

Theaters: Cinematic vintage magnified

The pictures gathered in the photographic series *Theaters* are the perfect attempt to exemplify the challenging task to find a crystallised form to cinematic duration. Analog in their technique, they not only represent the impressed trace of an instant in which the authors freeze an existing referential index, but they actually feed the rich debate about the state of health of cinema by means of a classical metonymic procedure that addresses the architectural, material component of the apparatus to encourage a reflection on cinema in its multiplicity. Focusing in particular on its environmental aspect, the photographs invoke cinema as film culture (movie-going), a place (the movie theater), and an object of fond memories.

Conceived by French photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre as an ongoing artistic reportage, the project started in 2005 with the aim of focusing on abandoned movie theaters located in the United States. A selection encompassing 30 of these shots was exhibited under the title *Filmtheaters* at the Deutsches Filmmuseum in Frankfurt am Main from 26 November 2014 to 15 May 2015. The exhibition is currently traveling throughout Europe (Cultuurcentrum Caermersklooster in Ghent is hosting a new release from 9 October 2015 to 3 January 2016), though the Frankfurt initiative, which was designed in cooperation with Polka Galerie in Paris, marks the first time for the series as the object of a standalone exhibition.

In Frankfurt the large-scale pictures were complemented with the screening of a 35mm film about the history of cinema in Germany, to be seen in a small screening room built *ad hoc* at the center of the exhibition space. Despite the lack of any introduction to the visitor, and therefore perceived as a bit disorienting at first, the film proposed a different and extremely interesting take on the cultural history of movie-going, producing a remarkable comparative perspective able to couple the same phenomenon in both America and Germany. Most likely envisaged as a way to bridge the temporary exhibition with the permanent one, this film somehow primed the visitor on the local history of movie-going; the Deutsches Filmmuseum approached this subject in a diverse exhibition area located in the same building, where an in-depth overview of the diffusion of cinematic places in the region from 1906 to our age is offered. The exhibition set also comprised some old-fashioned red velvet seats, establishing an explicit deictic continuity between the immaterial dimension of the photographs and the tangible spatio-temporal dimension of the

museum experience. The photographs were also composed to emphasise the materiality of traces and worn objects in the rooms.

A specific attention towards materiality/ephemerality, present/past, flowing/stasis, life/death, infuses the whole artistic research of the photographic duo. The pictures basically document either the state of abandon and decay or the repurposing strategies for the movie theaters. Representing the result of the development of the entertainment industry and the leisure society¹ in the early 20th century, these movie palaces were major entertainment firms and movie studio cathedrals, often built by specialised architects with the very aim to be grandiose and extravagant auditoriums often used for important film premières. As the history of the entertainment industry became increasingly intertwined to that of technology and city planning, such lavish displays of architectural splendor entered a profound and irreversible crisis caused by the introduction of new ways and patterns of consumption of the moving image.² This process was later exacerbated by the mobilisation of cinema, by digitization, and by the structural separation between support and content,³ to finally culminate in the recently acknowledged multiplicity of cinematic forms with the consequent variability of screening situations.⁴

Regarding the theaters captured by Marchand & Meffre, the ultimate result of said dynamics is essentially a recrudescence of obsolescence. In this vein the series primarily shows a situation of decline, in which the movie theaters are either closed, recklessly left to their own destiny, or simply turned into something else. Hence, ruins and the signs of the past are the recurrent elements to be found throughout the series. The same aspects and vintage flavor characterise previous projects by the photographers: in *Gunkanjima* (2008-2012) the Japanese ghost island once hosting a coal mine is explored in architectural and historical terms, while in *The Ruins of Detroit* (2005-2010) the Michigan city becomes the perfect site to further study neglected spaces and their visual charm.

Theaters basically inherits this interest in urban relics and reframes it in a wider context, underscoring the broad dimension of the phenomenon affecting many contemporary cities and mirroring it onto a cinematic imagery that explicitly questions the idea of cinema as necessarily connected to the movie theater and, therefore, its identity. To do so, the series does propose a collection of photographs that perfectly encapsulate an aesthetic of ruins.⁵ In the wake of antecedents that combine a peculiar sensitivity for the material decay of architectural structures, many of which focus on Detroit as an emblematic place (almost a *cliché*) of sublime demolition (e.g. Andrew Moore's *Detroit* [2008-2009], Camilo Jose Vergara's oeuvre, particularly *Tracking Time* [initiated in the 1970s and still ongoing], and *Detroit Photos* [1999; later exhibited at the Canadian Cultural Center in Paris in the frame of the more comprehensive *Abandonment and Splendour* in

2013] by Stan Douglas), and the attention to the cinematic medium in its environmental/screened component (e.g. Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Theaters* [1978], Candida Höfer's *Architecture of absence* [2005], Franck Bohbot's *Cinema* [2014], and *Theaters* [2012]), Marchand & Meffre elaborate a complex interpretation of the aesthetics of ruins. Their work is a visual meditation that reports and poetically represents, documents, and at the same time is somehow bewitched by the story it tells. Acting as archivists of decline and archaeologists of a nostalgic charm, the two photographers seem not to see ruins merely as dead objects but on the contrary the reification of a promise that overcomes material obsolescence – that of a story to be told, either belonging to the place or bringing millions of stories to life on screen.

As the exhibited pictures showed, the series encompasses very diverse kinds of photographs. I would suggest distinguishing at least three categories, enabling the possibility to identify a different and complementary way to interpret the captured ruins: relics-traces, specters, and 'monumentaries'. In the first group I would place gathered images of pure decay, in which scraped ceilings, damaged walls, broken shades, torn velvet curtains, and worn seats fill the void of a deserted screening space. These images suggest no human presence, turning the entire space into the realm of pure objecthood. Old movie posters, chipped stucco, cut leather seats and such are presented as relics, a symbolic synthesis of the pact between film and spectator, producing a suspension of disbelief that is long gone but can still be remembered and evoked by means of a certain cinephilic attitude. Since they are inhabited only by these relics, the presence of man, as well as that of the film, is just a trace – strongly evoked and vividly imaginable, albeit absent. It is precisely such an apparently contradictory nature of simultaneous presence and absence that allows the places and objects in the photos to be identified as traces.⁶

The decaying buildings and the objects they entail can be seen as a crystallisation of the sense of time and, paradoxically, a fixed materialisation of its passing. This tangible form of temporality is what enables a sort of cult of the past that prolongs it in the present, hence the phenomenon of vintage, which re-proposes the objects and the style of times past in the contemporary dimension. Establishing a room for the things and the atmosphere of the past in the present actually negotiates a new space to develop the discourse of pastness, with the result that it not only survives but is praised and gains new life.⁷

Interpreting such an attitude and interweaving it with a reportage mode of production, the photographs by Marchand & Meffre aestheticise the cinematic ruins, sometimes fetishising the objects and places of the past – a cinematic past that ends up producing a nostalgic effect.⁸ The movie palaces we see in the photographic series feed this symbolic, retrospective construction, providing an image of an old-fashioned dimension that responds to the criteria of a melancholic

flavor. Consequently, adopting an exquisitely medium-oriented point-of-view, the project *Theaters* can be considered as a collection of snapshots created out of a cinephilic vintage effort.

As French philosopher Alain Badiou maintained:

[c]inema is an art of the perpetual past, in the sense that it institutes the past of the pass [*la passe*]. Cinema is visitation: The idea of what I will have seen or heard lingers onto the very extent that it passes.⁹If this is true, then the dispositif of cinema *tout court* – and the movie theater as part of the elements giving birth to the apparatus as a complex assemblage and a symbolic concretion – is also something that contextually mirrors ‘the past of the pass’, as well as the passing of the past. A further dimension revolving around a specific identity connected to the memory of the medium is then opened up. In this sense, *Theaters* offers a view of cinematic traces, suggesting more or less implicitly that the means by which we are presented the classical movie-going experience and the traditional theater-based film screening are in fact at the same time the proof that they are gone – a sign of cinema’s past and ongoing pass



Fig. 1: Proctor's Theater, Newark.

Repurposed buildings represent the second category of movie theaters I suggest to identify. Marchand & Meffre include images of places that lost their original function for having been turned into various other spaces, such as supermarkets, gyms, warehouses, churches, retail spaces, flea markets, bingo halls, and discos. However, the primary vocation of the buildings is not completely erased, rather just partially covered, adapted, and integrated with the new structural changes. Introducing a variation on the motif of the ruin, these photographs do not capture dusty abandoned remains but elements of a past life that are now absorbed within a different architecture: the results are 'mutant places' that echo the past but clearly show the signs of a process of conversion, so that they end up as hybridisations. I believe these photographs are characterised by the coexistence of multiple temporalities in a quite plain fashion – these buildings testify to the passing of time and the stratification of practices, functions, and spatial and pragmatic identities. Such an amphibious nature allows the viewer to retrieve a simultaneous sense of loss and life, substantiating this dichotomy into material layers. Possibly more clearly than the first group of photographs thematising decay, the temporal quality of these theaters conveys the impression of an ongoing heterogeneity, as they situate themselves on the border between two states of things. This is the reason why I would consider the cinematic remains featuring these ex-movie palaces as specters.

In the recent film by Jim Jarmusch *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013), vampire-protagonists Adam and Eve meet up in abandoned Detroit and visit one of the movie palaces photographed by Marchand & Meffre. Despite the fact that they are creatures inherently bound to death, they seem to be the only presence animating the place, producing a deep sense of anachronism. The notion of anachronism is precisely the term I propose to use to describe the temporal quality of the theaters photographed in the series. Composed of elements belonging to different epochs, each of which saw the building serving a different function (cinema and gym, or screening room and shop, etc.), these repurposed theaters seem to be almost 'out of time'; they are in fact inserted into multiple times at once.

Thanks to a detour via Jarmusch, the repurposing strategy seems to underscore the spectral, non-linear, multilayered nature of the theatres – an inherent state that might be further specified with the help of Georges Didi-Huberman. In his text, beautifully titled, *Génie du non-lieu*, the French scholar takes into account the artistic series *Delocazione* by Claudio Parmiggiani, which according to him manifests a 'state of survival that does not belong to life nor to death, but rather to a paradoxical kind of state – that of specters, who set memory in motion without respite'.¹⁰ Marchand & Meffre actually offer some compelling iconographic proof of the process described by Didi-Huberman: to set memory in motion. As Parmiggiani, whose works on the tangibility of objects is conveyed by the visualising power of dust, *Theaters* offers an extraordinary result, for the series ultimately

elaborates a conceptual sense of fluidity, visualising it by means of a crystallisation of time/duration into its image.





4124 seats, designed by architects Rapp and Rapp, opened (1928), hosted artists such as Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis, Liberace or Frank Sinatra, closed (1962), used as gymnasium by Long Island University (from 1962)
PARAMOUNT THEATER, BROOKLYN, NY, 2008

Figs 2, 3: Gotham Theater, New York; Paramount Theater, Brooklyn.

The third and final group of photographs exhibited develop the aesthetics of ruins in the light of a restorative possibility. As the captions of the photographs explain, some of the movie places are in fact listed in the National Register of Historic Places – that is to say they are awaiting renovation. Looking at ruins in their potentiality inscribes these buildings in a regime of heritage preservation apt at solidifying the identity of the places as both architectural and cinematic entities. However, this renovation is planned according to the current standards, functionalities, and cultural habits, inevitably introducing elements of novelty in between the threads of an old-fashioned texture. Ruins are turned into residuals which appear as monuments of sorts – materialised celebrations of the past in a *Back to the Future*-style intervention.

If such a restoration policy is useful to re-open a number of theaters, this monumentalising restitution poses the risk of producing mere ‘monumentaries’. According to Spanish artist and architect Jorge Otero-Pailos, monumentaries

architecturally combine the performativity of fiction with the fidelity of documentary. When faced with the anachronistic and often contradictory task of narrating a historical monument or heritage site, preservation design can only create entirely new theaters for staging memory.¹¹

In other words, a strategy of restoration does not necessarily adhere to a conservative rationale (i.e., the claimed veracity typical of documentary, despite the fact that performativity and enactment are key elements of most documentary narratives), assuring that the initial essence of the buildings would be fully re-established in a totally transparent fashion. The renovated movie theaters do not become solely ‘material documents of the past, but also the expression of a con-

temporary editorial point of view [developed to possibly] create a more historically accurate image of the building at the moment of original construction, – an intentional attempt to turn the monument into a monumentary.¹²

Once again, this poses questions regarding temporality, but it also underscores how the photographic series allows us to see the spaces as places where power relations can be expressed – a kind of power exercised on the buildings and the urban textures by intervening on them, but also by the visitor of the exhibition who looks at the images, as well as by the buildings in their potentiality to oppose the passage of time and the intervention of men.



Fig. 4: Fox Theater, Inglewood.

Conveying the vintage atmosphere and magnifying the complex sense of duration and finiteness, presence and absence, Marchand & Meffre's photographic meditation encourages one to reflect upon temporality *tout court*, as well as on its passing in relation to cinema as movie-going, as medium, object-based, and environmental stance to be constructed culturally and symbolically as an 'architecture'.¹³ In other words, the series produces an encounter. As Éric Michaud suggests,

the material image is not temporally oriented per se: it is rather the site of time, situated in between past and future. It is affected by a temporal vector in so far it

encounters a gaze, which has [and reverberates] in turn a historical contextualization itself.¹⁴

The image's relationship with time is re-established every time it encounters the gaze – a gaze featuring its own history. The gaze of those visiting the exhibition, as historically and phenomenologically situated, frames the image within a temporal dimension which merges the captured past, the moment of the capture, her/his perceptual present, the personal imagery, and the memorial dimension solicited by the pictures. The result is a variable and multifaceted temporality reunited in the encounter with the image and the cinematic view it depicts. Looking carefully at the fascinating photographs by Marchand & Meffre the visitor can experience his/her own instant of intuition and realise that, after all, cinema is actually visitation.

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Websites

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Notes

1. Rojek 2000; Rojek & Shaw & Veal 2006.
2. Unfortunately, I cannot delve into the history of television diffusion in the 1960s and the flourishing of multiplexes in the following decades. On these issues please refer to Rosenbaum 1980; Morley 1992; Hansen 1994; Stokes & Maltby 2001.
3. I refer to Krauss 1999. This observation is related to the concept of obsolescence, conveying the idea that the processes Krauss is describing are a sign of the decay of the medium, which opens up some room for a new medium inheriting the valid aspects of the former one.
4. I presented an overview on this issue elsewhere (De Rosa 2013), while in his book *The Lumière Galaxy*, Francesco Casetti frames the mentioned aspects within a systematic theory of relocation.
5. Böhme 1989.
6. I refer to the definition given by Jacques Derrida (1998).
7. Davis 1979; Bal & Crewe & Spitzer 1998; Boym 2002; Guffey 2006; Niemeyer 2014; Morreale 2009.
8. de Valck & Hagener 2005; Balcerzak & Sperb 2009.
9. Badiou 2005, p. 78.
10. Didi-Huberman 2001, p. 16 (my translation).
11. Otero-Pailos 2015.
12. Ibid.
13. Derrida interview with Eva Mayer, now republished as *Labyrinthe et archi/texture. Entretien avec Eva Meyer (1984)* in Michaud & Masó 2015. The term 'architecture' seems particularly fitting, for it combines Derrida's attention towards the idea of 'texture' and his conception of architecture, which he sees as an 'event', something taking place within the space and also within time in its complexity.
14. Michaud 2001 (my translation).