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Imaginary Placements: The Other Space of Cinema

This article explores the cultural and ideational imperatives that have shaped the architecture of the movie theater as an institution and a building type since inception. The focus of the article is on the early formative years of the movie theater design from the turn of the nineteenth century to the rise of movie palaces. The article outlines how the specifics of the design and the particular experience of the movie theater have, from the start, helped objectify and sustain our assumptions about the relationship between reality and representation. For example, one important element in my analysis will concern the movie theater's façade, from its early days as vacant storefronts to the contemporary theater. It is the façade's entryway, an architectural element that would become increasingly exotic, that would serve as the border between the real and the imaginary—the ticketed passageway from everyday life into the construed other world of the movies. This article, then, hopes to make a contribution toward understanding how architecture shapes our experience of the arts and of the world.

I. MORE IS LESS

The immediate success and lasting appeal of cinema over the course of its short history have had much to do with its persuasive and ever-increasing approximation of reality over time as technological improvements have been made to the medium, ranging from enhanced image, to sound, to color, to stereoscopy, and so on. Yet, despite cinema's incessant drive to ever-greater approximation, reality has remained a constant measure of cinema's decided and decisive alterity. This may be the only measure André Bazin, Jean Mitry, Christian

Metz, and Jean-Louis Boudry, among other theoreticians of cinema, have in common. Each evokes reality at the start of his theoretical discourse, only to locate cinema at a measurable distance from it. Each not only assumes a priori that cinema is essentially an illusion, but finds it necessary to emphasize the imaginary nature of cinema, that is, its unreality, as the point and condition of departure.

The insistence on the illusory nature of cinema, emphatic as it has been, has nothing to do with any possibility of confusing film with reality. Rather, the two have to be conceptually, and for that matter, spatially and architecturally kept apart, partly because of what Metz calls "the problem of verisimilitude" and what Bazin attributes to the possibility of substitution.¹ Admittedly, no one assumes the images on the cinematic screen to be real. The audience, Metz tells us, "is not duped by the diegetic illusion, it 'knows' that the screen presents no more than a fiction."² However, he tells us, "it is of vital importance for the correct unfolding of the spectacle that this make-believe be scrupulously respected, . . . that everything is set to work to make the deception effective and to give it an air of truth."³ It is this air of truth, according to Bazin, that enables film as an "illusion of reality" to act as a substitute for "authentic reality."⁴ This substitution has distinct and potentially dire consequences. The substitution "quickly induces a loss of awareness of the reality itself, which becomes identified in the mind of the spectator with its cinematographic representation."⁵ 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.

How and why the copy should adversely affect the original and what may be the conditions and ramifications of this depreciation are questions that I address below. For now, it is important to note that both Walter Benjamin and Bazin gauge “authentic reality” and its mechanical reproduction in spatial terms and, in particular, in relation to distance. Benjamin defines the “aura” of the real as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.”⁶ This is a distance measured in experiential rather than literal terms. Conversely, the destruction of this “aura” has to do with attempts to overcome this distance through the agency of mechanical reproduction, for example, the cinema. Also, to insist, as Bazin and many other theoreticians of cinema do, on the illusory nature of film *vis-à-vis* reality is to insist on the spacing of reality and illusion to the two sides of a line that readily allows one “to tell where lies begin or end.”⁷ Though generally presumed, the implement of this spacing is not necessarily a given. Indeed, the spacing fails when and where authentic reality is identified with the illusion of reality. This is why the place and the conditions under which this identification could happen, which is wherever films are viewed, have been a matter of considerable concern and careful consideration since the inception of cinema.

If cinema is, as Benjamin contends, a direct response to “the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly,” the history of cinema’s place and architectural placement has followed the opposite trajectory. A reverse spatial logic has seen to the formation of the place of film from inception. That film is not reality is not only a persistent theoretical note; it is also implemented and imposed by the designed experiential peculiarities of the buildings that have circumscribed the filmic event.

Locating and placing film architecturally is a formidable challenge confounded by the fact that film overlaps and condenses time and space. It, in a sense, displaces every place it happens to be. It produces a strange cohabitation between heterogeneous spaces, past and present, real and illusory, virtual and actual. This is something that does not happen in reality, though it happens in reality.

The ambivalence that persistently overshadows any question of a place for film is compounded by cinema’s constant technological striving toward ever-greater approximation of reality. Despite this constant striving, or rather because of it, film from

inception has been persistently placed at a marked experiential distance from reality. The modalities of this placement have changed drastically over time. The placement has not. In effect, the need to maintain this distance physically has increased with every technological abridgement of the distance between film and reality. In the coming pages, I first trace the modalities of film’s placement in the early formative years of the movie theater design from the turn of the nineteenth century to the movie palace era. I then address the peculiar logic of this spacing and the ideological consternations it is meant to circumscribe.

II. BORROWED SPACES

In a sense, cinema has never been *here*, in the everyday world we normally inhabit. It has always been *there*, by design, at an irreconcilable distance.

In its earliest incarnation (circa 1891), the “moving picture” was confined within the well-defined box of the Kinetoscope. To see the moving picture, one had to look inside the box from the outside through a peephole. The box, despite all its variations in form, material, and ornamental detail, retained the moving picture within its limits at a clear distance from the viewing subject who initiated and terminated the viewing process. Since the Kinetoscope was self-contained and mobile, it could be placed at any place, as it was at fairgrounds, parlors, arcades, department stores, and so on. The novel displacement of time and space that happened within it remained within it wherever it happened to be. And there, it was always in borrowed space.

As compared to the Kinetoscope, the projected film, in any of its many designations—*cinémaographe*, *vitascope*, *eidoloscope*, *bioscope*, and so on—constituted an entirely different type of viewing experience and presented an entirely different set of challenges. The projection brought the moving picture out of the box and into the same space as the viewing subject. In place of the bounding box of the Kinetoscope, now a void was to intervene as a divider between what is and what seems to be what it is not and where it is not. The functioning of this void had everything to do with the novelty of the event, and it helped to shape the subject matter of early films, creating what Tom Gunning calls the “cinema of attraction,” that is, a cinema that offers scenes to look at, instead of

narratives to be engrossed in.⁸ Both the novelty and the attraction encouraged the viewer to assume the role of a spectator. The spectatorial role fixes the subject's place outside the spectacle. It requires the subject to look *at* the spectacle in recognition of the space that is transformed into distance between the spectator and the spectacle. Early films often addressed themselves specifically to this space and distance for the thrill and amusement of the viewing spectators. Cases in point are the ubiquitous and all-too-popular films of on-rushing trains and other moving vehicles, waves breaking at the shore, and so on.

On one account, confronted with an imaginary abridgement of the spatial distance between the audience and the images on the screen, the audience "involuntarily . . . scramble[d] to get out of the way of the train."⁹ Other, perhaps exaggerated accounts have the audience rushing out of the theater in panic. The physical reaction, whether slight or severe, does not come from any confusion of a dim gray illusion on the screen with reality. Instead, it is an improper involvement with the image, that is, being dialogically involved instead of looking *at* the image, that led to the audience's reactions. 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.

The addition of a narrator and musical accompaniments to early silent film screenings would soon help remediate the type of dialogical involvement with silent films that purportedly elicited these physical reactions from the audience. Interjected between the audience and the screen, the narrator and the music helped stabilize and localize the audience in their place vis-à-vis the screen, which was now located behind the source of sound directed at the audience. Irrespective of this stabilizing addition, film's place was to remain no place for a time. Pending the transformation of the cinema of attraction into narrative cinema, film would be confined to temporary and borrowed spaces. It would be kept on the move by traveling showmen from locality to locality and confined to a heterogeneous group of borrowed spaces, including churches, schools, city halls, vacant stores, vaudeville theaters, and the like, in each of which the film was a novelty out of place. In addition, films were placed in the company of other oddities, wonders, and curiosities—that is, things that had no place inside the place of everyday life—at

circuses and places for other traveling entertainments, all of which were carefully demarcated and segregated spaces at a measurable experiential and literal distance from the course of daily life.

III. A PLACE ELSEWHERE

The technological novelty of the moving image inevitably dissipated in a relatively short time. With it waned the appeal of the cinema of attraction that celebrated and in turn sublimated the uncanny effect of film. Meanwhile, as the lasting appeal and entertainment value of narrative film became clear, it was circumscribed in a permanent place of its own in the space, if not the place, of the real. The cohabitation of the real and the imaginary offered distinct challenges: where and how to place a displacement, no less, of space and time.

The affinity between narrative cinema and theater made the latter a logical model for a place for film. This was particularly true of vaudeville theaters, some of which had earlier hosted films as a novel supplementary sideshow. However, as compared to both theater and the cinema of attraction, the narrative cinema required a distinctly different mode of reception from the audience and as such a different type of place.

In contrast to the cinema of attraction, 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 their spectatorial role, in what has become a time-honored tradition, narrative cinema casts the audience in a voyeuristic role. It absorbs and integrates the audience into the type of immersive experience that both Bazin and Metz warned us against as a problem with verisimilitude and Benjamin placed at the root of the decay of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction.

The immersive voyeuristic experience of narrative cinema sets it apart from not only the cinema of attraction but the "legitimate theater" as well. In the latter, the imaginary is always *there*, at a marked distance from the audience. It is always circumscribed to a carefully sequestered and segregated *stage* where actors may readily and safely assume identities other than what is presumably and properly their own. The proscenium arch that locates the audience and the staged fiction in opposition elaborately and clearly articulates the

line where the imaginary meets but never touches reality.

The distance between the real and the imaginary in theater is additionally augmented and controlled by the literal presence of the actors onstage. This presence invariably underscores the absence and illusory nature of the characters staged. In contrast, on the virtual stage of narrative cinema there are no actors. There are only characters. The audience is the only presence in the cinema, cast, nonetheless, in a voyeuristic role and immersed in the action for the duration of the film. However, the duration of early narrative films was short (ten to fifteen minutes on average by 1905), and the captions they contained pulled the audience out of the action at regular intervals and located them opposite the flat screen. Both effectively kept the illusion at bay in early narrative cinema as it was in the cinema of attraction. In addition, the narrative short films, accompanied as they were by live music for the duration, were often seamlessly integrated with live performances of popular songs and music between reels. Siegfried Kracauer delineated the role of this auxiliary entertainment in the entire performance 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."¹⁰

It would not be until silence gave way to sound in what by then would be a very different movie theater that Kracauer's call could and would be heeded. In the early decades of film, the live performances that preceded and followed the filmic illusion, in effect, allowed the illusion to strategically and effectively "fail," that is, to depreciate and distance itself as illusion by receding into the background. Therefore, the principal challenge for the designers of the first movie theaters was not keeping the film at bay in the space of the auditorium. Until the advent of feature-length movies, the music and captions during their screening and the live entertainment at the intervals were sufficient. Rather, the principal preoccupation was situating the cinema vis-à-vis reality. The challenge was to contextualize and explain how what did not

happen in reality happened in reality. This challenge was met architecturally with a gate erected between the real and the imaginary.

The process often began with the conversion of a vacant store. David Hulfish provided a vivid description in 1911 of a process that dated from the first years of the new century:

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 far 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.¹¹

A vacant store began its transformation into a movie theater when the visual continuity of its transparent façade was supplanted by a requisite opacity. The implied thickness of this opaque façade was in turn amplified by placing it at a measured distance from the sidewalk. This setback instituted a void that intervened as a forceful divider between the film inside and the world outside. A vacant store became a movie theater, in other words, by withdrawing and distancing itself from its context (see figure 1, below).

This implied separation was augmented on the street façade with a superimposed gateway imagery whose ubiquity made it in short order synonymous with the nickelodeon. An articulated frame, often employing the classical orders in various degrees of abstraction, was typically superimposed on the physical borderlines of the nickelodeon's street façade. The inscription of an arch within this frame completed a gateway imagery that more often than not evoked a Roman Triumphal Arch and the city-gate it symbolically embodied.

The gateway theme for the movie theater façade became so prevalent that prefabricated façades 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



FIGURE 1. Theatorium postcard, circa 1912.

Photo Credit: Gotham Book Mart Collection, University of Pennsylvania Library.

glass front and replacing it with a regular theater front similar to the illustration shown” on the catalogue page.¹² The “regular theater front” is the arch in frame format that served as a forceful dividing line.

The nickelodeon’s arch-in-frame façade also bore more than a passing resemblance to the legitimate theater’s proscenium arch. Strategically, however, the nickelodeon did not erect its proscenium arch at the edge of the stage and the auditorium, but on the sidewalk. As such, the nickelodeon’s audience was made not so much to look at the world of illusion from the other side of the

proscenium arch as they were made to cross it to an elsewhere on the other side of this borderline. In time, the thematic of elsewhere would be fully explored in the exotic interiors of movie palaces. The nickelodeon’s focus, however, was entirely on the fabrication of a divide, the related production of an elsewhere, and the subsequent transition from the place of the real to the (dis)place(ment) of the imaginary.

The requisite depth of the nickelodeon’s “regular façade” was equally, if not more, significant to the thematic of elsewhere than the triumphal arch iconography. David Hulfish explained the intent

of this otherwise nebulous void clearly. Although “the front partition of a typical theatre is placed six feet back from the sidewalk,” he noted, “a still deeper front is desirable if the floor space can be spared.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴ In other words, the void as a third, transitional, space was meant to denote departure and prolonged passage. It forced the audience to step off and depart from the place of the real before traversing its depth to enter the imagined and the imaginary world beyond.

Placing the ticket booth as a freestanding entity in the center of this void reinforced this effect. It transformed what otherwise would have been a static space into a bidirectional space on two sides of a well-defined center. In form and detail, relative transparency, and controlled access, it had the trappings of a guardhouse at the borderline. More significant, however, was the elaborate ritual of passage for which the ticket booth along with the vestibule and the front gate was the setting. The placement of the ticket booth in the vestibule was a significant departure from an analogous practice in legitimate and vaudeville theaters, where tickets were commonly vended on the interior lobby of the theater instead of exterior. The displacement meant having to purchase tickets at the gate (border), immediately before and as the condition of entry. The right of passage to the other side here required the rite of a peculiar and elaborate exchange.

To enter the movie theater, then and since, one has had to exchange currency first at the border. Beyond the ticket booth, only the ticket, as substitute money, could secure one’s entry. In principle, no amount of *real* money could do so, without the requisite ritual of exchange prior and as the condition of crossing the inner borderline. Unlike real money, however, this substitute money is not a medium of free exchange. Its currency is delimited to the borderline, and even there, it is not exchangeable or exchanged with any commodity. If the logic of money is logged in exchange of value, this logic is suspended, in a sense, at the point of entry into the movie theater.

Once the requisite currency exchange is complete, one has to carry the movie currency only a few feet from the ticket booth, across the en-

try door, and surrender it to an authority figure whose recognition and subsequent destruction of this money both validates and invalidates it as currency. Whereas the destruction of real money causes considerable consternation outside the movie theater, precisely because the exchange value is lost, its proxy—the ticket—assumes currency only in being destroyed. To gain entry into the movie theater, one has to consent to the destruction of the ticket’s exchange value and carry forward a torn stub that retains the memory of the destruction and loss at its edge and, as such, sanctions one’s presence for the duration of stay.

What this ritual of transformation and destruction institutes at the border between the real and the imaginary is, in effect, their irreducibility. What it disavows is any intermediary or exchangeable value between the real and the imaginary. The tearing of the ticket locates the imaginary outside the circuit of restricted economy and renders the divide between the real and the imaginary ritually absolute. The condition of admission into the movie theater has been a ritual renunciation of equivalency and exchange between the imaginary and the real.

Once admitted, the experiential journey that had started on the sidewalk would be merely prolonged by the directional space of the nickelodeon’s auditorium. The directionality of this space had as much to do with the physical dimensions of the often narrow and long auditoriums as with the strategic location of the screen at the far end of the room. As the focal point of this directional space, one’s movement in the auditorium was progressively toward, though never arriving at the literal place of the imaginary: the screen. Placing the screen at the far end of the auditorium was not, however, the only option. Besides the side walls, John Klaber noted in 1915, “[t]he 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 faces toward the principal exits, and need not pass the operating room to reach them.”¹⁵ 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 far end of the auditorium. The screen

has since generally been at the far end of the auditorium, despite many intervening technological transformations and endless contextual variations from time to time and place to place.

Though the placement of the screen at the far end of the auditorium kept it at an unabridged distance from the audience, nonetheless, this arrangement placed the audience and the screen in the same space. The cohabitation presented a distinct challenge. This had nothing to do with the projection of moving images on the screen. It had to do with its absence. As Hulfish explains: “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.”¹⁶

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 seventy years, only to 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 served no purpose other than to hide the “unsightly” screen when there was no image projected on it. The live performances that preceded and followed the screening of movies at the nickelodeon took place, unlike legitimate theater, at the closing of the curtain and in front of it. In other words, the persistent wish to spare the audience the sight of the blank screen was primarily ritual and ideational. What was unsightly about the blank screen was what it represented and kept in sight.

As a displacement of time and space, the movie is ideally transformed, at its conclusion, into the memory of another time and place, leaving behind no trace of the displacement. However, inasmuch as the screen bounds and localizes the displacement, it memorializes it. It allocates it an unsightly place that perpetually speaks to 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, but it also divides the auditorium in two. It localizes the audience to one side and locates the imaginary outside this place, out of sight, in a place that seemingly recedes infinitely behind the curtain.

The distance the curtain effectively placed between the audience and the screen would be the subject of greater articulation, in the form of elaborate frames and arches at the far end of the auditorium in the waning years of the nickelodeon’s near decade-long popularity. Moreover, these decorations anticipated the even more elaborate proscenium arches of the movie palaces to come.

Despite a relatively short history, the nickelodeon had a profound influence on the design of movie theaters in the century to come. Whereas 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—the nickelodeon effectively sidestepped this challenge by using architecture to turn the experience on its head, conceptualizing it as a journey out to an other place. This was its contribution and lasting legacy, whereby cinema would always be located at the end of a journey to an elsewhere. If the movie theater is, as Mary Heaton Verse 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. It was also an experience that was enacted architecturally and ritually so as to estrange narrative cinema from every place it happened to be.¹⁷

IV. IMAGINARY PLACES

In the ensuing century, the estrangement of film would assume different forms with every abridgement of the distance between the real and the imaginary made possible by developing technologies. The advent and ensuing popularity of feature-length movies in the early to mid-teens entailed much greater intensity and duration of involvement with the imaginary than did the ubiquitous shorts of the nickelodeon. Consequently, the nickelodeon was, in short order, deemed “inefficient and obsolete and altogether unsuited to the presentation of this modern form of entertainment,” and was replaced by the movie palaces of the 1920s and early 1930s.¹⁸ The latter would forgo the formal simplicity of the nickelodeon, though not its architectural strategy of creating a journey out to an elsewhere. The movie palace would merely exaggerate and push the strategy to its logical conclusion in tandem with the greater intensity and duration of involvement with the imaginary.

Whereas the nickelodeon's primary focus was the institution and elaboration of a threshold between the real and the imaginary, the movie palaces of the silent era focused on fabricating a "different world" inside the movie theater.¹⁹ Film was now to happen in a world apart, where exoticism and, in short order, "Orientalism" were to underscore an alterity that was not only visceral, but also dramatic and literal.

The sources of the movie palace decoration were as diverse as European aristocratic palaces from one end to a vast and diverse repertoire subsumed under the label "Orient" to the other. All that mattered was exoticism and otherworldliness "conspiring to create an effect thoroughly foreign to our Western minds," thereby casting "a spell of the mysterious and to the Occidental mind exceptional."²⁰ In this exotic and Oriental imaginary, the moviegoers were transformed into visiting tourists in a foreign, displaced, and displacing land, where film stood in the same relationship to the real as

Orient did to Occident. Here, the imaginary was not per se what the movie brought to its place; it was a reception the place imposed on the movie in advance (see figure 2, below).

V. IMAGINED PLACES

It would not be until the early 1930s that the initial technological challenges of adding sound to movies, including synchronization and sound quality, would be overcome, the novelty would wear off, and "talkies" would become merely movies. In the process, the relationship of the audience to the filmic event would undergo a profound transformation and, along with it, the movie theater whose function remained the ideational sublimation of that relationship would be transformed. What would remain constant throughout these transformations was the architectural invocation of the journey out to an elsewhere.



FIGURE 2. Thomas W. Lamb, Loew's Ohio Theatre, Columbus, OH, 1928.

Photo Credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, HABS OHIO,25-COLB,4-24.

Although the architectural changes the movie theater underwent in the 1930s had everything to do with sound, it had nothing to do with acoustics per se. The movie palace auditoria were acoustically superior to the movie auditoria that replaced them. Instead, the change had to do with the abridgment of the distance between the audience and the imaginary produced by the introduction of sound and a deliberate attempt to reestablish the distance architecturally.

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, at the source. Reaching the audience from across the multiple thresholds erected in the movie palace auditoria to keep the filmic event at a safe distance, the talkies radically altered the relationship between the audience and the filmic event. 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. The defenses built to date against the uncanny effect of film proved no defense against sound.

To reestablish the abridged distance between the real and the imaginary, all the trappings of exoticism and orientalism were dropped in short order so as to transform the movie theater from an exotic destination into a featureless path to an imaginary destination. Ben Schlanger, who played an instrumental role in shaping the new movie theater, summed up his lifetime effort in 1961: "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 vacuum to provide the transition to the new time and space and to hold him there by eliminating all distractions. The name 'Transcendum' suggests itself."²¹

The audience would hereby never be given to arrive in a literal and literally exotic place. They would remain on a path and in "transport," as it were, to and from an imagined and imaginary destination before and after the filmic event. Through the "floating void" of the new auditorium, sound would no longer be given to reach the audience in any place identifiable as such, exotic or otherwise. Instead, the placeless "optical vacuum" of

the new transcendum would "transport" the audience to its imaginary place for the duration of the filmic event. Before and after, the audience would remain on a path through a floating void to and from no place *real*.

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 1960s, 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 exhibition and voyeurism: the mall. In the mall cinema, the audience was transformed into a spectator tourist away from home in an exaggerated version of the movie palace's exotic alterity long before reaching the movie theater to embark on a temporal journey through the floating void of the auditorium to an imaginary destination.

VI. IMAGINED REALITY

Although the transformations in the movie theater design have been profound and dramatic over time, what I have tried to outline thus far is that they are essentially variations on a fundamental theme first introduced in the nickelodeon: the journey to an elsewhere, literal or imaginary. The lingering question is: Why?

The spacing of the imaginary and the real has been both a theoretical and experiential imperative, in no small measure, because of the "air of truth" that enables the film as an "illusion of reality," to act as a substitute for "authentic reality."²² The consequence of the identification of "authentic reality" with the cinematic illusion is, according to Bazin, the inevitable depreciation of the former, what Benjamin referred to as the "decay of aura" in the age of mechanical reproduction.²³ What is depreciated by virtue of substitution is, of course, the alterity of authentic reality as a nonrepresentational site. What is exposed is an imaginary dependence in authentic reality of appearance on presence, that is, its authenticity.

The condition of the possibility of confusing authentic reality with the "illusion of reality" is the independence of appearance from the presence or

absence of the signified referent in authentic reality as it is in representation. This independence is also the condition of the possibility of substitution and at that the possibility of the imaginary as repetition, imitation, or representation. What the possibility of depreciation indicates is that authentic reality is itself a *representation*. It is only as a representation that the aura of authentic reality may be subject to decay. Authentic reality offers no greater hold on its appearance and no greater link to its substance than the illusion of reality. Authentic reality is always already an imaginary reality whose authenticity is not a given but a function of spacing and distance.

This spacing is not, of course, unique to cinema. It follows a widespread and time-honored practice. Our encounters with graphic representation in the wider cultural realm are highly mediated, carefully controlled, and spatially segregated. We find the logic of spacing and a multilayered demarcation of the place of representation not only in the picture frames and book covers that mediate our experience and condition our access to their representational content but, with greater supplemental force, in institutional building-types that serve as exclusive domiciles to various forms of representation. The movie theater is one example among others.

If the question of the film's place and placement has loomed large since its inception, it is, in no small measure, a reflection of the problematically undifferentiated and undifferentiable space of the imaginary. It is that film has no decidable place inasmuch as every place assumes boundaries and outer limits, that is, an outside. Film at once exceeds and defies any sense of place or any act of placement, predicated upon, in the simplest terms, a clear boundary separating two opposite terms, for example, here and there, inside and outside. The imaginary has no outside, since outside every presumed or presumable place for representation, one finds only more representation.

To curtail the ever-looming danger of exposure and displacement in the company of film, it is essential to distance, and put in place, institutionally and literally, what representation defies and denies conceptually: a sense of place. The fabrication of the movie theater as a journey to an *other* space is, persistent as it has been, a cultural substitute for what is missing and missed: an outside to

the imaginary. Within the confines of the screen's frame, provisionally and, within the confines of the movie theater, permanently, film assumes an outside. The logic of spacing at work in the making of the movie theater puts the relationship between film and all that is to escape its grip in the proper cultural perspective.

From the nickelodeon through every mutation and modification of the movie theater, the preoccupation with an other place for film is primarily a preoccupation with a place from which all that is to escape its effect can be safely withdrawn. It is a preoccupation with preserving the presumed alterity of the imaginary as measured against the real. Opening a place elsewhere for film is tantamount to opening a place for its presumed other and for otherness as such to representation. At stake is authoritative control over the determined superiority and anteriority of reality over representation, the imitated over the imitator, the original over the copy, and the real over the imaginary. At stake in placing film is, in other words, the presumed order of appearance in the world, which is, in a manner, order itself. If our construed cultural reality is to assume the authoritative guise of inevitability and truth, then the decisive exorcism of the imaginary is not a choice that can be readily avoided. If authoritative control over representation and its potentially destructive effect is delegated to specific institutions, it is precisely because of what is at stake. The institution of the movie theater is an instituted resistance to representation. To control representation is to control not necessarily what is real but the possibility of its authoritative being and presence as a nonrepresentational, self-referential entity.

As an institution and a building type, the movie theater effectively differentiates the undifferentiated space of graphic representation into two distinct realms separated by an elaborate journey. Between the real and the imaginary, the movie theater institutes an elaborate journey that mediates and oversees the passage to and from the mutually exclusive worlds it fabricates as such. It thereby offers the visitor—by design—a spatial experience that is profoundly alien to the film as the space of a non-place. Past the careful delineation, separation, and processional transitions that are the hallmarks of successful movie theater design, film is given to stand in the same relationship to its

presumed other, as inside stands to outside, here to there, and as do all binary spatial and formal terms that are called on to shape the movie theater into an *other* space. Should one even wish to conceive of the relationship between film and the world from which it is sequestered in any terms other than in binary terms, one must confront and contradict the immediate experience of the movie theater. Much as the imaginary resists a sense of place, the movie theater successfully resists the imaginary's defiance of a sense of place, to the point of invisibility.

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