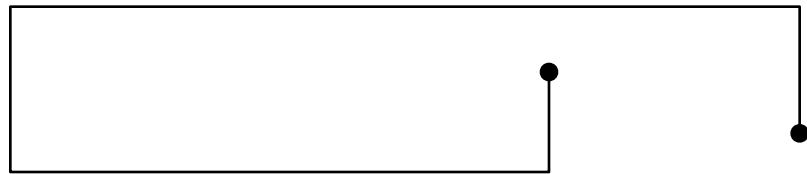


Stored in Broadway's Theaters



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A specter haunts the storefronts of Broadway in Downtown Los Angeles—the specter of cinema. Early in the twentieth century, cinema was quite alive and at home in downtown’s spaces, to this day its theaters’ marquee still light the city’s streets. Cinema’s theaters still line Broadway between Third Street and Olympic Boulevard and now comprise the city’s Historic Theater District. Beginning in 1910, Broadway became the common building ground for movie palaces, and also for a number of vaudeville playhouses. Nicknamed the Great White Way of the West, Broadway enjoyed prominence as a premier location for cinema theaters until the 1930s, when the opulent movie palaces began to choose Hollywood Boulevard instead. In the decades following Hollywood’s relocation, many downtown theaters continued to operate. Many exhibited Spanish-language films in order to cater to Broadway’s dominant buying demographic. But, as time went on and film projectors stopped running on Broadway, the physical structures of its palaces remained. And though marquee bulbs still flicker and neon still shines on Broadway, they no longer signify newsreels, performances or even second-run late-night cinema features. The vibrant screens that once displayed projections of the American imagination now remain silent and blank (if they remain standing at all), housed in abandoned or converted real estate.

The ‘Cinema of Walking’

While traveling along Broadway on the Los Angeles Conservancy tour of the Theater District, my walking group swooned appropriately at the Palace's newly power-washed Renaissance Revival façade and admired the renovations done to the interior of the Million Dollar Theater. When we reached the 500 block of the Broadway, however, reactions of awe were characterized by sensations and questions of a different quality. On this block three former theaters—Roxie (built 1931), Cameo (formerly Clune's Broadway, built 1910) and Arcade (formerly Pantages, built 1910)—have been converted into retail space. While Roxie sells clothing, both Cameo and Arcade specialize in consumer electronics. As our group of Broadway tourists moved through the storefronts populated by Middle Eastern, Latino and Filipino electronics salesman, we retraced the steps cinema and vaudeville spectators had once followed, striding through theater lobbies to the dark comfort of a theater. Now in 2007, there is no room for spectators in these theaters, the seats have been removed and boxes holding electronics merchandise pile high in their place.





Cameo had remained one of the longest operating movie theaters in California until 1991, when it was converted to retail space. It had withstood challenges from television, resisted declines in movie theater attendance and had somehow managed to operate as a second-run movie theater—only to become the storehouse for the very entertainment forms that had dethroned cinema. As I scanned the inventory that now filled Cameo, I noticed the handheld devices, the screens, the time-shifting players and the many, many phones. Instead of mourning the decay of this once vibrant theater, my mind spun with the meaning of this converted space. Was cinema dead at Cameo? And if it was, was this theater its carcass, a physical signifier that implicated the electronic (or the digital) not only as a parasite, but also, therefore as physical itself?

Like the cans of film that had once made cinema projection possible inside Cameo, the boxes filled with electronics contained the physical substance of entertainment media and mediated imagination. This spectacular display in Cameo's darkened theater complicates discourses surrounding the death of cinema and its annihilation at the hands of the digital revolution, while strangely reinforcing it. It also offers an alternate to dominant understandings of convergence and its digital networks; the customers involved in transactions of e-commerce on Broadway are not finance's elite, rather they belong to the immigrant working-class that maintains the physical structures that make global networks possible.

I will continue to explore the implications of remapping globalization, and the network, onto the street level of Broadway in the concluding sections of this essay. However before progressing with this level of imagined and actual participation in electronic commerce, the paper will now focus on cinema's mortality and places of haunting in order to connect the example of Cameo to larger fears surrounding the end of an American era.



I. Melancholy of the Abandoned Movie House

We are to be concerned with two things here. There is the building, and there is the experience the building housed... The movies themselves are still viewable in one form or another, but the American landscape has changed. The photographs here...rehearse a loss that is actual. All the same, they recall us to that which lives, rich and eloquent, inside us. (Putnam 2000:xii)

The archaeological image of the closed theater recalls a lost world in which, behind the marquee, central dilemmas and conflicts of twentieth-century American culture played offscreen. (Sklar 2000:12)

In Michael Putnam's photograph book *Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater* dilapidated small-town movie houses represent the passing of an American era. Themes of nostalgia, disappearance and the loss of American innocence recur throughout the essays that accompany the book's photographs of theaters captured in varying states of abandonment, demolition and conversion. Putnam states it himself when he writes: "I saw the theaters I was drawn to photograph...as embodiments of the death of the American town." (2000: 96) In conflating the screening space of the movie theater and the character and vitality of the mid-twentieth century American town, Putnam overlays the spaces of constructed American entertainment onto constructed, lived city space. For Putnam, however, the layering is a somber one, as the theater, the experiences housed there and the American landscape have all faltered. The unspoken villains responsible for these disappointments are agents that have broken up a comfortable unity between small town America and neon lit movie houses—television, VCRs, the suburbs, peripheral identities and an entertainment industry ready to adapt (however slowly and clumsily) to accommodate change in order to profit. Robert Sklar thankfully points this out in his introduction: "Sentimental memories may overlook a fundamental point: in the United States, popular entertainment is first of all a commercial culture, created and disseminated for private profit." (2000:2)

Vivian Sobchack has also contributed a significant elegy for cinematic sensations, memory and presence. In her 1994 essay "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic 'Presence,'" Sobchack explores the topic with a phenomenological approach. To distinguish Sobchack's project from Putnam's, "The Scene of the Screen" is focused on the differences in how presence is experienced through photographic, cinematic and electronic representation. Sobchack draws on Frederic Jameson's historical model and configuration to compare the photographic as representative of realism, the cinematic of modernism and the electronic of postmodernism. In comparing these technological moments, the cinematic is obviously the most favored for Sobchack and the electronic, her least: "the electronic trivializes the human body." (1994:152) Sobchack concludes: "Devaluing the physically lived body and the concrete materiality of the world, electronic presence suggests that we are all in danger of becoming merely ghosts in the machine." (1994:153) Here, the electronic is plainly identified as villainous.

These two examples of mourning for cinema point to what is generally accepted to be lost in the transition out of an era in which cinema dominated as the largest entertainment medium: loss of place and loss of bodily experience. Putnam contemplates his relationship to cinema as it lives on only in memories and in photographs. Sobchack regrets the loss of the material and concrete. Both connect their subjective memories and experiences to a cohesion and wholeness that no longer exists. Sobchack claims that with electronic media, "space becomes abstract, ungrounded, and flat." (1994:151) But, for all their claims of the specific and embodied experience (that now live only in the past) I perceive abstraction—abstraction of subjective experience for shared, objective experience and the abstraction of a romanticized era and medium. Perhaps this has much to do with my perspective from this current moment, Putnam does conclude his book with the following: "The past has different aspects, depending on one's place in relation to it. The present generation will see these photographs as representations of history. For me they are reflections of experience." (2000:100)

Hopefully, the photographs included in this essay conjure up reflections of experience, as well as being representations of a moment in history. In these photographs electronic merchandise does not threaten its consumers with becoming ghosts in the machine; they are commodities stored and sold much like commodities that preceded them. In the darkened theater of Cameo mere machines occupy space in the ghost, instead of the other way around. With practices of shopping and consuming still intact, a stroll down Broadway makes plain that the material conditions of this world still dictate a consumer's interactions with entertainment. As far as the experience of the medium's representation, this stroll will also reveal how people are using at least one type of these electronic devices: the cellular phone. Amongst the other merchandise, the VCRs, the DVD players, the DVRs—it is true that these are devices used to retreat entertainment into the home, but they also hold the material significance of representing status and technological advancement and superiority that, though different from the phenomenological experience of its representations, still signifies “relations between the subjective and objective aspects of [their] material, social, and personal existence.” (Sobchack 140)

Though, these photographs of Broadway and its theaters also could be read as haunted by an era past, they are not intended to convey sadness or death. They express how cinema was not cleanly wiped from the earth's surface; its physical structures endure. Similarly, the physical components of electronics and its networks fill space and hold weight—the abstracted computer chip may theoretically be “pure surface, pure simulation of thought. Its material surface is its meaning without history, without depth, without aura, affect, or feeling,” (Nichols 1988:633) but we now see that its presence (through production and consumption) is not so easily dismissed.

These new technologies also reveal the technological characteristics of cinema. As Donna Haraway wrote in 1985 about a hopeful (but not utopian) future and fusion with machines: “There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic...” (533) When a medium or technology is first introduced, it is usually revolutionary to declare this sentiment. For cinema, however, “impermeable wholeness” became a theorized characteristic—one that television and digital technologies fractured. These photographs seek to evoke not a lost past that was once whole and is now fractured by the latest technological moments and consciousness. Instead, they strive to show how similar the practices of modern day consumption and entertainment are to those at the beginning of the century, and how the wholeness of the American dream and its access to a “locatable center” (149) has long been fractured and illusory.



II. Convergent Space

Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it...With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled. (Benjamin 1935:13)

Cinema did not kill theater. Television did not kill radio. Each old medium was forced to coexist with the emerging media. That's why convergence seems more plausible as a way of understanding the past several decades of media change than the old digital revolution paradigm had. Old media are not being displaced. Rather, their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies. (Jenkins 2006:14)

Clockwise (starting with R): 1) Cameo 2007; 2) from street Cameo 2007; 3) Clune's Broadway (LA Times, 1915)



This section's opening quotes from Benjamin and Jenkins reveal characteristics of the space that occupies Cameo Theater; it is simultaneously the ruins of a former market's dream of prosperity occupied by the product of a new market, it also facilitates the dramatic coexistence of technologies of old media and new media. While finding nuance in the sentiments of Benjamin and Jenkins not found in Putnam and Sobchack's elegies—Broadway's Cameo also calls for the incorporation of some theoretical context for the spatial practices of Broadway to explore its possibilities as a convergent space.

In his essay "The City in Pieces," Victor Burgin describes modern-day "schizophrenic anxiety of the body in pieces," a 'psychocorporeal' affliction, as directly related to the "teletopological puzzle of the city in pieces" (Burgin 158). Though Burgin attributes this way of experiencing the city to be at least in part due to the fractured mediation of television, the experience of a 'teletopological puzzle of the city in pieces' seems appropriate to apply to the immigrant perspective shared by many of the shoppers on Broadway, those who browse and purchase at the storefront occupying Cameo. For this group, this perspective on the city, one of fragmentation in identity as mapped onto an urban topology, would have precedent reaching much further than 1984.

In the introduction of Burgin’s book *In/Different Spaces*, Burgin recalls the work of a postmodern geographer whose theories will be helpful in further detailing Cameo’s relation to the environment built on Broadway, Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre asserted that space is not a container without content, it is not abstract without human subjectivity and agency; Burgin explains that Lefebvre’s project was to theorize space as a product of human practice (Burgin 27). Explaining Lefebvre’s terms “the perceived” (spatial practice), “the conceived” (representations of space) and “the lived” (representational space) Burgin provides a vocabulary to explain the larger consequences of the different spatial functions at play in the abandoned theaters on Broadway. What purposes, and public, were the spaces intended to serve? What type of lifestyle were they meant to signify? These constructions differ from “the lived” and “perceived” functions they perform now. And yet, some overlap. Notions of modernity and entertainment technologies are still central to the selling tactics of Broadway storeowners—despite the different forms they might take.





For example, consider the following excerpt from a personal recollection written by performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña:

Luckily, my family never lost their magical thinking and sense of humor around technology. My parents were easily seduced by refurbished and slightly dated American and Japanese electronic goods... Things like televisions, short-wave radios, and microwave ovens; and later on ionizers, walkmans, crappie calculadoras, digital watches, and video cameras, were seen by my family and friends as *alta tecnologia* (high technology), and their function was as much pragmatic as it was social, ritual, sentimental, symbolic, and aesthetic. (Gomez-Peña 1996:298)

As the Hollywood industry once gave psychical power to the cinema as a signifier of glamour, consumer electronics communicate high technology and advancing modernity in Gomez-Peña's description of his family's investments in buying electronics. As Gomez-Peña plainly states "their function was as much pragmatic as it was social, ritual, sentimental, symbolic, and aesthetic." The sale of these functions are visible on a Sunday afternoon stroll through Broadway. It is a convergence not only of times and entertainment mediums, but also of the conceived notion of Los Angeles and the lived reality of Los Angeles—dreams of Hollywood, technological progress all delivered through global networks of commerce to serve a transnational demographic, whose expectations of Downtown Los Angeles do not always meet with the reality.

Segregated from the commercial venues of commerce for wealthy Angelenos, Broadway represents a convergence of the perceived space of Hollywood and the lived places of Los Angeles. But this convergence and realization is not equally distributed, as Mike Davis puts it in a chapter titled "Fortress L.A.": "Although a few white-collarers venture into the Grand Central Market – a popular emporium of tropical produce and fresh foods – Latino shoppers or Saturday strollers never circulate in the Gucci precincts above Hill Street." (Davis 1990:231) A scene from the 1983 film *El Norte* (dir. Gregory Nava) also makes these divisions clear. The film tells the story of two siblings who emigrate from a village in Guatemala, travel through Mexico in order to finally arrive in Los Angeles. Once in the city, the main female character, Rosa, gets a job working at a sweatshop, but must flee on her first day as Immigration and Naturalization Services raid the sweatshop, seeking illegal workers to arrest or deport. Rosa escapes and is taken to lunch on Broadway by a new friend. Noticing that all the people on the street are Latino, Rosa inquires where all the white people are, concluding that Broadway "looks like Mexico City." Nacha replies,



while applying her lipstick: “Oh, you didn’t think they would live here, did you? They have their own neighborhoods.”

While spaces of globalization have been characterized by flows and “timeless time,” the Latino shoppers that frequent Broadway make it a global city as the old collides with new, the global with the local, Mexico with Los Angeles, pop mythologies with lived reality. Furthermore, this status as a global city is not new to Broadway. Broadway has exhibited Spanish-language media on its screens since the 1950s just as it now sells Spanish-language DVDs in the Broadway-Spring Arcade, steps away from street vendors that sell pirated Hollywood films on DVD and Video CDs. While nodes of global capitalism are characterized as non-places, cultural globalization has yielded vibrant cultural hybridity. The playhouses and arcades that remain standing in Downtown Los Angeles from the early part of the twentieth century show the legacy and history of these global flows. As spaces are reused and repurposed, they become striking spatial palimpsests that show the architectures of one entertainment era overlaid by the commodities and advertisement of another era’s.

I. Conclusion

I urge to city of L.A. to take over at least one of these old theatres (like was done for the Egyptian) and get some NGO to come in start showing films there on a regular basis again! It's shame the way all of Broadway has gone to seed. (ScottS.:2007, posted on CinemaTreasures.org)

“...right now, our best window into convergence culture comes from looking at the experience of these early settlers and first inhabitants. These elite consumers exert a disproportionate influence on media culture in part because advertisers and media producers are so eager to attract and hold their attention.” (Jenkins 23)

At the end of his introduction to *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins concludes with a half-hearted disclaimer about the group his book focuses on, the elite consumers that advertisers pay attention to. For Jenkins then, they serve as the most appropriate example of convergence culture. However, this essay and its images have sought to briefly explore how the Cameo Theater, and spaces like it, might also provide most insightful examples of convergence culture for both cultural globalization and their related mediascapes.



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