in the transformation of the latter in the 1930s and 40s. Looking back in 1930, George L. Rapp attributed the transformation of the nickelodeon into the movie palace to the development and ensuing popularity of feature-length narrative film in the early teens.¹⁰ He anticipated a third phase in movie-theater design addressing another major change in the nature of the filmic experience. “The universal popularity of sound pictures and the prospect of wide dimension film, in the opinion of many,” he wrote in 1930, “will result in a new third period in cinema architecture.”¹¹

The advent of the movie palace in the early nineteen teens and the very different sound/image theater of less than two decades later had at least one thing in common.

Both were conceived in response to a major transformation in the prevailing mode of film reception. The proponents of both also offered remarkably similar justifications in defense of their two mutually exclusive solutions. Both were intended to envelop the filmic event in an environment that made the audience “more receptive” to the unfolding imaginary events on the screen. The only contextual difference was the imaginary being silent in one instance and vocal in the other. What covert connection there may have been between a transformed architectural setting and the silent or vocal moving images it enveloped will be the focus of the remainder of our discussion.

At the outset, it is important to note that of the various changes in the movie-theater design of the 1930s, the most explicit was stylistic. A new style, variously termed art deco and/or streamline moderne widely supplanted others.

The stylistic change, followed as it was by a shift to modern architecture in the ensuing decade, has been the aspect of transformation that has received the greatest attention from movie-theater historians.¹² However, had the movie-theater design transformations of the early 1930s been primarily stylistic, it would have been, besides its wider cultural implications, of little note or significance in the context of the stylistic eclecticism of the preceding decade - the golden age of silent movies. The movie-theater designers of the silent era experimented with virtually every known stylistic idiom. Art deco would have been a mere addition to a rich repertoire, as it indeed was in the late 1920s. Benjamin Schlanger, a leading proponent of change in movie-theater design of the 1930s, saw little difference between “expressing” oneself “on the side walls of the auditorium in some Spanish or French historical palatial style of architecture, or in some modernistic ornamental mode.”¹³

Significant and instrumental as the dynamic formal characteristics of art deco may have been to the broader objectives of movie-theater reformers, what is evident from Schlanger’s statement above is that a stylistic shift in movie-theater design was not the principal objective. Rather, what Schlanger and other proponents of change had foremost in mind was to transform the audience’s relationship to the filmic event, conditioned as that experience is by the spatial characteristics of the auditorium in particular and the movie-theater in general. “The theatre structure of tomorrow must become,” Schlanger demanded, “more a part of the art which it is serving, and not be separated, as it is now, into an auditorium and a stage.”¹⁴

The plea to alter the customary separation of the auditorium and the stage, and along with it, the established relationship between the audience and the filmic event, had much to do with changes in the relationship of the audience to the filmic event, affected by the introduction of sound. The ensuing transformation, I will argue, was meant to reconstitute, rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, the ideational distance

between the audience and the filmic event, or else the real and the imaginary, lost to the uncanny advent of talking images on the screen.

Of course, were one to look at architecture in formal and stylistic terms, one would be hard-pressed to see any connection between sound film on the one hand and art deco or streamline moderne on the other. It would be equally difficult, if not absurd, to link silent film to a baroque palatial style. However, were one to focus on the broader institutional and ideational agenda of the movie-theater and see the choice of any one style and/or formal arrangement in relation to that agenda, a different picture may well emerge. It is this latter route that I propose to pursue.

Imagining the imaginary

In as much as the movie-theater insinuates itself, as it has from inception and per force, between the real world outside and the imaginary world unfolding on the screen inside, it inevitably locates and localizes the real and the imaginary at a pronounced physical distance. The modalities of this pronouncement define and articulate the perceived relationship between the real and the imaginary. Any call for change in the modalities of this pronouncement may well stem from a perceived change in the established relationship between the real and the imaginary. In effect, each of the three phases in the history of movie-theater design Rapp identified in 1930 was a response to such a change.

Before the advent of movie-theaters, however, the initial and perhaps the most profound change in the relationship of the real and the imaginary happened with the invention of cinema itself. The addition of motion to photographic reproduction further and dramatically altered the preconceived distance between the real and the imaginary to the point of a spatial, if not ideational crisis.

Inasmuch as film overlaps and condenses time and space, it inherently displaces every place it happens to be. It produces a strange cohabitation between heterogeneous spaces, past and present, real and illusory, virtual and actual. The ensuing sense of displacement is well documented in early reactions to film exhibition, coming as they did before the advent of the movie-theater.

A well-known case in point is Maxim Gorky's review of the Lumières Cinématographe exhibition at the Nizhny-Novgorod Fair of 1896.¹⁵ The spatial consequences of the encounter for the future development of the movie-theater warrant a recounting.

The scene Gorky reviewed was not entirely different from the one depicted in an 1897 advertising poster for the Lyman H. Howe's Animotoscope exhibition (Figure

3).¹⁶ The audience and a train locomotive are depicted in a head-to-head confrontation on two sides of a gigantic picture frame that reassuringly separates and localizes the moving picture within a well delineated and laterally contained space opposite the spectators' gaze.¹⁷ Gorky's encounter does not appear to have had the benefit of Howe's frame, whose logic would become, in time, the movie-theater's.

Suddenly something clicks, everything vanishes and a train appears on the screen. It speeds straight at you - watch out! It seems as though it will plunge into the darkness in which you sit turning you into a ripped sack full of lacerated flesh and splintered bones, and crushing into dust and into broken fragments this hall and this building, so full of women, wine, music and vice.¹⁸

Gorky is well aware of his place in the darkness opposite the "train of shadows" on the screen. He knows that it only "seems as though" the train will cross the line of the screen into the domain of the living. Nevertheless, these shadows are "terrifying to see," because of the graphic images that the contemplation of an abridged distance brings to mind. What he imagines is not merely death, but disfigurement. It is bodies and buildings transformed into flesh and bone, dust and broken fragments, i.e., deprived not only of life, but also of *form*! Why the contemplation of shadowy illusions crossing into reality should evoke such graphic images of disfiguration, knowing the images to be mere shadows, is a question we will have to answer later. The immediate reaction to the scene unfolding on the screen was perhaps closer to this account:

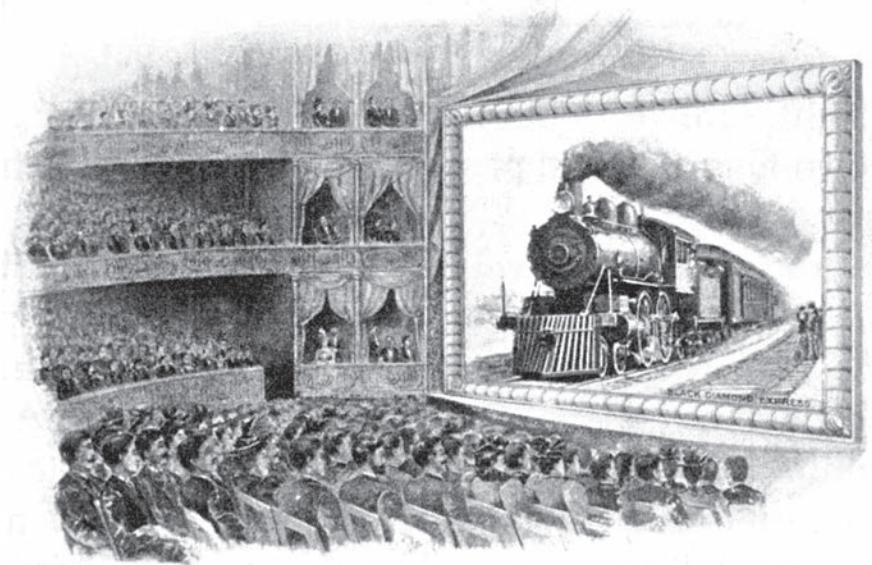


Fig. 3 - Lyman H. Howe's Animotoscope exhibition poster, 1897

"involuntarily you scramble to get out of the way of the train."¹⁹ Other and perhaps well-exaggerated accounts have the audience rushing out of the theater in panic. The physical reaction, slight or severe, does not come from any confusion of a dim grey illusion on the screen with reality. Instead, it is an improper involvement with the image, i.e., being dialogically involved instead of looking *at* the image that has the audience react. It is the fear of proximity to something that should remain at a distance that would have the audience reestablish the distance by physically distancing themselves from the image.

Much as Gorky tries, from the outset, to imagine film as a distinct place - a kingdom no less - this place is anything but clear and distinct. Affording no clear hold on presence or absence, "this mute, grey life finally begins," Gorky tells us, "to disturb and depress you."

It seems as though it carries a warning, fraught with a vague but sinister meaning that makes your heart grow faint. You are forgetting where you are. Strange imaginings invade your mind and your consciousness begins to wane and grow dim ...²⁰

Although Gorky does not specify what the warning of the mute grey life on the screen is, fraught as he imagines it to be with a vague but sinister meaning, he is quite clear on the consequence. In its company, he loses his sense of place and forgets where he is, i.e., in the darkness, amidst the audience. The dissolution of his sense of place is coupled with a loss of control over his thoughts. Falling, by all appearances, into the grip of language over which one has no hold, strange imaginings *invade* his mind. His thoughts too become displaced, as his consciousness wanes and dims.

Suddenly "a gay chatter and a provoking laughter of a woman" in the audience returns him to his place outside the kingdom of shadows. There, from "the vague, but sinister meaning" of this experience Gorky tries to distance himself by locating and placing cinema elsewhere. In his place, he imagines cinema to be "out of place." "Why here, of all places," he asks repeatedly, "are they showing this latest achievement of science?" Though he is not certain of the exact scientific value of this invention, he is certain it safely and usefully belongs in the realm of science and in the hands of scientists within the confines of the laboratory. Any place else, it is displaced and displacing. Nevertheless, he suspects the entertainment value of this peculiar invention will outweigh its scientific value, and it will be placed where it should have no place. Gorky's suspicion was of course well founded. Nonetheless, the logic of his imaginary placement of film at a distance in an Other space was to shape the place of film for the remainder of its history.²¹

The challenge of (dis)locating and keeping film at a distance, there, vis-à-vis the

audience, here, became much more acute as narrative cinema supplanted the cinema of attractions.²² In contrast to the cinema of attractions, narrative cinema willfully collapsed the space the former confronted and effectively constituted as distance between the screen and the audience. Avoiding any recognition of the audience in a dialogical role, narrative cinema cast the audience in a spectatorial role.²³ It absorbed and integrated the audience into the type of immersive experience that was the source of this cinema's persuasive appeal. The task of reconstituting the distance between the real and the imaginary would shift in the transition from attraction to narration to a new building-type: the movie-theater. The first of its kind was the nickelodeon.²⁴

Despite its short history, the nickelodeon was to have a profound influence on the history of movie-theaters in the century to come. Whereas literally, if not in effect, cinema brings other spaces and times to our space and time and as such creates a potentially uncanny cohabitation – raising questions of place and placement as it did for Gorky – the designers of the nickelodeon effectively sidestepped this challenge by turning the experience on its head, conceptualizing it as a journey out to an Other place. To constitute an Other space for film, the designers of the nickelodeon focused primarily on fabricating a thick borderline between the world outside and the screen placed at the far end of the auditorium furthest, both conceptually and literally, from that world. The process often began, as David Hulfish explained in 1911, with the conversion of a vacant store.²⁵ The transparent glass facade was removed and replaced with an opaque wall placed six feet or more away from the sidewalk (Figure 4).²⁶ In addition to the literal spatial depth of the setback, the reading of the nickelodeon's separation from its context was augmented on the street façade with the superimposition of a gateway imagery whose ubiquity made it in short order synonymous with the Nickelodeon. An articulated frame, often employing the classical orders with various degrees of abstraction, was typically placed on the physical borderlines of the nickelodeon's street facade. The inscription of an arch within this frame completed the gateway imagery that more often than not evoked a Roman Triumphal Arch and the city-gate it symbolically embodied.²⁷

The divide, thus instituted as a deep threshold in-between the real and the imaginary, effectively denoted separation and prolonged passage, pending the ubiquitous currency exchange ritual at the ticket booth. Whence, cinema would always happen in an Other space, as it would at the end of a journey, past a pronounced and deep threshold. If the movie-theater is, as Mary Heaton Vorse noted in 1911, “the door of escape, for a few cents, from the realities of life,” this escape - no less from reality - was not merely imaginary.²⁸ It was also a literal experience enacted architecturally and ritually to the estrangement of narrative cinema from every place it happened to be.²⁹



Fig. 4 - Lyric Theater, Mt. Vernon, Ohio

The Imaginary Imagined

The development and ensuing popularity of feature length movies in the early teens brought with it an important shift in the relationship of the audience to the filmic event. The demand for a new form of movie-theater ensued as the nickelodeon was declared "inefficient and obsolete and altogether unsuited to the presentation of this modern form of entertainment."³⁰

What made the nickelodeon "inefficient" and "altogether unsuited" to the exhibition of feature-length movies was the obsolescence of its localization in face of greater intensity and duration of involvement with the imaginary. Rapp aptly attributed the shape of things in the making to a new vision for what the movie-theater ought to be in face of rapidly improving film productions:

A second period in the history of the motion picture theater began - with the advent in the field of a different type of showman - one who believed that people go to the theater to live an hour or two in a different world; that the atmosphere of a palace should prevail in a theater, and that this could be arrived at by gorgeous stage settings, luxurious drapes and enchanting music.³¹

Of course, this new vision was not entirely new. What it had in common with the

old is transforming the movie-going experience into a journey out to an Other place. However, whereas the nickelodeon's primary focus was the institution and elaboration of a threshold in between the real and the imaginary, the movie palaces of the silent era focused on fabricating a "different world" beyond the nickelodeon's threshold. Film was now to happen in a world apart, where exoticism, and soon thereafter, orientalism were to underscore a difference that was not only visceral, but also dramatic and literal.

Thomas Lamb, whose work for Marcus Loew also played a seminal role in shaping the history of the movie palace, succinctly articulated the strategy for this "new" motion picture theater in 1928.

To make our audience receptive and interested, we must cut them off from the rest of the city life and take them into a rich and self-contained auditorium, where their minds are freed from their usual occupations and freed from their customary thoughts. In order to do this, it is necessary to present to their eyes a general scheme quite different from their daily environment, quite different in color scheme, and a great deal more elaborate.³²

Cutting off the audience from the rest of city-life began, as it did, on the sidewalk.³³ Assuming the nickelodeon's lessons, the street facade was transformed into a more pronounced, deeper and more directional threshold, if only to enhance "the patrons" spirit of adventure" at the outset of their journey to a "different world" (Figure 5).³⁴

The design of the movie palace facade followed no one style. Nonetheless, in a 1925 article devoted to "Theater Entrances and Lobbies," E.C.A. Bullock summed up the overall objective of the facade as creating "an attractive theatrical appearance." That meant "an exterior design in which the curves of graceful arches predominate, but are not overdone, provides a pleasing contrast to the cold, straight and commercial lines of the usual surrounding buildings."³⁵ In contrast to the deep, directional and formally contrasted facade of the movie palace, dramatically emphasizing separation and passage, the nickelodeon's facade may well have appeared static and subdued, or else, as Rapp put it "unsuited" and "obsolete." What would not become obsolete in the transformation were the location of the ticket booth and the ritual of exchange at the borderline.

Past the ticket booth, the doors of the inner lobby, and the ticket attendant, torn stub in hand, the movie-goer, having been ritually constituted as such by design, and "taken up on the architect's magic carpet," was delivered to "a celestial city of gorgeous stage settings, luxurious hangings and enchanting music."³⁶ If in the grand lobby "the atmosphere of a king's palace" had to "prevail to stimulate the imagination of



Fig. 5 - Thomas and Mercie Architects, Oriental Theatre, Portland, OR, 1927.

those who come within its doors," it was merely to construe and underscore the alterity of the "dream city," the "land of Romance" or the "temple of day-dreams," the movie palace was meant to be, by appearance and by experience (Figure 6).³⁷

The construed grand spectacle of a palace, that wasn't, "transformed" everyone entering.³⁸ In presenting "to their eyes a general scheme quite different from their daily environment," as Lamb called for, the movie palace transformed movie-goers into visiting tourists in a displaced and displacing land. Here, everyone was, by design, out



Fig. 6 - S. Charles Lee, Los Angeles Theatre, Los Angeles, CA, 1931.

of place by rite of visitation to a place that was not only out of the ordinary but also overwhelmingly ornate and complex in appearance. Ben Rosenberg's remembrance of the encounter is telling: "I think my most memorable impressions of working in the lobby came from the expressions on the faces of patrons as they walked in, often stopping, looking upward and uttering words of amazement at the splendor about them."³⁹ Overwhelmed by the sublime spectacle, the urge was to transform the incomprehensible strangeness of the sight into tangible information: "In the lobby, patrons

asked us myriad questions: 'What is the seating capacity? Are those marble columns real? How high is the lobby? Is that piano on the loge floor really gold? How many bulbs are there in each chandelier? How do they clean the chandeliers?'"⁴⁰ In the spur to substitute information for the incomprehensive sublimity of the sight, questions of authenticity, and of substance behind appearance, raised as they were about, for instance, marble or gold, speak to both a compulsory involvement with appearances and a disjuncture between substance and appearance in the mind of those who entered the palace, that wasn't. Here, in this "different world," the imaginary as representation supplanted the "real," as marble or gold, for instance, appeared to the spectator as appearance with indeterminable substance. This was what was to be "different." In the "land of romance," by design, one had access only to impenetrable appearances in disarming multitude. If various authors and architects insisted, as they did then, on the other worldly character of the movie palace, in order to "stimulate the imagination" and make the "audience receptive and interested," what they demanded was, in effect, the forced suspension of the "real" and acquiescence to the imaginary. It was appearance relieved of purported substance in a world apart. The imaginary wasn't per se what the movie brought to its place; it was a reception the place imposed on the movie in advance. The overarching assumption in this strategy was that the public's encounter with feature-length narrative film could not, or rather should not happen without proper preparation, stimulation, and mediation, i.e., outside the land of sublime appearances.

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The palatial theme introduced in the lobby, and the subsequent mezzanines and foyers, reached a climax in the monumental auditorium of the movie palace (Figure 7). Although the style and the details varied, what movie palace auditoria shared in common was richly articulated wall surfaces that decisively enveloped the auditorium space and vertically led up to an imposing ceiling whose monumental concentric patterns often culminated at the center in a grand chandelier. This may not have been the most effective means of illuminating a large interior. However, it was a very effective way of creating, in conjunction with the concentric ornamental patterns of the ceiling and the vertical wall articulations, a decidedly centralized space that located and localized the audience in Lamb's requisite "rich and self-contained" place (Figure 1).

An important measure of the auditorium's requisite self-containment as a *place* was the elaborate and ornate proscenium arch. Erected as a monumental threshold at the far end of the auditorium, opposite the entry doors, the proscenium arch at once marked a literal end to the auditorium, as it visually extended the journey that had started at the sidewalk, past the auditorium into the exclusive domicile of the imaginary into which the audience could peer, but not cross. The proscenium arch in effect articulated and underscored the inherent tension between the directional gaze of the



Fig. 7 - Thomas W. Lamb, Loew's Ohio Theatre, Columbus, OH, 1928

audience from their seats and the concentric, self-enclosing envelope of the auditorium. The deliberate tension between a directional visual *path* and a concentric place effectively localized the audience and the imaginary in their respective and mutually exclusive places at an unabridged distance. Placing the laterally framed screen at some distance behind the depth of the proscenium arch located the imaginary at a further literal and greater perceptual distance from the audience.⁴² The separation was characteristically augmented with layers of elaborate and ornamental curtains, bordered by intricate cloth frames covering the screen when no image was projected on it.

In turn, a raised shallow stage in front of the curtain articulated the spatial depth of the proscenium arch, followed by a demarcated and segregated layer of space inside the auditorium devoted to the Orchestra and/or the ubiquitous Wurlitzer organ. Together, they created both a permanent multi-layered spatial barrier and a temporal sound barrier between the audience, the monumental opening of the proscenium arch, and the place of the imaginary beyond.

Most, if not all the characteristics of the movie palace pointed out thus far, had little to do with the actual screening of the movie. As the lights dimmed, the curtains parted, and the movie began, the space and time of the auditorium were supplanted by the space and time of the movie. All that mattered was to ensure the audience

effectively lost awareness of their place within the auditorium for the duration of the screening. Hence, extensive studies on proper illumination, sightlines, and air quality were undertaken as early as mid-nineteen teens to ensure nothing did indeed happen "to spoil the illusion" of the auditorium's erasure for the duration.⁴³

Although much was invested in affecting the illusion of the movie-theater's disappearance for the film's duration, far more was invested in what was to temporally disappear. These, including the illusory journey, the elaborate rituals along the way, the costly palatial settings, and all else that was meant to disappear for the duration of the screening, were all in place to contextualize and render the encounter with the imaginary an extraordinary encounter in an other place. The illusory erasure of the auditorium for the film's duration was to avoid the type of uncanny cohabitation of heterogeneous spaces and times to which Gorky alluded and the movie-theater was meant as a solution. .

Although the auditorium was to disappear for the film's duration, the distance between the audience and the imaginary was not. From entry to exit, what remained constant throughout the *visit*, including the duration of film's screening, was the distance between the audience's gaze and all that it was directed at by design, be this the touristic gaze directed at the palatial setting before and after the screening, or the spectatorial gaze directed at the screen for the duration. The distance was reinforced by the captions that pulled the audience out of the action at regular intervals and located them opposite the flat screen. There was also the live music performance directed at the audience from within the auditorium for the duration. It acted as an invisible temporal barrier between the audience and the screen.⁴⁴

Whereas the palatial design of the first movie palaces was derived from European baroque architecture and its 19th century second empire variant, the designers of the movie palace soon looked, in the cause of alterity, to more distant and exotic imagery from a vast and diverse repertoire subsumed under the label "Orient." They borrowed and combined freely from Egyptian, Persian, and Indian, to Chinese, and every other source in between, to fabricate a world for the filmic event far more distant and exotic than the first movie palaces ever were (Figure 8). What mattered to the designers of these movie palaces was neither orthodoxy nor fidelity to any of the numerous and diverse sources that constituted the "Orient" in the public imagination. All that mattered was the exoticism and other-worldliness of the result. Thomas Lamb, who played a decisive role in the adoption of the Oriental theme was, once again, quite succinct in describing the outcome.

The styles of architecture vary, but are all permeated with a touch of the Orient, which has always been brightly colorful, emotional and

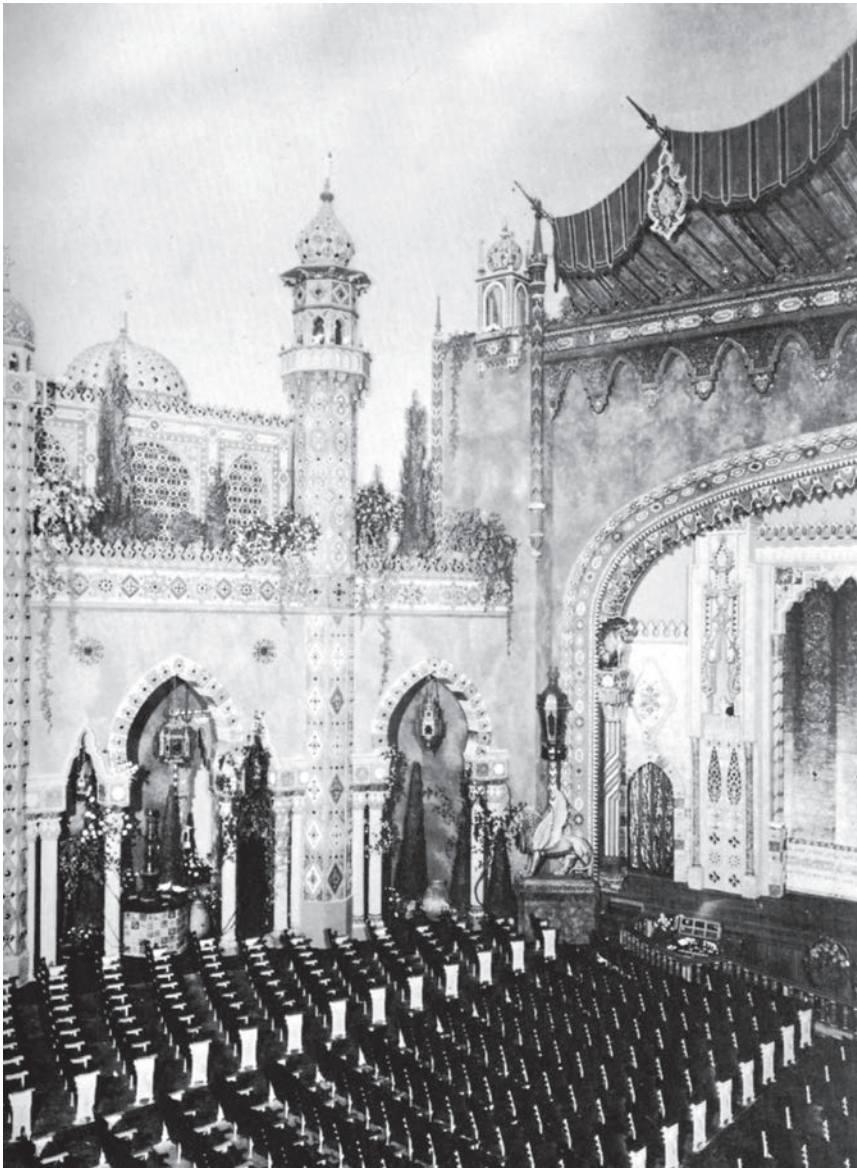


Fig. 8 - John Eberson, Avalon theatre, Chicago, IL, 1927.

almost seductive in its wealth of color and detail. The grand foyer represents a festive procession all in Oriental splendor It is pageantry in its most elaborate form, and immediately casts a spell of the mysterious and to the Occidental mind exceptional. Passing on into the inner foyers and the mezzanine promenade, one continues in the same Indo-Persian style with elaborate ornamentation both in relief and in painting, all conspiring to create

an effect thoroughly foreign to our Western minds. These exotic ornaments, colors and scenes are particularly effective in creating an atmosphere in which the mind is free to frolic and becomes receptive to entertainment.⁴⁵

Much as the overt Orientalism of the second-generation movie palaces, conceived and presented as sensual, emotional and seductive surface effect, aided the self-fabrication of the "Occidental" mind in opposition to it, it also placed and kept the "Occidental" mind at an unabridged distance. In this Oriental imaginary, the Occidental mind was de facto on tour in a "foreign" land where film was made to stand in the same relationship to the real as Orient did to Occident, by design.⁴⁶

Imagining the unimaginary

From the introduction of the moving picture, to sound, to color, stereoscopy, and such shot-lived experiments as smell-o-vision and odorama, there has been constant technological striving toward ever-greater approximation of reality in cinema. The place and placement of film has followed, from the outset, the reverse trajectory. This would not change with the technological advances that led to the introduction of sound. The latter merely rendered the dis/placement strategies of the movie palace problematic and obsolete, much as the advances leading to the inception of the movie palace rendered the nickelodeon's strategy "unsuited" and "obsolete."⁴⁷

The technology that brought sound to film was in early stages of development when it was introduced to a wider audience in 1927. Perfect synchronization and the realistic reproduction of the human voice would take a few more years to achieve. In the meantime, the talking picture challenged the audience in ways that exceeded the technology's deficiencies.⁴⁸

Complain as Alexander Bakshy did about being "treated to hollow and squawking and lisping voices, and even to imperfect synchronization" two years after the introduction of sound, there was, as he saw it, a greater problem with the talking picture.⁴⁹ "For reasons which it is difficult to discern, the total effect of the talking picture is generally thin, lacking in substance. ... In the talkies, much as you may be moved by the drama, you feel it is a drama in a world of ghosts. Perhaps, the introduction of stereoscopic projection coupled with color will solve this problem."⁵⁰ Sound was for Bakshy not so much an addition as a subtraction, raising questions of substance, and resurrecting the very "world of ghosts" that unsettled Gorky many years before. Here too the problem was essentially spatial.

Much as sight takes cognizance of distance, sound overcomes and collapses distance. It is heard and felt *here*, where the listener happens to be, rather than *there*,

whence it emanates. As such, sound had the same novel and thrilling effect on the audience as did Gorky's onrushing train. It too threatened the space and the distance between the audience and the filmic event. Reaching the audience from across the multiple thresholds erected to keep the filmic event at a safe distance in a place of its own, the talking picture radically altered the relationship between the audience and the filmic event. The defenses built to date against the uncanny effect of film were no defense against sound. Crossing through and filling the audience's space, the sound film was no longer merely *there* as silent movies had been by design, but in effect *here*. More to the point, it was both here and there, close and far, two and three dimensional, living and dead. Restoring the imaginary to its desired place *there*, at a marked distance from the audience, was to require significant modifications and a very different strategy.

The "world of ghosts" perception of early talking pictures that Bakshy presumed stereoscopic or three-dimensional color film would in time overcome had everything to do with the coupling of the two dimensional image with the three dimensional sound. Luigi Pirandello articulated its effect in greater detail. In the talking picture, Pirandello argued, "all illusion of reality is lost," i.e., the talking picture ceases to be merely and clearly an "illusion."⁵¹ This is "because the voice is of a living body" and "there are no bodies" in film."⁵² There are only "images photographed in motion." The irreconciled juxtaposition of the "living voice" with the "illusion of reality," Pirandello noted, "disturbs, like an unnatural thing unmasking its mechanism." As with Gorky, here too, it is the displacement and juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements that should remain at a distance, which unmask and expose something disturbing.⁵³

Two years before Bakshy and Pirandello's reviews, Seymore Stern, like many film critics of his generation, expressed considerable consternation over the pending arrival of sound, color, and stereoscopy to film. They were, he thought, detrimental to an art that was quintessentially a two-dimensional interplay of "silence" and "shadow." Each of the pending inventions, he noted, "is the greatest of bastardizations, the most intolerable of abomination," because each threatened to turn film's distinct identity into "a hodge-podge of the stage, painting, and conventional reality," i.e., no one thing, in no one place.⁵⁴

Mindful of the impending displacement, Stern imagined a new movie-theater where "the aesthetic appreciation of the work of art of the future will be determined by the extent to which it permits the projection of the ego of the spectator into its form, resulting in a complete excitation of the emotional system."⁵⁵ He imagined, in other words, the eradication of that carefully instilled distance in the movie palace that proved all too vulnerable to sound.

Leaving the journey to the auditorium intact, Stern focused his entire attention on altering the auditorium of “the house of spatially discontinuous perception,” of “disinterested contemplation,” of “spectatorship,” i.e., the movie palace. “In the film-house of the future,” he imagined, “the ‘role’ of spectator will be unknown.”⁵⁶ To this end, his points of attack were consistent and telling. It began with “abolishing” the proscenium arch, including “all forms and varieties of present-day theatrical architecture which in any way divide the house into two parts, that is, into a place for seeing and a place for being seen.”⁵⁷ Along with the proscenium arch, the stage was to disappear for the same reason. The orchestra was also to disappear from sight because “nothing,” Stern noted, “is more disconcerting in the contemporary movie house than the presence of a body of musicians between the spectators and the screen.”⁵⁸ At issue wasn’t the music; it was the location. Though not in the visual path of the audience, in the orchestra’s presence, Stern noted, “the spectator is made annoyingly conscious of his spectatorial role,” i.e., his place in the auditorium vis-à-vis the screen on the other side.

In place of two places for “seeing” and “being seen,” what Stern imagined wasn’t any one place as such, but in a sense, no place at all. What he imagined the auditorium of the future to be was an emphatic path to an illusive/imaginary destination. As in the past, the screen was to read “like the vision of another world.”⁵⁹ To enhance the screen’s other worldliness, Stern imagined it occupying the entire far end of the auditorium. For the rest of the auditorium “the general direction will be one of converging graduation, ending, visually, architecturally and psychologically, in the screen.”⁶⁰ “All architectural lines must,” Stern demanded, “lead to and meet in the screen.” Whereas the architectural envelope of the movie palace auditoria was decidedly vertical in emphasis —affecting its reading as a *place* - the film-house of the future was to be decidedly horizontal in emphasis —affecting its reading as a *path*.⁶¹

To further emphasize the horizontal directionality of the auditorium as a path, the walls of the auditorium were to be plain and “painted in tones of grey.” There were to be no “decoration,” nothing “borrowed from the architecture of the past periods,” nor “any note suggestive of the three-dimensional forms belonging to standardized reality.” The latter were to be left entirely behind - stylistically, dimensionally, and tonally - on the journey through a path that, if not entirely surreal, was to be “pronouncedly phantasmagoric, two-dimensional and cinematic.”⁶²

Even though, Frederick Kiesler’s Film Arts Guild Cinema of 1929 was a close approximation of Stern’s vision for the film-house of the future, the broad embrace of a new vision had to await the technological advances that brought perfect synchronization and natural sound reproduction to the movies. It was at that point in the early 30s - when the novelty of sound had worn off and with it much of the initial objection

and fear, when the talkies had become merely movies, and instead of being trapped in the discrepancy between sound and image, film stood to engross the audience in its reality effect, without any captions or live music to keep them at bay - that the call for re-contextualizing the encounter with film became emphatic and wide-spread. In time, Stern's vision for the "film-house of the future," for its greater part, would become the film-house of the future, because it assumed, in advance and for different reasons, a type of immersive experience in the movies that talking pictures in motion would eventually affect.

The call for a different movie-theater design, widespread as it became in both the movie industry and the architecture trade journals starting in 1931, was led by Ben Schlanger. In an article, prophetically entitled the "Motion Picture Theatres of Tomorrow," he articulated a vision that not only closely paralleled Stern's in its immersive experience; it would soon become the de-facto Motion Picture Theater of the sound era.⁶³

From the outset, the objective of Schlanger and the other proponents of the new movie-theater design was not to alter the stylistic features of the movie-theater, as noted earlier. Rather, the objective was to fundamentally alter the relationship of the audience to the filmic event from a spectatorial to an immersive voyeuristic experience, in tacit recognition of the talkies' inherent spatial displacement. Echoing Stern, the "theatre structure of tomorrow must," Schlanger wrote, "become more a part of the art which it is serving, and not be separated, as it is now, into an auditorium and a stage."⁶⁴ As the initial resistance to sound proved all too futile, the solution to sound's spatial displacement was, in effect, to dislocate the audience from their established spectatorial place at a distance in the "place for seeing," and thereby allowing, if not requiring, every audience member to "completely envelop himself in that which he is viewing," for the temporal duration of the filmic event.⁶⁵ The solution was, in other words, to erase the distance that, in effect, sound had breached.⁶⁶

The erasure of the breached distance meant systematically dispensing with all the architectural implements that constituted the auditorium as a destination, a place, and at that a "different world." It also meant re-contextualizing the new immersive experience in a new auditorium that would transform and reconstitute the finite distance erected between the audience and the screen in the movie palace into an infinite distance. It meant never being able to locate the imaginary in a finite place as such and at a distance susceptible to breach.

As Stern had done, Schlanger focused almost entirely on altering the auditorium's design. The "slaughtering," he wrote, "should begin and concentrate itself" on the "proscenium frame," since "it is here where the mood is determined."⁶⁷ Next to

the “slaughtering” of the proscenium arch and with it the auditorium as a “place for seeing” came the “usual treatment of the rest of the auditorium,” i.e., the “ornamental side walls, which are always treated vertically with columns, pilasters, arches, etc.”⁶⁸ Schlanger’s objection to columns, pilasters, and arches was not stylistic. He objected to their *verticality* and the “symmetrical repetition of motifs from the proscenium to the rear of the auditorium, which causes a disturbing pull of the eye away from what should be the main focal point.”⁶⁹ His objection was, in other words, to the architectural motifs that imparted a distinct sense of place to the auditorium and reinforced the dissociation between “a place for seeing” and “a place for being seen.” Instead, the sidewalls of the auditorium “should have a gradual simplification and omission of forms as they recede to the rear of the auditorium.” In addition, “the forms used should have strong horizontal direction, instead of vertical emphasis, fastening the eye to the screen, the focal point, at the front of the auditorium.” To reinforce the envisioned emphatic horizontal directionality of the new auditorium “the ceiling, even more so than the sidewalls, should be left as simple as possible.”⁷⁰ The “usual domes, suspended from above and resting on air,” and all other centralizing motifs, including the ubiquitous chandeliers were to disappear from the new auditorium.⁷¹

The screen was next on Schlanger’s transformation agenda - as it had been Stern’s and for similar reasons:

The screen as it is presented in today’s cinema is still an obviously framed picture instead of a space into which we peer, seeing the projected other world of the cinema. It should, if possible, dominate the whole forward portion of the auditorium. The spectator can thereby be made to feel that he is actually encompassed in the action which he views.⁷²

This meant that not only was the screen to get larger - as it would - the forward portion of the auditorium side-walls was also to curve or angle toward the screen - as they would - to make the screen appear as the sole destination of the path the new auditorium was meant to become. This focal point, however, it is important to note was never quite in sight. It was hidden behind a curtain that exponentially added to its mystery and distance. When the curtain parted, it was not the screen, but the filmic event that was in view and one was, by then, as it were, already there.⁷³

For Schlanger the opportunity to realize his new vision for the movie-theater came with the Thalia Theater commission of 1932 in New York City (Ben Schlanger and R. Irrera, Architects). Thalia Theater’s emphatic horizontal directionality and abstracted formal vocabulary were as glaringly different from the prevailing practice in movie-theater design, as were, of course, the intentions behind each (Figure 2). The Thalia Theater dropped all the trappings of exoticism and orientalism to be transformed from

an exotic destination into a path to an imaginary destination. Different as the Thalia Theater was, it was widely published to acclaim in various architectural and trade journals, including the June, 1932 issue of *Architectural Record* and the September, 1932 issue of *Architectural Forum*.

Although far fewer movie-theaters were built during the depression and the ensuing World War, Schlanger's vision was soon embraced by most architects of his generation. Most notably, it was adopted by the very architects that were responsible for the rise and development of the movie palaces of the silent era. Noteworthy examples are C. W. & G. L. Rapp's 1937 Rhodes Theater in Chicago (Figure 9), as well as Thomas W. Lamb's 1936 New Rialto Theatre in New York and John Eberson's 1936 Penn Theatre in Washington, D.C. (Figure 10). These projects could not have been more different as compared to the works of the very same architects of only a few years prior.

It wasn't a mere boast, therefore, when Schlanger declared the war on movie palaces all but over in the July 1938 issue of *Architectural Record* devoted to movie-theaters. "We have all but eliminated," Schlanger declared, "the "atmospheric" treatment of the auditorium and its indefensible competition with the exhibition."⁷⁴ Schlanger's justification for the elimination of the silent era decorations because of competition and distraction was reiterated by many in various trade publications throughout the late thirties and well into the late forties. These statements often accompanied the published reviews of recently renovated "atmospheric" movie-theaters. Of these the Wareham Theater in Wareham, MA (Figures 11 & 12) and the Strand Theater, Hartford, CT (Figure 13), both renovated by William Riseman Associates published in the November 1948 issue of *Architectural Record* are telling examples.⁷⁵

The oft repeated assertion that "distracting wall decorations interfere with the illusion," or "compete with the presentation" are, from a certain perspective, perplexing justifications, coming repeatedly from among others, Schlanger himself who in his 1931 critique of the movie palace noted:⁷⁶

The walls and ceiling are usually designed as if they were going to be seen in broad daylight, neglecting the fact that the light in the auditorium of a theatre must be kept quite dim during most of a performance. Thus the architectural forms employed are blotted out and have little or no effect on the viewer during the performance.⁷⁷

Schlanger, much as his contemporaries, were well aware of the fact that their revisions to the old auditoria were of little to no consequence for the duration of the filmic event. The formal and spatial characteristics of the auditorium, old or new, were only visible and consequential before and after the filmic event. If they contributed or



Fig. 9 - George & W. C. Rapp, Rhodes Theater, Chicago, IL, 1937

distracted, competed or promoted, it was not to the filmic event per se. It was to its contextualization and localization before and after the fact, i.e., where the audience found itself and how the audience localized itself vis-à-vis the imaginary.

For the duration of the event, every detail, from illumination to sight lines, chair comfort, and air conditioning to make the audience “unconscious of surrounding temperature conditions or even odors” was attended to within the dark confines of the auditorium in order to create the perfect “illusion.”⁷⁸ This was the illusion of being anywhere and everywhere, other than where one actually was, i.e., “to be able to look at that picture, lose himself in it completely, and have no reminder of the fact that he is in an enclosure and looking at a picture.”⁷⁹ There was to be no *here*, only an *elsewhere*. Where one actually was had to all but disappear for the duration. In the post-silent era auditorium, the illusory was not to be the filmic event per se. It was also not being where one was, by design. This is to say that so long as the illusion of not being where one happens to be is sustained, sound’s uncanny spatial displacement remains curtailed since sound no longer comes to one from elsewhere. One is already elsewhere and there is, virtually, no longer a *here*, and the elsewhere is nowhere real, i.e., nowhere that is not an imagined destination or an Other world. This is one reason why the mandate and the measure of success for the post-silent era movie-theater

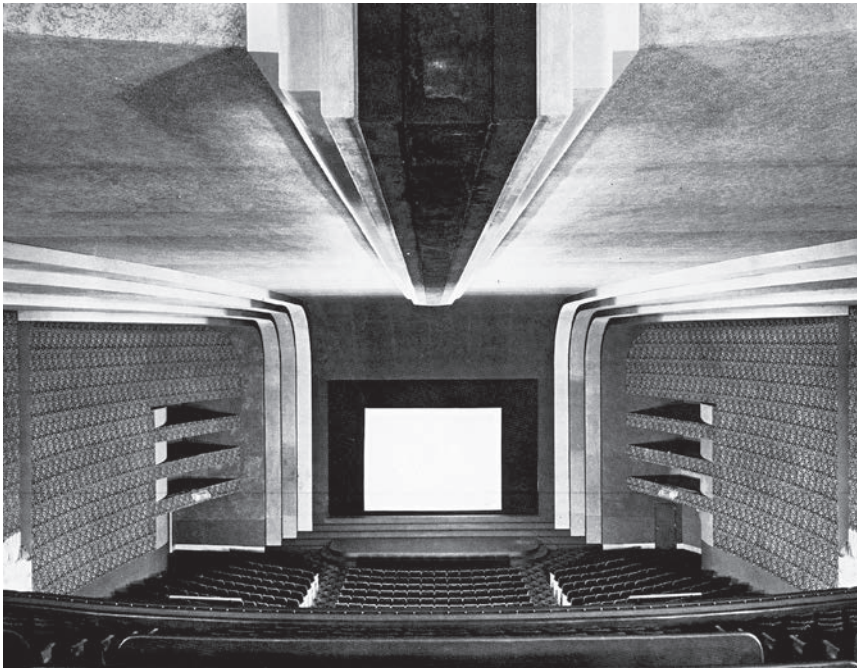


Fig. 10 - John Eberson, Penn Theatre, Washington, D.C., 1936

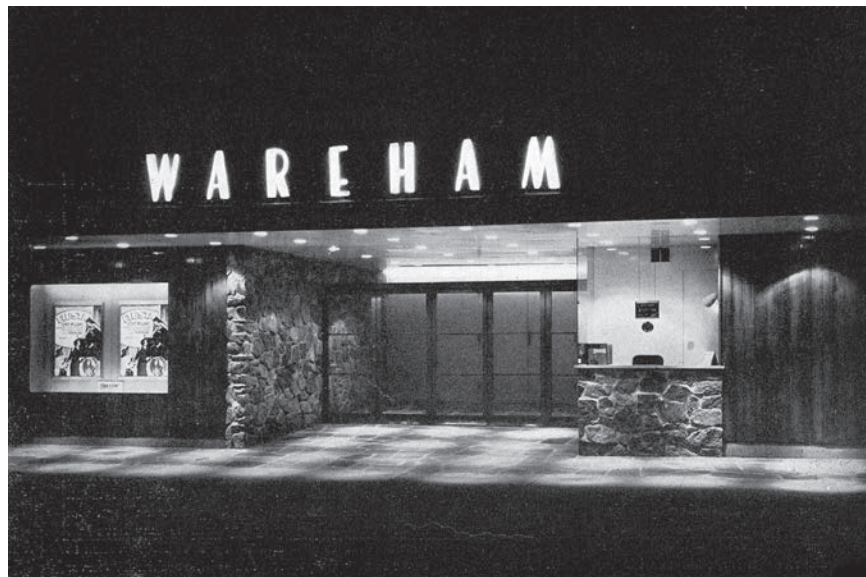


Fig. 11 - William Riseman Associates, Wareham Theater in Wareham, MA, 1948

has, since its inception, hinged on affecting and maintaining the illusion of the erasure of being where one is, and with it, the path that got one *there*.⁸⁰

Having affected the imaginary erasure of *here* for the duration, all that remained

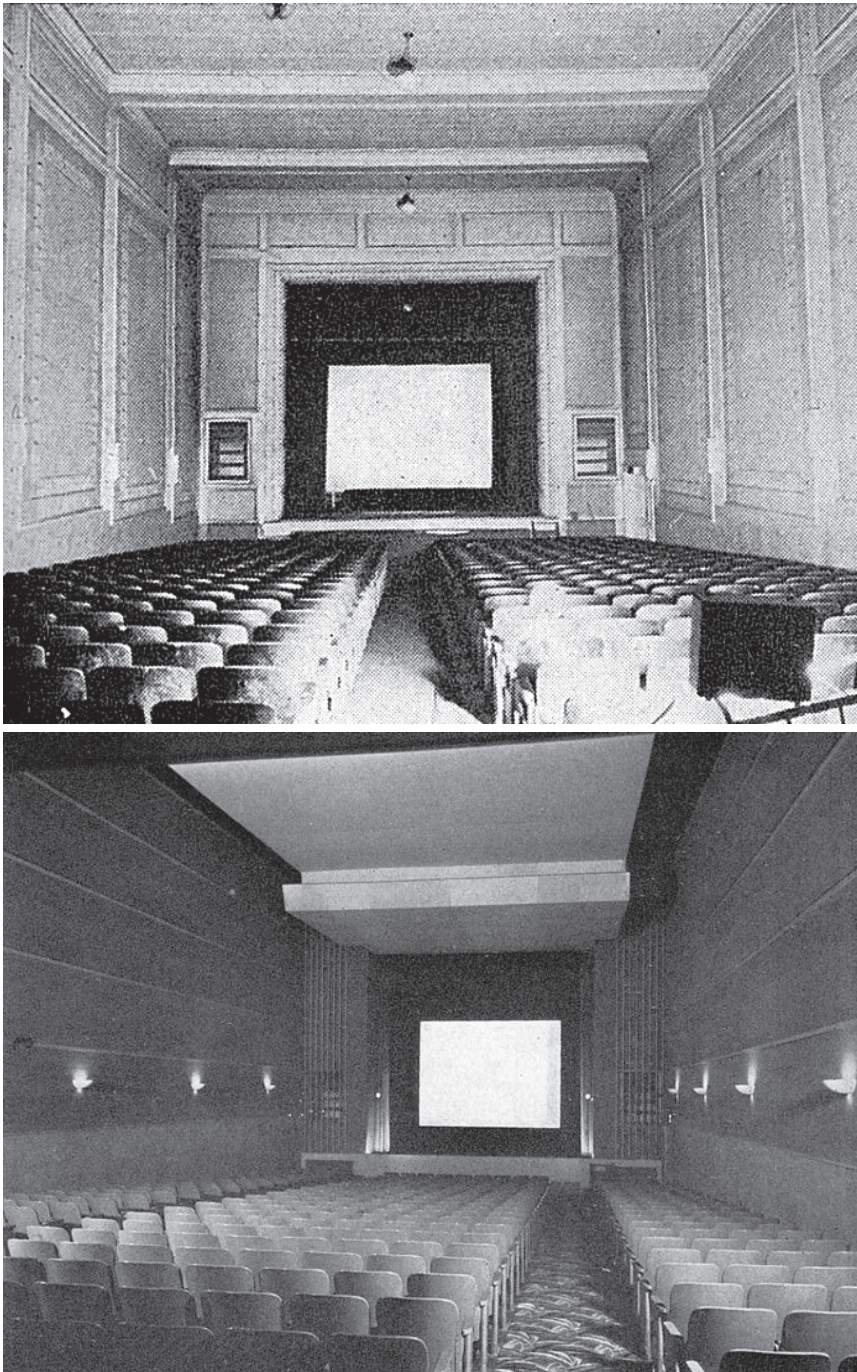


Fig. 12 - William Riseman Associates, Wareham Theater in Wareham, MA, 1948

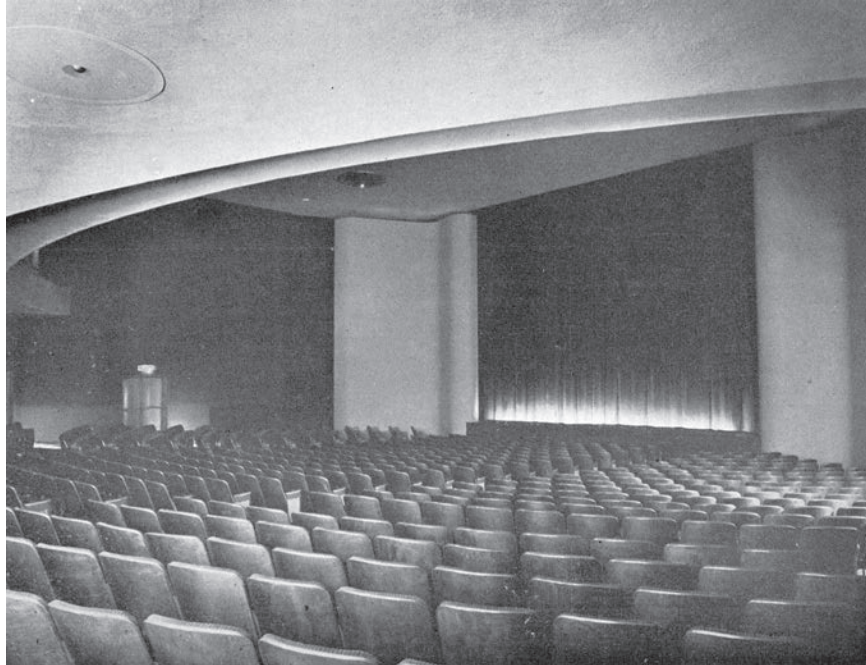
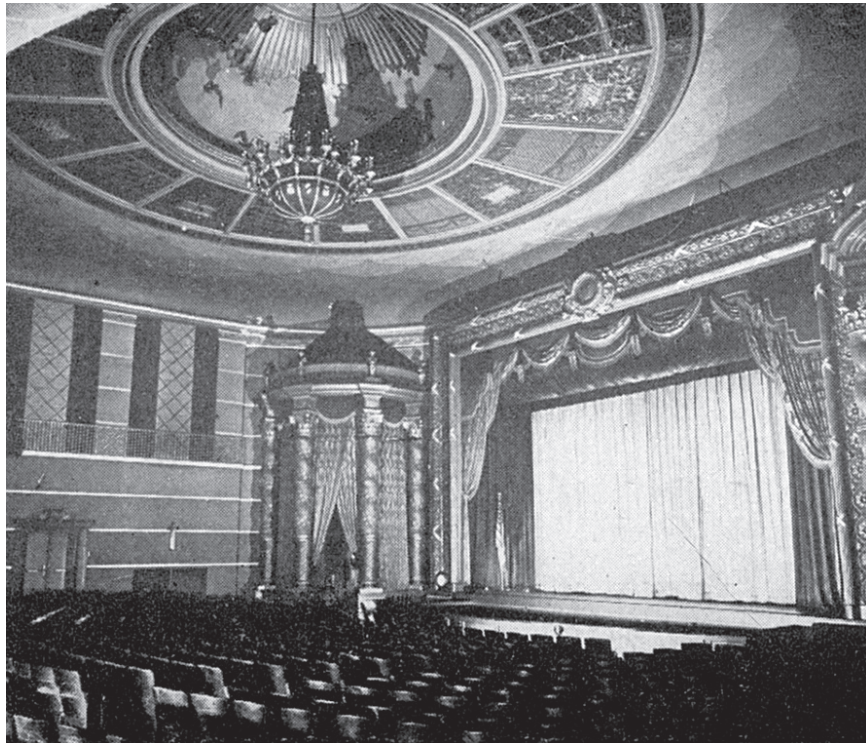


Fig. 13 - William Riseman Associates Strand Theater, Hartford, CT, 1948

was to localize and explain where one found oneself before and after the filmic event. It was precisely in this context that the movie palace auditoria's intended sense of place as a "different world" was purported to be distracting and "indefensible." In time, even the emphatic formal horizontality of the thirties auditoria appeared to the movie-theater architects of the post-war years as giving too much character and identity to the auditorium. It too was abandoned as a "futile effort to create screen importance," whereas its "omission would better serve this purpose."³¹ In place of formal horizontality there was to be "a completely neutral enclosure" with a strong spatial direction toward the screen. The Modern Museum of Art's movie-theater in New York City by Goodwin and Stone, Architects, published in the November 1948 issue of *Architectural Record* is an early example of the type (Figure 14).

Looking back, in 1961 Schlanger eloquently summarized the objectives of the post-war movie-theater:

The desire in the designing was to permit the viewer to the fullest possible extent to be able to transport himself in imagination to a different time and space by furnishing a floating void or optical

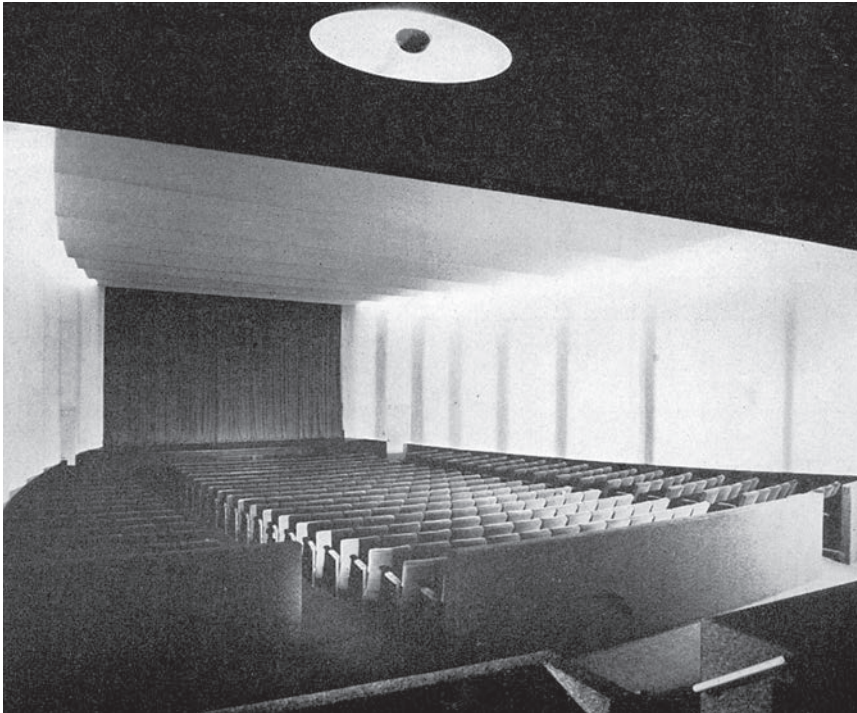


Fig. 14 - Goodwin and Stone, Architects, Modern Museum of Art Movie Theater, New York, NY, 1948

vacuum to provide the transition to the new time and space and to hold him there by eliminating all distractions. The name Transcenum suggests itself ...⁸²

This would be the decisive solution. The audience would hereby never arrive in a literal, much less literally exotic place. The placeless "optical vacuum" of the "Transcenum" would hereafter keep the audience in "transport," as it were, to and from an imagined and imaginary destination. On the way to and from, the audience would remain in transit through a "floating void" on the path to everywhere and therefore nowhere. To be in transit is not to be *there*. The Transcenum as such would be a journey without end. Every cognition of it as the floating, optically vacuous void that it was designed and meant to be, entailed anticipation of going/being elsewhere.

The movie palace auditoria, predicated as it was on a journey to and an unmistakable arrival at a "different world," designated the silent imaginary a decisive place on the other side of the threshold that was the proscenium arch. In contrast, the Transcenum, having to confine a vocal imaginary that would not be confined or bordered by any threshold, eschewed any and all sense of place, much less arrival anywhere but an ever illusive destination. The place of the vocal imaginary in the Transcenum became no place at all, i.e., no place that was not imagined and imaginary and as such infinitely postponed/distanced. The Transcenum, in effect, exiled the imaginary from the movie-theater. The imaginary was no longer located in the movie-theater, i.e., not localized by the movie-theater, as there was to be no movie-theater for the duration and otherwise merely a path, a floating void, or optical vacuum to nowhere identifiable as such, much less real. Much as the movie palace's strategy was to contain and confine, the Transcenum's strategy was to postpone and delay. As images spoke, the auditorium was driven to silence.⁸³

The Unimaginable Imaginary

If cinema is indeed a response to what Benjamin referred to in 1936 as "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly," the history of cinema's place and placement has followed the opposite trajectory.⁸⁴ Much as ambivalence persistently overshadows any question of a decidable place for film, nevertheless, a persistent spacing has kept film at bay from inception. The modalities of this spacing, I have tried to point out thus far, have changed drastically over time. The spacing, in effect, has not. Movie-theaters over the course of the last century have been, despite significant changes in form and experience, variations on an elemental theme introduced in the nickelodeon: a journey to an Other space/place. The lingering question is why this particular and persistent spatial strategy? What is the logic, or

else the illogic of this persistent dis/placement?

In effect, and at face value, the objective has been to keep the real and the imaginary at a pronounced distance from each other. This has not been for fear of unbridled cohabitation, or any possibility of confusion between the real and the imaginary *per se*. Rather at issue in the absenting of each from the construed place of the other has been the clarity of the line separating the real from the imaginary, i.e., their radical alterity. Gorky forcefully reminded us long ago of the dire extent to which even the contemplation of an imaginary collapse of the distance between the imaginary and the real leads to consuming anxiety, along with “a warning, fraught with a vague but sinister meaning.”⁸⁵ That experience not only disturbed and depressed Gorky, it caused him to lose his sense of place, along with his footing in the real, as ‘strange imaginings’ invaded his mind. And this was all because he could not localize the imaginary at a controlled distance.

Although Gorky did not explain what the “vague but sinister meaning” of his experience was, certain as he was of its menacing nature, we find one explanation in Freud’s essay on the uncanny, of two decades later. “An uncanny effect,” Freud noted in 1919, “is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, ... or when a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes, and so on.”⁸⁶ A case in point, Freud noted, is confusing one’s own reflection for someone real and other than oneself. The uncanny sensation has not to do with the confusion as such. Rather, the sensation is associated with the recognition of the confusion after the fact, i.e., the recognition of having momentarily and involuntarily taken the imaginary for the real. Regarding the cause of the sensation, Freud notes:

This uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression. This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore, to understand Schelling’s definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light.⁸⁷

What in the uncanny is familiar and repressed and ought to have been kept concealed, is not the substitution,” rather, it is the condition of its possibility. It is the possibility of the distinction between the real and the imaginary being the function and the effect of spacing, i.e., extrinsic rather than intrinsic to the real and the imaginary alike. It is the repressed recognition that what is imagined and imaginary is the line separating the real and the imaginary, as the condition of the possibility of substitution and/or confusion.

André Bazin provides a cogent account of both what gives the imaginary its pow-

er of substitution, and the potential dire consequence of it.

Each representation discards or retains various of the qualities that permit us to recognize the object on the screen. Each introduces, for didactic or aesthetic reasons, abstractions that operate more or less corrosively and thus do not permit the original to subsist in its entirety. At the conclusion of this inevitable and necessary “chemical” action, for the initial reality there has been substituted an illusion of reality composed of a complex of abstraction (black and white, plane surface), of conventions (the rules of montage, for example), and of authentic reality. It is a necessary illusion but ...⁸⁸

Admittedly, no one assumes the images on the cinematic screen to be real. However, “if the film is to fulfill itself aesthetically we need to believe in the reality of what is happening while knowing it to be tricked.”⁸⁹ This necessary reality effect has, nevertheless, distinct and potentially dire consequences. It “quickly induces a loss of awareness of the reality itself, which becomes identified in the mind of the spectator with its cinematographic representation.”⁹⁰ What concerns Bazin is not attributing more to cinema than is due; it is attributing less to reality than is prudent. It is not cinema that may be confused with reality, rather, it is reality that may be confused with cinema to the former’s detriment. More may appear to be less. Lost thereafter is the ability “to tell where lies begin or end.”⁹¹

The depreciation Bazin ascribes to the identification of “authentic reality” with the cinematic illusion has at least one thing in common with the “decay of aura” Benjamin attributed to “the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.”⁹² In both cases, the substitution of a mechanical reproduction for “the uniqueness of every reality” leads to the depreciation of the latter.⁹³ Benjamin recounts an instance of this uncanny effect as relayed by Pirandello. Before the camera, the film actor, Pirandello noted:

... feels as if in exile – exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, ...⁹⁴

Benjamin compares the “feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera” to the “estrangement felt before one’s own image in the mirror.”⁹⁵ However, “now the reflected image has become separable, transportable.”⁹⁶

The sensation of exile from the self in front of the camera, accompanied as it is with a *vague* sense of discomfort, has to do with the recognition of an *inexplicable* divide within the self as the condition of possibility of duplication. Whereas one’s image

in the mirror remains at a fixed distance and can be animated at will to simulate possession and control, cinema dispenses with the possibility of idealizing the image as a mere reflection. This is not to say the image that is “separable” and “transportable” dispenses with the referent. To the contrary, much as it references and remains bound to the referent to the point of involuntary substitution, it deprives the referent of its “corporeality,” “reality,” “life,” and much of everything else that may constitute a radical difference between the real and the imaginary. The self has never been but in exile from “reality” which is never given though always desired. This is, in a sense, that “warning, fraught with a vague but sinister meaning,” that accompanies any “illusion of reality” that encroaches on the space and place of “authentic reality” by way of substitution.

That “authentic reality” is, in a sense, always already an “illusion of reality,” i.e., divided and deferred and as such, a substitute for a desired reality that is undivided and present unto itself is “nothing new or foreign, but familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression.” That the difference between “authentic reality” and “illusion of reality” is also an indifference is what ought to “have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light” in the figure of the uncanny. Cinema always stands to be uncanny, were it not for the spatial supplements that seek to mitigate its “warning.”

This brings us full circle to the site of our encounter with cinema: the movie-theater. Much as the uncanny marks the site of a collapsed distance between the real and the imaginary, its aversion is perpetually pending the institution of that distance. Hence, the architecture of an illusive distance, that is never a given and perpetually in place. There, should one even wish to conceive of the relationship between the imaginary and the real world from which the imaginary is separated by a path, in any terms other than in mutually exclusive binary terms, one must confront and contradict the immediate experience of the movie-theater. Much as the imaginary resists the divide and confounds the distance, the movie-theater successfully resists its defiance to the point of invisibility.

NOTES

- 1 By 1929 only 37% of all movie-theaters in the United States were wired for sound. By 1931 62% of all movie-theaters had converted to sound (Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926–1931*, Berkeley, 1999, p.155).
- 2 Donald Crafton notes: “The Western Electric sound-on-disc system, which would become Vitaphone, may have achieved perfect synchrony in the laboratory, but

in the field – that is, in the nation's theaters – the picture-sound match was frequently off a bit, owing to the inevitable slippage in the mechanical link between turntable and projector head. This small lapse between the 'flapping' of the lips and the hearing of the voice militated against the illusion of naturalism. Additionally, the telltale needle-scratching in the background was always audible and must have reminded viewers that Vitaphonic recording was a product of the phonograph industry" (Ibid., p.59). Please also see note 53.

- 3 Qualitatively, the sound-on-film system was not superior. As Barney Balaban explained in 1929: "While at the present time it is our experience that sound-on-disc gives better tonal results, we find sound-on-film to be so much more simple and convenient to handle that we feel it is much to be preferred" (quoted in Crafton, *The Talkies*, 1999, p.147).
- 4 Alexander Bakshy, "A Year of Talkies," *Nation*, June 1929, p.773.
- 5 Richard Stapleford, *Temples Of Illusion, The Atmospheric Theaters of John Eber-son*, New York, 1988, p.12.
- 6 Harry B. Braun, "Sound Motion Picture Requirements," *Arch Forum*, 57, October 1932, p.381.
- 7 Ben Rosenberg's recollection of the movie palaces of Rapp & Rapp is telling: "The thing which impressed me most was the marvelous acoustical treatment associated with their work. Remember that in those days no amplification of any kind was used. The sounds from the stage had to project into every nook and cranny of those huge auditoriums. I can recall standing in center balcony tunnel entrances, where I could almost hear the performers take a breath, so wonderful were the acoustics" (Ben Rosenberg, "An Usher's Life- Part I," *Marquee*, 27: 2, 1995, p.22).
Also, "the advent of talking films has entailed very little reconstruction in German cinemas, as nearly all of them were originally planned with due regard to acoustic properties owing to the fact that variety turns are often sandwiched in between the films" (Philip Morton Shand, *Modern Picture-Houses and Theaters*, Philadelphia, 1930, p.23).
- 8 Randolph Williams Sexton, ed., *American Theatres of Today*, vol. 2, New York, 1930, p.41.
- 9 Fredric Arden Pawley, "Design of Motion Picture Theaters," *Architectural Record*, 71, 1932, p.439.
- 10 George L. Rapp, "History of Cinema Theater Architecture," in *Living Architecture*, ed. Arthur Woltersdorf, Chicago, 1930, p.56.
- 11 Ibid., p.56
- 12 It has been attributed to broader formal and stylistic trends in architecture stemming from, in the context of the great depression, "a shift in public taste" and "changes in aesthetic ideas." It is also seen as the expression of "a utopian ideal of a classless machine world, coordinated and rooted in egalitarian symbols," or "an expression of hope and dynamism in an age of despair and stagnation" (Lary May, "Designing Multi-Cultural America, Modern Movie-Theaters and the Politics of Public Space 1920-1945," in *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship*,

- ed. James Combs, New York, 1993, 213). Also see Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee*, New Haven, 1996; David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*, New York, 1981; Richard Stapleford, *Temples of Illusion: The Atmospheric Theatres of John Eberson*, New York, 1988; Jane Preddy, "Glamour, Glitz and Sparkle: The Deco Theatres of John Eberson," in 1989 Annual of the Theatre Historical Society Chicago, 1990, p.p.1-39; Christine Basque, "The Paradoxes of Paradise: Elements of Conflict in Chicago's Balaban & Katz," *Marquee*, 27: 2, 1993, pp.4-12; Ben M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats; The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace*, New York, 1961; Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, Madison, 1992; Ina Rae Hark, *Exhibition, the film reader*, New York, 2002.
- 13 The "modernistic ornamental mode" is, Schlanger concludes, "what is now known blindly (both to the public and the theatre industry) as the modern theatre structure" (Ben Schlanger, "Motion Picture Theatres Of Tomorrow," *Motion Picture Herald*, February 1931, p.13). A month later, the noted theater architect R. W. Sexton echoed the same sentiment: "Of late there has been a tendency to design so-called 'modern theatres.' And yet we find on analysis that most of the modern theatres today are based on the same plan and section - that has been adhered to so closely for the last 50 years. These theatres are modern in their decorative treatments because the design of their decorations does not suggest the influence at any one of the old styles and periods. But we still find the elaborate proscenium arch, the huge orchestra, the squeezed-in mezzanine and the deep-sloping balcony" (Randolph Williams Sexton, "The Changing Values in Theatre Design, An Architect's Analysis and Prophecy," *Motion Picture Herald* 25, March 1931, p.25).
 - 14 Schlanger, Motion Picture Theaters Of Tomorrow, p.13.
 - 15 Maxim Gorky, "A Review of the Lumières Programme at the Nizhni-Novgorod Fair," in *Kino: A History Of The Russian And Soviet Film*, ed. Jay Leyda, Princeton, 1983, pp.407-09.
 - 16 Charles Musser and Carol Nelson, *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition, 1880-1920*, Princeton, 1991.
 - 17 The picture frame is a recurring theme in the depictions of early film exhibits. It is not clear how prevalent the use of a picture frame around the movie screen - often a stretched muslin sheet - may have been in the early exhibits. Its absence may well have exacerbated the audience's reaction. Nevertheless, the frame is a prevalent feature of idealized depictions of the exhibit. Whether actual or imaginary, the logic of this frame, if not its form, would remain with cinema for the remainder of its history.
 - 18 Gorky, "A Review of the Lumières Programme," p.408.
 - 19 Musser, *High-class moving pictures*, p.66.
 - 20 Gorky, "A review of the Lumière programme," p.408.
 - 21 The novel spectacle that was the type of early film exhibition Gorky reviewed and Tom Gunning calls the "cinema of attractions," i.e., a cinema that offers scenes to look at, rather than narratives to be engrossed in, encourage the viewer to

assume the role of an observer. The observational role fixes the subject's place outside the attraction, and requires the subject to look at the attraction in recognition of the space that is transformed into distance in-between the viewer and the attraction as such. This distance, contingent as it was in the cinema of attractions on the threat of an imaginary collapse, was both volatile and to a degree unsettling as Gorky's review clearly indicates. The addition of a narrator and/or musical accompaniments to early silent film screenings would soon go some distance toward remediation of the type of dialogical involvement with silent films that purportedly disturbed and depressed Gorky. They acted in ways that were similar to the "gay chatter" and "provoking laughter" that extracted and returned Gorky to his *place*. Interjected in-between the audience and the screen, the narrator and/or the music helped stabilize and localize the audience in their place vis-à-vis the screen located now behind the source of sound directed at the audience.

By 1914, Charles Wittemore would go so far as to attribute the broad appeal of narrative cinema to the introduction of the organ: "It is difficult to say what new features may be added to the development of the motion picture in the next few years, but certainly the introduction of the organ in connection with the picture program has done much to arouse a universal interest among the class of people who are not fascinated by the 'thrillers,' and to raise the tone of the programs by this very fact" (Charles A. Wittemore, "The Moving Picture Theatre," *Brickbuilder* 23 1914, p.43).

For a detailed discussion of the role of sound and music in early film exhibitions see: Richard Abel, Rick Altman eds. *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, Bloomington, 2001; Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, New York, 2005.

- 22 Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994, 114-33. See also, Wanda Strauven ed., *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Chicago, 2007.
- 23 For a detailed discussion of the emergence of the spectator as a historical construction from early to classical cinema, see Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, Cambridge, 1994.
- 24 For a detailed discussion of the history of the nickelodeon, see Q. David Bowers, *Nickelodeon Theatres and Their Music*, Vestal, 1986. Also, Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping, Cinema and the Postmodern*, Berkeley, 1994; Charlotte Herzog, "The Archaeology of Cinema Architecture: The Origins of the Movie Theater," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, 1984, pp.11-32.
- 25 "A vacant business house having been selected both for its location and for size, the process of converting it into a motion picture theatre is to remove the glass front and framing for the door and window, to replace it with a closed front a few feet back from the sidewalk line and into which are built the ticket seller's booth and the entrance and exit doors and on the inside of which is built a projection operator's booth. At the inner end of the room a muslin screen about three by four yards is stretched. The room is filled with rows of chairs, either kitchen chairs or opera chairs, as the expense justified by the location will permit, and a piano is placed near the picture screen" (David S. Hulfish, *Motion-Picture Work: A General Treatise on Picture Taking, Picture Making, PhotoPlays, and Theater Management and Operation* Chicago, 1913, p.176).

- 26 Although "the front partition of a typical theatre is placed six feet back from the sidewalk," Hulfish noted, "a still deeper front is desirable if the floor space can be spared" (Ibid., p.177). Besides more advertising space, his reasoning had to do with the fact that the void "suggests retirement in the theatre, and when the prospective patron steps off the sidewalk he feels he is already within the theatre, even before he has purchased his admission ticket" (Ibid., p.178). In other words, the void was meant to have one step off and depart from the place of the real before traversing its depth to enter the consequently imagined other world beyond.
- 27 The gateway theme for the movie-theatre facade became so prevalent that soon prefabricated facades were offered for sale by various vendors. The Sears & Roebuck company's 1908 catalogue, for example, claimed "the 5-cent theater is here to stay" and "almost any vacant storeroom can be made into a five-cent theater by removing the glass front and replacing it with a regular theater front similar to the illustration shown" on the catalogue page. The "regular theater front" is the arch in frame format that served as a forceful dividing line.
- 28 Mary Heaton Vorse, "Some Picture Show Audiences." *Outlook* 98, June 1911, p.442.
- 29 Consternation about the adverse effect of the imaginary on the real did not dissipate with the advent of the nickelodeon. It was merely localized there. As Lee Grieveson points out, in the imagination of the emergent middle-class the nickelodeon not only attracted the "vulnerable and dangerous," i.e., "children, women, and lower-classes and immigrant audiences," also "experiences at moving pictures in nickelodeons were regarded as particularly dangerous, principally because of the realism of moving pictures, because images were seen to be linked closely to imitative responses from 'suggestible' audiences and because the ill-lit space of the nickelodeon provided what the Juvenile Protective Association of Chicago described as 'a cover for familiarity and sometimes even for immorality'" (Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America*, Berkeley, 2004, p.13). The middle-class consternation about the imaginary's adverse effect on the real led to a concerted effort at censoring and policing cinema in the decade that followed the advent of the nickelodeon. These included legislative measures at the municipal, state, and federal levels, as well as, self-regulatory practices by the movie industry.
- In contrast, focusing on the experience of the immigrant and women audiences at the nickelodeon, Miriam Hansen makes a sharp distinction between their experiences and the audience experience of "classic cinema" as it would emerge in the second decade of the twentieth century. In classic cinema, Hansen argues, "the absorption of the viewer into narrative space on a stylistic level corresponded to an increased derealization of the theater space - the physical and social space of the spectator" (Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, p.83). On the other hand, "the neighborhood character of many nickelodeons - the egalitarian seating, continuous admission, and variety format, nonfilmic activities like illustrated songs, live acts, and occasional amateur nights - fostered a casual, sociable if not boisterous, atmosphere. It made moviegoing an interactive rather than merely passive experience" (Ibid., p.61). The disjunctive exhibition program of the nickelodeon had two distinct consequences for Hansen. It did not allow the audience to get fully submerged into "the illusory space on screen." Throughout, the audience remained

conscious of "the actual theater space" and their collective place within it (Ibid., p.84). Also, "this aesthetics of disjunction not only contested the presumed homogeneity of dominant culture and society in the name of which immigrants were marginalized and alienated; more important, it lent the experience of disorientation and displacement the objectivity of collective expression" (Ibid., p.108). The nickelodeon, Hansen argues, played much the same role for female audiences in so far as "it "simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" the gendered demarcations of private and public spheres Bounded by familiar surroundings and culturally accepted, within the working-class community at least, the movie-theater opened up an arena in which a new discourse on femininity could be articulated and the norms and codes of sexual conduct could be redefined" (Ibid., p.118).

Hansen's acute observations are based on an exclusive focus on the auditorium space. Taking into account the entire experience may well lead to a more nuanced interpretation. Though indeed "bounded by familiar surroundings," the nickelodeon was effectively separated and segregated from those surroundings both visually and ritually. This was the primary focus of the nickelodeon designers, given that the music and the captions during and live entertainment at the intervals effectively kept the imaginary at a pronounced distance in the auditorium. If the nickelodeon was indeed "an objective correlative of the immigrant experience" (Ibid., p.108), it was by virtue of leaving one's "familiar surroundings," on a journey to an Other world, into which the audience were given short glimpses, and from which they remained effectively distanced, if not segregated. In a sense, everyone at the nickelodeon was an immigrant, i.e., an outsider by design. Any shift in gender and social roles within the bounds of the nickelodeon merely underscored the alterity of the movie-theatre as the fantastic and other worldly - indeed a place apart where real norms did not apply.

The difference between the nickelodeon experience and the "classic movie" experience at the movie-palaces of the late teens and twenties may not have been as pronounced as Hansen portrays it. The disjunctive program of the nickelodeon did not entirely cease with the demise of the nickelodeon. The live music at a grander scale, the captions during, as well as the live entertainment on occasion would continue to play much the same role in the movie palaces as they did at the nickelodeon. Please also see notes 44 and 79.

- 30 Rapp, "History of Cinema Theater Architecture," 58-59. In addition see P.R. Pereira, "The Development of the Moving Picture Theater," *American Architect* 106, 1914, p.178.

The changes that made the nickelodeon obsolete were not technological per se. Aside from on-going improvements to projection equipment leading to relatively brighter images on the screen, the main developments in the movie industry had to do with the movie's duration and content, in particular, narrative plot, acting and the relative realism and polish of the production. Although, these "wonderful advances" immersed the audience in an imaginary reality to far greater degree and for far longer duration than the ubiquitous short duration films of the nickelodeon era, nevertheless, none of these advances mandated, for any functional or practical reasons, a new type of movie-theatre to which Rapp alludes above. Even the ever-increasing popularity of the movies that led, by deliberate choice, to fewer

and much larger movie-theaters as opposed to more numerous smaller theaters, could account for the shape of things to come. Whereas the average nickelodeon had 300 seats and up to 1200 by early teens, the average movie palace had over 3000 seats and upwards of 5000 seats in some cases.

- 31 Rapp, "History of Cinema Theater Architecture," p.59. Rapp was merely paraphrasing what had been previously expressed by a host of authors and architects. For instance: "The people of today's hurly-hurly, commercialized world go to the theater to live an hour or two in the land of romance. So it is that the sophisticated playgoer must be taken up on the architect's magic carpet, and set down suddenly in a celestial city of gorgeous stage settings, luxurious hangings and enchanting music. The atmosphere of a king's palace must prevail to stimulate the imagination of those who come within its doors" (E.C.A. Bullock, "Theater Entrances and Lobbies," *Architectural Forum*, 42: 6, 1925, p.370).

Also: "People come to the motion picture theatre to live an hour or two in the land of romance. They seek escape from the hum-drum existence of daily life. ... People realize that for a small charge they can be lifted up on a magic carpet and set down in dream city amidst palatial surroundings where worry and care can never enter, where pleasure hides in every shadow" (John F. Barry and Epes W. Sargent, *Building Theatre Patronage: Management and Merchandising* New York, 1927, p.12).

- 32 Thomas W. Lamb, "'Good Old Days' to these Better New Days," *Motion Picture News*, June 1928, p.14.
- 33 Hence, Charles S. Lee's famous dictum, "the show starts on the sidewalk." For an in-depth discussion of Charles S. Lee's work see the seminal work of Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee*, New Haven, 1996.
- 34 Barry, *Building Theatre Patronage*, p.12. The addition of a canopy or marquee that extended over the sidewalk allowed the designers of the "new" motion picture theater to add much greater directional depth to the outer lobby than their predecessors had managed in the nickelodeon.
- 35 Bullock, "Theater Entrances and Lobbies," p.370. The same exact phrase would be used by Barry in 1927 and Rapp in 1930, among others.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p.371.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 The lobby, Bullock tells us, had to be "a place of real interest," where "the waiting throng may be transformed from the usual pushing, complaining mob into a throng of joyous and contented people" (*Ibid.*).
- 39 Rosenberg, "An Usher's Life," p.20.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 The lobby, the grand staircase, foyers, vestibules, and mezzanine promenades as sites of visitation rather than habitation also had to be, Bullock tells us, "as open in treatment as possible, permitting the movie-goer to get one vista after another, which will produce a decided spirit of adventure and a desire to gain admittance to the other parts of the house" (Bullock, "Theater Entrances and Lobbies," 371).

In the "celestial city," one was not to linger or contemplate. Led on by succeeding vistas through successive spaces that according to another author "open into one another like chambers in a maze" the sight-seeing "adventure" of the audience/tourist was to continue and culminate in the auditorium (Lloyd Lewis, "The De Luxe Picture Palace," *The New Republic* 58, 1929, p.176).

- 42 Placing the screen at the "inner end" of the auditorium was not, however, the only option. Besides the side walls, John Klaber noted in 1915: "The type of hall where the screen is at the same end as the main doors has been advocated by some authorities as lessening the fire risk, since the audience face toward the principal exits, and need not pass the operating room to reach them" (John J. Klaber, "Planning the Moving Picture Theatre," p.550). Practical as this placement would have been, it would have also drastically altered the experience and with it the intended relationship between the real and the imaginary. Consequently, fire exits were placed, at some expense, in proximity to the screen to allow the latter to remain in its desired location at the "inner end" of the auditorium. The screen has since been at the "inner end" of the auditorium, despite considerable transformations and endless contextual variations from time to time and place to place.
- 43 See, Charles A. Whittemore, "Planning for Sight and Projection Lines," *Architectural Forum* 27, 1917, pp.13-18, and "The Artificial Illumination of Motion Picture Theatres: Present Abuses and Suggested Improvements," *American Architect* 118, 1920, pp.678-681.

In addition to studied sightlines and optimum illumination to soften the peripheral reflections from the screen that cause screen awareness, the movie-theater was the first public building to incorporate air conditioning from very early phases of that technology's development. The objective was to achieve that constant temperature and humidity, which allowed the audience to become perfectly oblivious for the duration of their stay.

- 44 In addition, silent movie screenings were generally accompanied by live vaudeville performances, whose auxiliary role was best delineated by Siegfried Kracauer long ago. "If scenes of real physicality are ... displayed alongside the movie" Kracauer noted in 1926, "the latter recedes into the flat surface and the deception is exposed. The proximity of action which has spatial depth destroys the spatiality of what is shown on the screen. By its very existence film demands that the world it reflects be the only one; it should be wrested from every three-dimensional surrounding lest it fail as an illusion." It would not be until silence gave way to sound Kracauer's call could and would be heeded. In the silent era, the live performances that preceded and followed the filmic illusion, beyond their entertainment value, in effect, allowed the illusion to strategically and effectively "fail," i.e., to depreciate and distance itself as illusion by receding into the background, behind the curtain, in the palace that wasn't (Siegfried Kracauer *Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces*, *New German Critique* 40, 1987, p.6).
- 45 Lamb, "Good Old Days" to these Better New Days, p.14.
- 46 The media coverage of the movie palaces in the 1920s is replete with reference to the democratic nature of the movie palace as an institution. This too, however, merely underscored the alterity of the "dream city." Lloyd Lewis's account is tell-

ing.

Most of these cinema palaces sell all their seats at the same price; and get it; the rich man stands in line with the poor; and usually tipping is forbidden. In this suave atmosphere, the differences of cunning, charm, and wealth, that determine our lives outside, are forgotten. All men enter these portals equal, and thus the movies are perhaps a symbol of democracy. Let us take heart from this, and not be downcast because our democratic nation prudently reserves its democracy for the temple of day-dreams (Lewis, "The De Luxe Picture Palace," p.176).

At the gates of the "celestial city," ticket in hand, one was to leave behind much that socially and economically characterized "lives outside." If the "temple of day-dreams" was democratic, it was so by way of being/construed as the radical other of the real.

- 47 Rapp, "History of Cinema Theater Architecture," p.56.
- 48 For detailed discussion of audiences' reaction to early sound films see Robert Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound Film and the Origins of the Horror Genre*, Berkeley, 2007.
- 49 Bakshy, "A Year of Talkies," p.773.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Luigi Pirandello, "Pirandello Views the 'Talkies,'" *New York Times*, 28 July 1929, p.71.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 The same disturbing juxtaposition is the basis for Pirandello's third objection. Given that "the setting represented by the film ... is outside the hall where the film is being projected ... the voices ring inside the hall with a most disagreeable effect of unreality." Conscious, if not preoccupied with the dimensional and spatial discrepancy between sound and image, Pirandello tells us that, "the quick succession of talking images tires the eyes" and "the dialogue loses all forcefulness." Pirandello like Bakshy, complained of poor sound quality, i.e., "a machine-made voice far from human, the vulgar muttering of ventriloquists accompanied by the buzzing, frizzling noises of phonographs," nevertheless, he too attested that "even when technical improvements have eliminated this frizzling nuisance, and have obtained a perfect reproduction of the human voice, the main ailment will still be there, for the obvious reason that images are images, and images cannot talk." The one is *there*, the other *here*. To combine them is to leave one nowhere, i.e., in no one place that is not disturbing (Ibid.).
- 54 Seymour Stern, "An Aesthetic of the Cinema House: A Statement of the Principles Which Constitute the Philosophy and the Format of the Ideal Film Theatre," *National Board of Review Magazine*, 2, May 1927, pp.7-8.
- 55 Ibid., p.8.
- 56 Ibid., p.19.
- 57 Ibid., p.10.

- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Ibid. Additionally, in the film-house of the future, the screen was to be evermore "like some hallucinatory sphere, passing uncannily before our eyes."
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Furthermore, "the whole interior will be emphatically triangular, and the screen will be the apex of the triangle ... even the ceiling will slope till it meets the screen-top, and focalization will be complete" (Ibid.).
- 62 Ibid., p.19. Finally, to complete the illusion of a path to an imagined destination, Stern demanded the insertion of a "void" between "the final portion of the visual path," i.e., the last row of seats, and the "screen." This spatial "break" between the audience and the "silversheet" was to be "a thing of darkness, of absolute emptiness," meant to "set off the screen as a clearer, more emphatic entity than it could otherwise hope to be," i.e., apart from the path and as such, its destiny. The spacing of the screen placed it, in effect, at an emphatic distance that could only be breached virtually (Ibid.).
- 63 Schlanger, "Motion Picture Theatres Of Tomorrow," p.13. In the years to come, Schlanger would play a leading role in the articulation and realization of the various facets of this new vision. To it, he would devote his professional career as an architect, critic and theater consultant in the three decades that followed.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 This breached distance disallowed both Bakshy and Pirandello from assuming the familiar spectatorial position vis-à-vis the moving picture, without also allowing either to assume, in those early days, the type of voyeuristic posture that the realistic reproduction of sound would allow in the 30s.
- 67 Ibid., p.13.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Schlanger was the inventor of the "Parabolic Reverse Floor" intended to improve sightlines in the auditorium. The Parabolic Reverse Floor introduced a pronounced curvature to the auditorium floor that made the floor dip and flare upwards in the front portion of the seating area, reaching up to meet the screen. In addition to improved sight lines, it effectively enhanced the directional momentum of the auditorium.
- 72 Ben Schlanger, "New Theaters for the Cinema," *Architectural Forum* 57, 1932, pp.257-58.
- 73 Covering the movie screen with a curtain was not unique to the new movie-theater. The practice dated back to the early days of the nickelodeon. The justification was articulated then and repeated since.

The picture screen is an unsightly object in the theater when there

is no projected picture upon it. The appearance of the room is improved greatly during the intermission by lowering an ornamental drop curtain over the picture screen. (Hulfish, *Motion-Picture Work*, p.61)

At face value, it is difficult to imagine what would be unsightly about a blank white surface. Yet, covering the screen with a curtain was a practice that would persist for over 70 years. It would only be displaced by a virtual curtain of advertisements and other projected images at the advent of the Multiplex. In contrast to the legitimate theater, where the drawing of the curtain between performances served both a ritual and a practical purpose, in the movie-theater the curtain drawn over the screen served no purpose other than to hide the "unsightly" screen when there was no image projected onto it. Echoing Hulfish's sentiment nearly two decades later, Barry advised, "that the audience never see a blank screen." He reasoned the screening of a movie "cannot be satisfactory if something happens to spoil the illusion - something that reminds the patron that he or she is sitting in a theatre chair looking at a two-dimensional surface covered with light and shadow," i.e., precisely what caused Gorky much consternation and anguish. Barry went on to note: "the blank screen at any time makes it so much harder to create that illusion." By which he meant before and after the screening.

In effect, what is unsightly and inadvisable about the sight of a blank screen is what it represents and keeps in sight. As a displacement of time and space, the movie at its conclusion is ideally transformed into the memory of another time and place, leaving behind no trace of the displacement. However, inasmuch as the blank screen bounds and localizes the displacement, it memorializes it. It allocates it an "unsightly" place that perpetually speaks to the past and anticipates future displacements. While the screen is in sight, the displacement does not disappear without a trace. The curtain not only hides this trace from sight; it also locates the imaginary outside the audience's place, out of sight, in a place that seemingly recedes infinitely behind the curtain. This was as indispensable to the new movie-theater as it was to the old.

For a broader discussion of the cinematic screen see Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, Cambridge, 2006.

- 74 Ben Schlanger, "Theaters, Cinema, Community, Broadcasting," *Architectural Record* 84, July 1938, p.96.
- 75 "A New Architecture for The movie-theater," *Architectural Record* 104, November 1948, p.122. "A florid architectural style," we are told, "only competes with the illusion on the screen." Having removed "the distracting wall decorations" of the old movie-theater, "plain wall surfaces now direct the eye toward the screen" as they must in the post-silent movie era, and that, purportedly, not out of deference to any stylistic conviction or a desire to be formally up-to-date. In either example, much as others, what has been renovated is not so much the event as it is the message, i.e., how the filmic event is contextualized and framed.
- 76 Helen M. Store, ed., *The Motion Picture Theater: Planning, Upkeep* New York: Society of Motion Picture Engineers, 1948, 32. Schlanger, "Motion Picture Theatres Of Tomorrow," p.13.
- 77 Schlanger, "Motion Picture Theatres Of Tomorrow," p.56.

- 78 "A New Architecture for the Movie-Theater," 123. In addition, "The comfort of the patron also requires more careful attention in the cinema than in the legitimate theater. The spectator in the cinema must be at ease and must feel neither bodily nor ocular discomfort. This is essential to help complete the illusion of realism desired, despite the fact that the images on the screen have technically only two dimensions" (Schlanger, "New Theaters for the Cinema," p.255).
- 79 Walter A. Cutter, "Psychology of the Theater," in *The Motion Picture Theater: Planning, Upkeep*, ed. Helen M. Stote, New York, 1948, p.21. In movie palace auditoria, the music that filled the auditorium, kept the audience at a safe spectatorial distance, or as Stern put it, made the spectator "annoyingly conscious of his spectatorial role." In the post-silent era, sound had the exact opposite effect. It stood the chance of suspending the audience between where they were physically and where they were virtually. It stood the chance, in other words, of affecting the type of dialogical involvement with the imaginary that unsettled Gorky and in time, Bakshy and Pirandello. Hence the far more acute and urgent need to erase any and all sense of a *here* in the new auditorium.
- 80 Illumination levels during the movie screenings were carefully studied with the stated intent of reducing "screen consciousness." The adopted recommendation was to avoid total darkness and screen reflection from surrounding surfaces, if only to avoid spectatorial consciousness.
- 81 Ben Schlanger, "How Function Dictates an Auditorium Style that Endures," *Motion Picture Herald*, 6 January 1945, p.7.
- 82 Ben Schlanger, "Motion-Picture System from Camera to Viewer," *The Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers Journal*, 70: 9, September 1961, p.685.
- 83 Although much of the critical reform in the thirties and forties was focused on the auditorium, changes to the rest of the movie-theater kept pace. The formal vocabulary and spatial characteristics of the auditorium were extended to the preceding sequence of foyer, inner lobby and outer-lobby, if only to "induce a mood of pleasurable anticipation" in each and thereby extend and link the path through the auditorium to its conceptual start at the outer facade and the ticket-booth beneath the marquee. Eugene Clute, "New Schemes in Modern Remodeling" (*Motion Picture Herald*, 20 October 1934, p.11). As movie-theaters migrated along with the population to the suburbs, freestanding movie-theaters became the norm, relieving the facade from having to differentiate and separate itself from its context through overt formal contrasts. In turn, the Transcendum's facade became a monumental opaque, frontal surface that forcefully announced the line where reality ended and journey to the imaginary began, aided as this demarcation was by attached or free-standing pylons whose verticality sat in sharp contrast to the horizontality of the new facade, together emphasizing both separation and passage. The Delman Theater in Dallas, Texas, (Raymond F. Smith, Architect; A. E. Swank, Jr., Associate) published in an *Architectural Record* issue of 1949 is a telling example of the type ("Where Parking Is No Problem," *Architectural Record* 105, January 1949, pp.84-7).

As color film overcame yet another divide between the real and the imaginary and went from being an exception to becoming norm in the 1950s and early 60s, the

movie-theater was transformed yet again to reestablish the abridged distance between the real and the imaginary. This time the logic of the movie palace was conjoined to the logic of the "Transcendum" theater as the movie-theater was (re) moved to a new profoundly segregated world dedicated to spectatorship: the mall. To reach the new "Transcendum" theater, one now had to travel to a new and "different world" through roads, across a sea of parking segregating it, not unlike a moat, from its surrounding environment, only to arrive at an indoor outdoor space, where the passage of time and the vagaries of weather and seasons were suspended in a theatrical space dedicated to exhibition and spectatorship. Here, everyone was transformed into a spectator/tourist away from home in an exaggerated version of the movie palace's exotic alterity, long before embarking on a temporal journey through the "floating void" of the auditorium to an imaginary destination.

From here on, were the movie-theater not to depend on a mall, it would fabricate its own mall in front of the "Transcendum" theater, as Multiplexes have and continue to do.

- 84 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* New York, 1978, p.222.
- 85 Gorky, "A review of the Lumière Programme," p.408.
- 86 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Studies in Parapsychology* New York, 1977, p.50.
- 87 Ibid., p.47.
- 88 André Bazin, *What is cinema? vol.1*, Berkeley, 1967, p.27.
- 89 Ibid., p.48.
- 90 Ibid.
- 91 Ibid. It was a fear similar to Bazin's that produced, as Grieveson effectively documents, the middle-class consternations about the imaginary's adverse effect on the real, leading to concerted efforts at censoring and policing cinema in the decade that followed the advent of the nickelodeon. (Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema*, 2004).
- 92 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," p.223.
- 93 Benjamin notes:
The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated. This holds not only for the art work but also, for instance, for a landscape which passes in review before the spectator in a movie (Benjamin, "The Work of Art," p.221).
- 94 Ibid., 229.
- 95 Ibid., 230.
- 96 Ibid., 231.

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