A Path to Elsewhere: The Transcenium Experience

From early to mid 1930's, Movie theater design in United States underwent a profound transformation. By the end of the decade new movie theaters bore little resemblance to movie theaters of the preceding decade. 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. Significant as the introduction of sound was and closely as it was followed by calls for change in movie theater design; movie theater historians have found no apparent connection, besides their temporal coincidence, between the wide spread 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."[1] The link is indeed difficult to establish insofar as it is posited as a technological and/or acoustic question.

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This paper examines the objectives of the proponents of change, as voiced in various trade and professional publications, in contrast to the objectives of the silent-era movie theatre architects. The vocal imaginary, the paper argues, did not present as much a technological and/or acoustic challenge, as commonly argued, as it presented an ideational challenge. This latter the new design was meant to forestall. The transformation was meant to re/constitute an illusive ideational distance between the audience and the filmic event, lost to the uncanny advent of talking images

I.

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.

Before the advent of movie theaters, 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 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.[2]

The challenge of (dis)locating and keeping film at a safe distance, was first met at the Nickelodeon. Despite its short history, 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, 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 this end, the designers of 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 of instituting an other space for film often began, as David Hulfich explained in 1913, with the conversion of a vacant store.[3] The transparent glass façade was removed and replaced with an opaque wall placed at some distance from the street façade (Figure 1). Over the latter was superimposed a gateway imagery whose ubiquity made it in short order synonymous with the Nickelodeon. 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 a literal experience that was enacted architecturally and ritually to the estrangement of narrative cinema from every place it happened to be.

II.
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. Soon the Nickelodeon was declared "obsolete and altogether unsuited" to the exhibition of feature-length movies.[4] It was supplanted by the Movie Palaces of the silent era focused, as they were, on fabricating a "different world" beyond the Nickelodeon's threshold, literally. Film was now to happen in a world apart, where exoticism, and in short order, orientalism were to underscore a difference that was not only visceral, but also dramatic and literal.

Thomas Lamb, who 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.[5]

The inspiration for the movie palace interiors was as diverse in source as European aristocratic palaces from one end, to a vast and diverse repertoire

Figure 1: Theatorium postcard, circa 1912.

subsumed under the label "Orient" to the other (Figure 2). All that mattered was exoticism and other-worldliness "conspiring to create an effect thoroughly foreign to our Western minds," thereby casting "a spell of the mysterious and to the Occidental mind exceptional."[6] 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.

An important feature of the movie palace auditoria was the elaborate and ornate proscenium arch erected as a monumental threshold at the far end of the auditorium, opposite the entry doors. It produced two distinct and segregated spaces that localized the audience and the imaginary in their respective and mutually exclusive places at an unabridged distance. However novel, strange, and/or engrossing the displacement of time and space behind the proscenium arch may have been, at every draw of the curtain, one inevitably found oneself at a distance from both the event and the illusory enveloping veneer of an exotic destination, that wasn't. Here, in an other world designed to be looked at, one was never let in, though all the while inside.

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III.

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.

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. Also, "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 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."[7] This procedure was the same for movie theaters designed before or after the introduction of sound. The change was not an acoustic question. Rather it 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. Restoring the imaginary to its desired place there, at a marked distance from the audience, were to require significant modifications and a very different strategy.

The call for a different movie-theater design came as early as 1927 and became widespread in both the movie industry and architecture trade journals starting in 1931.[8] The most vocal proponent of change was the architect Ben Schlanger. In an article for the Motion Picture Herald, prophetically entitled the "Motion Picture Theatres Of Tomorrow," Ben Schlanger articulated a vision that would soon become the de-facto Motion Picture Theater of the sound era.[9]

From the outset, the primary objective of Schlanger and other proponents of the new movie theater design was to fundamentally alter the relationship of the audience and the filmic event. The "theatre structure of tomorrow must become," Schlanger wrote, "more a part of the art which it is serving, and not be separated, as it is now, into an auditorium and a stage."[10] The objective was, in other words, to transform the movie going experience from a spectatorial to an immersive voyeuristic experience, in tacit recognition of the talkies' inherent spatial displacement. As the initial resistance to sound proved all too futile, the solution to sound's indissociable spatial displacement was, in effect, to dislocate the audience from their established spectatorial place at a distance in the "place for seeing," thereby allowing, if not requiring, every audience member to "completely envelop himself in that which he is viewing," though only for the temporal duration of the filmic event.[11] The solution was, in other words, to erase the distance that sound had, in effect, breached.

The erasure of the breached distance in the Movie Palace auditoria 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, most critically, 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.

Schlanger focused almost entirely on altering the auditorium's design. The "slaughtering," he wrote, "should begin and concentrate itself" at "proscenium frame," since "it is here where the mood is determined."[12] Next to the 'slaughtering' of the
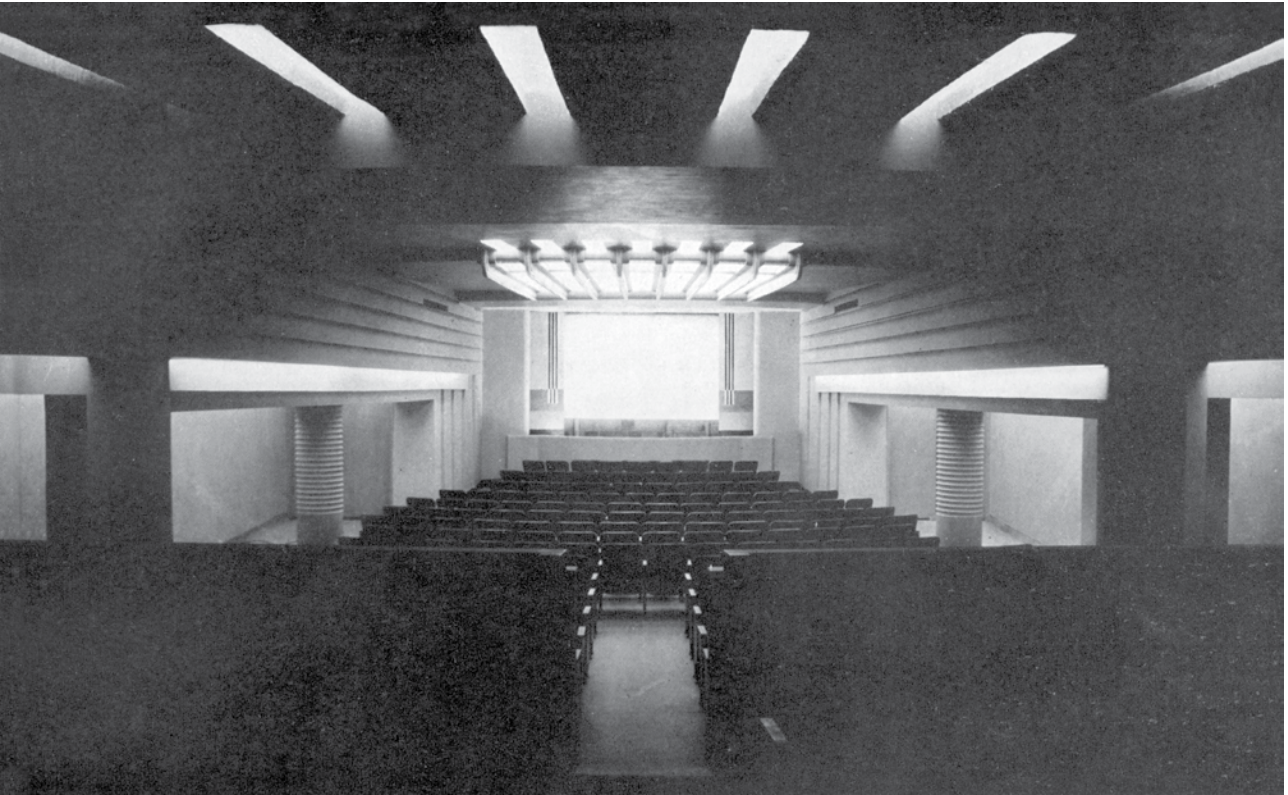
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proscenium arch and with it the auditorium as a "place for seeing" was the "usual treatment of the rest of the auditorium," i.e., the "ornamental side wall, which are always treated vertically with columns, pilasters, arches, etc."[13] Schlanger's objection to columns, pilasters, and arches wasn't stylistic. He objected to their verticality and "a 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."[14] 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 side-walls 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."[15] 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."[16] 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. [17]

The screen was next on Schlanger's transformation agenda:

> 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.[18]

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 it would - to make it 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 wasn't the screen, but the filmic event that was in view and one was, by then, as it were, already there.

Schlanger's opportunity to realize his vision 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 visions behind each (Figure 3). In sharp contrast, at Thalia Theater all the trappings of exoticism and orientalism were dropped to transform this movie theater from an exotic destination into a path to an imaginary destination. Different as Thalia Theater was, it was widely published to acclaim in various architectural and trade journals, including the June, 1932 issue of Architectural Record and September, 1932 issue of Architectural Forum.

Although far fewer movie theaters were to be built during the depression and the ensuing World War, Schlanger's vision would soon be embraced by most architects of his generation. Most notably, it would be adopted by the very architects that were responsible for the rise and development of Movie Palaces of the silent era. Notable examples are C. W. & G. L. Rapp's 1937 Rhodes Theater in Chicago (Figure 4), 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 5). These projects could not have been more different as compared to the works of the very same architects of only a few years prior.

Ideally, in the post-silent era, one had "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."[19] 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 wasn't to be the filmic event per se. It was also not being where one was, by design. 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 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," whose "omission would better serve this purpose."[20] The omission of overt formal horizontality was in favor of "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 November 1948 issue of Architectural Record is an early example of the type (Figure 6).

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 vacuum to provide the transition to the new time and space and to hold him there by eliminating all distractions. The name Transcenium suggests itself ... [21]

This would be the decisive solution. The audience would hereby never be given to arrive in a literal, much less literally exotic place. The placeless "optical vacuum"
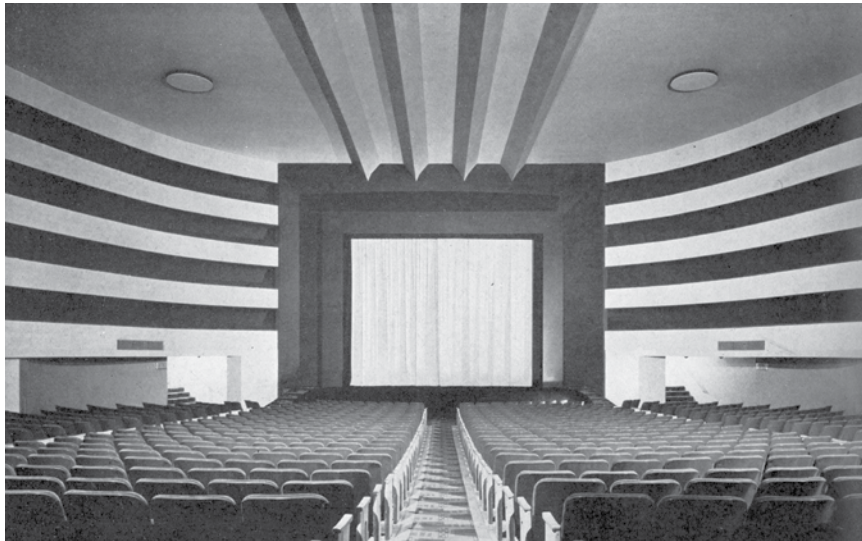
of the "Transcenium" would hereafter keep the audience in "transport," as it were, to and from an imagined and imaginary destination. On the way to and from, the audience would remain in transit through a "floating void" on the path to everywhere and therefore nowhere. To be in transit is not to be there. The Transcenium 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. As images spoke, the auditorium was forced into silence.

IV.

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.[22] Much as ambivalence persistently overshadows any question of a decidable place for film, nevertheless, a persistent spacing has kept film at bay from inception.

Figure 4: John Eberson, Penn Theatre, Washington, D.C., 1936.

Figure 5: George & W. C. Rapp, Rhodes Theater, Chicago, IL, 1937.
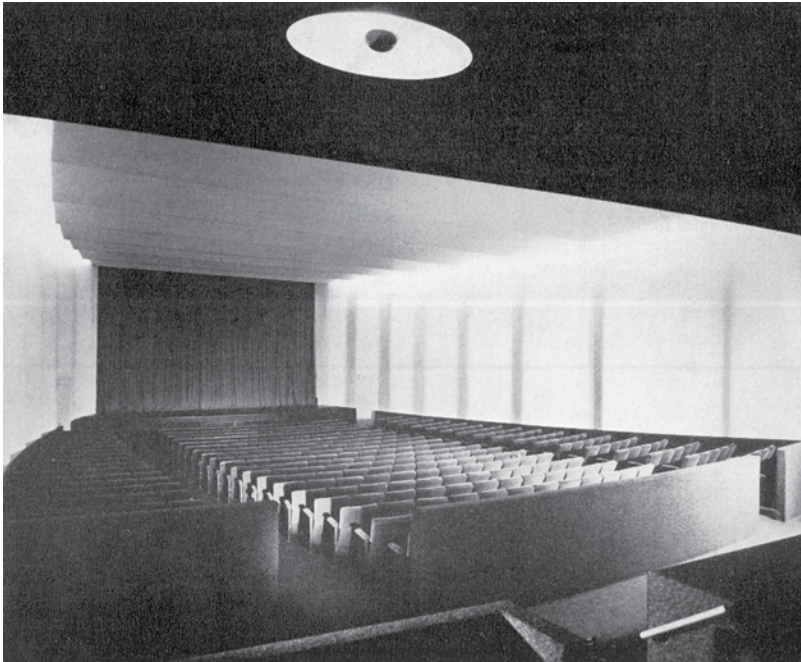
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In effect, and at face value, the objective has been to keep the real and the imaginary at a pronounced distance. This has not been for fear of unbridled cohabitation, or any possibility of confusion between the real and the imaginary per se. Rather 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."[23]

Although Gorky did not explain what the "vague but sinister meaning" of his experience was, certain as he was of it's 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."[24] 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.[25]

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

Figure 6: Goodwin and Stone, Architects, Modern Museum of Art Movie Theater, New York, NY, 1948.

imaginary is the line separating the real and the imaginary, as the condition of the possibility of substitution and/or confusion.

For the image to be separable and transportable, and at that subject to involuntary substitution, it must be always separable and transportable already, in origin, as it is in every repetition. Cinema's dispensation with the presence of the referent as the point of origin—without the loss of pretense to objective representation—brings to surface a gap between the visual and the substantive contents of reality. This gap between form and substance, or image and identity, may be covered but never bridged. The exposure of this gap offers a serious challenge to the privileged antecedence and alterity of reality as measured against representation. Cinema subjects the aura of humanist reality to radical query insofar as the possibility of its fabrications and the proximity of its representations strip reality of its endowed authority as the site of a causal link between form and substance, or image and identity. The visual content of the real can only be made to precede and be independent of its actual substantive content in the imaginary world if the two had not a causal, but a conventional relationship in the real. Cinema can only give visual content spatial and temporal mobility if reality that is always rigorously distinguished from representation is itself already a form of representation. Subject as it is to cinema's manipulative interventions and imaginary doubling, humanist reality stands to disappear as a selfsame entity, only to surface as a suppressed imaginary and a purposed construction, always already. Otherwise, there could be no signification without a present referent. In "authentic reality," as in the "illusion of reality" the referent is perpetually deferred. The self has never been but in exile from the "reality," that is never given, and 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 fully present to 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. This latter, cinema always stand to be were it not for the spatial supplements that seek to mitigate its "warning." This brings us back 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.

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, i.e., an outside. The imaginary 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, e.g., here and there, inside and outside. The imaginary has no outside, since outside every presumed or presumable place for it, one only finds the imaginary.

To curtail the ever-looming danger of exposure and displacement in the company of film, it is essential, as Gorky demanded, to distance, and put in place,

ENDNOTES

1. Stapleford, Richard. Temples Of Illusion, The Atmospheric Theaters of John Eberson. New York: The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery/ Hunter College, p.12.

2. A well-known case in point is Maxim Gorky's review of the Lumiére's Cinémaographe exhibition at the Nizhny-Novgorod Fair of 1896. Leyda, Jay, Kino: A History Of The Russian And Soviet Film, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

3. Hulfish, David S. Motion-Picture Work: A General Treatise on Picture Taking, Picture Making, PhotoPlays, and Theater Management and Operation. Chicago: American School of Correspondence, 1913.

4. Rapp, George L. "History of Cinema Theater Architecture." In Living Architecture, by Arthur Woltersdorf, 5564. Chicago: A. Kroch, 1930, pp. 58-59.

5. Lamb, Thomas W. "'Good Old Days'to these Better New Days." Motion Picture News, June 30, 1928: 29-45, p.14.

6. Ibid.

7. Braun, Harry B. " Sound motion picture requirements." Arch Forum 57 (1932): 381-386, p.381.

8. The call for change was not voiced, much less justified in stylistic terms. The early proponents of a new movie-theater design

institutionally and literally, what the imaginary defies and denies conceptually: its alterity and its distance. 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, i.e., the real. 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 uncanny effect in the proper cultural perspective.

As an institution and a building type, the movie-theater effectively differentiates the undifferentiated space of the imaginary into two distinct and distant realms separated by an elaborate journey. Between the real and the imaginary, the movie-theater institutes a distance 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 imaginary as the space of a non-place. Much as the imaginary resists the divide and confounds the distance, the movie-theater successfully resists its defiance to the point of invisibility.

were careful to make and insist on this point. In a 1931 article for the Motion Picture Herald, the noted theater architect R. W. Sexton wrote: "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." (Sexton, Randolph Williams. "The Changing Values In Theatre Design, An Architect's Analysis and Prophecy." Motion Picture Herald, 1931, p. 25).

9. Schlanger, Benjamin. "Motion Picture Theatres Of Tomorrow." Motion Picture Herald, February 1931, 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.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. 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.

18. Schlanger, Benjamin. "New Theaters for the Cinema." Architectural Forum 57 (1932): 25360, pp. 257-8.

19. Cutter, Walter A. "Psychology of the Theater." In The Motion Picture Theater: Planning, Upkeep, by Helen M. Stote, edited by Helen M. Stote, 1421. New York: Society of Motion Picture Engineers, 1948, p. 21.

20. Schlanger, Benjamin. "How Function Dictates an Auditorium Style That Endures." Motion Picture Herald, January 6, 1945, p.7.

21. Schlanger, Benjamin. "Motion-Picture System From Camera to Viewer." The Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers Journal 70, no. 9 (1961), p.677.

22. Benjamin, Walter. Illuminations. New York: Schocken Books, 1978, p.222.

23. Gorky, Maxim. "A review of the Lumière programme at the Nizhni-Novgorod Fair." In Kino: A History Of The Russian And Soviet Film, by Jay Leyda, edited by Jay Leyda. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, p.408.

24. Freud, Sigmund. Studies in Parapsychology. New York: Collier Books , 1977, p.50.

25. Ibid. p.47.