

THESIS

DENVER GOES TO THE MOVIES:  
ENGAGING NATIONAL-SCALE IDENTITY SHIFTS FROM MOVIE HOUSE TO MOVIE  
PALACE, 1900-1940

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## ABSTRACT

### DENVER GOES TO THE MOVIES: ENGAGING NATIONAL-SCALE IDENTITY SHIFTS FROM MOVIE HOUSE TO MOVIE PALACE, 1900-1940

This thesis examines the relationship between film history and movie theater architecture at local and national levels as a window into early twentieth century identity shifts. The argument is that Denver films and movie theaters from 1900 to 1940 manifested national-level identity shifts as well as influenced them. The identity shifts included attitudes of innovation, decadence, and endurance that roughly characterized the 1900s and 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. These identities represented the dominant identities that were part of the broad shift from nineteenth century frontier identity to post-WWII modern identity. This thesis draws from Denver newspapers, architectural and cinema journals, early film histories, Denver Householder and City Directories, Denver Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, other historic maps, memoirs, and photographs. Through close study of these sources and balancing the national history with Denver history, there emerges a story of how Denverites and Americans have selected ideals to maintain and adopted others as they chase their ever-changing dreams.

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## INTRODUCTION

On June 21, 1933, a bomb shattered the windows at the Aladdin Theater on the southeast corner of Race Street and Colfax Avenue in Denver, Colorado. Colfax divided upper-class and working-class neighborhoods and Denver's white citizens prevented various races and ethnicities from crossing to the east side of the coincidentally named Race Street. Perhaps these social and class issues flashed through citizen's minds when eight minutes after the Aladdin bombing, another bomb ripped through the Blue Bird Theater less than a mile down the road. The evening's shows were over and the theaters clear, except for the theater owner and a few friends and employees at the Aladdin. No one was hurt, but two theaters hit and it seemed that the bombings targeted establishments of pharmacist-turned-movie-theater-magnate, Harry Huffman. When a final bomb annihilated a car in a garage behind the Huffman mansion, there was no doubt. Reporters and Denver police speculated that the bombs were similar to the type "exceedingly popular with mobsters" in Chicago. The motive? A reaction against Huffman's support for orchestra leader Fred Schmitt when the Denver Musical Protective Association had accused the conductor of racking up overtime. Denver newspapers dropped the story after the initial article, but a national newspaper for the motion picture industry picked up the labor aspect in its October to December issue. The snippet revealed that Huffman and Schmitt settled the dispute with the union when Schmitt organized a non-union orchestra and Huffman made his eight theaters non-union. The deep tensions between social groups strongly affiliated with differing interpretations of similar ideals had laid the groundwork for such an explosive tale.

The tension preceding flash points like the Denver theater bombings involves contentious interactions amongst various social groups and at various levels of society. When loyalties to

different identities strains interactions between the different social groups, flash points are a natural reaction. The story of the 1933 Denver theater bombings is a shocking tale, but beyond the shock value are many elements that illuminate a shifting national-scale identity. In the first four decades of the twentieth century, Americans transferred their ideals from those of a frontier identity to those of a modern identity. The story of early twentieth century Denver was a clear site for this shift. Its movies and movie theaters were even more so. For instance, the theaters bordered neighborhood divisions based on class, race, and ethnicity. These divisions revealed how Denverites' grappled with a residual frontier identity, searched for new ideals, and connected to national-level identities. Denverites' formation of national-level identity was particularly apparent in movie theaters. In fact, Denver movies and movie theaters from 1900 to 1940 were a microcosm of the national-scale shift from frontier identity to modern identity.

In order to understand the implications of this shift, it is first important to understand what defines frontier and modern identity and the transitional identities between the two. In the transitional period from 1900 to 1940, three identities dominated the nation: innovation, decadence, and democracy. Within each of these identities were residual characteristics of the frontier identity and each became residual identities in the identity that followed. The frontier identity encompassed ideals of self-sufficiency and perseverance, but also a romantic vision including violent Native Americans and a wild landscape destined for Euro-American control. When modern identity solidified after World War II, it drew from these earlier ideas about organization of land and people. Modern identity stressed the role of the state or power group in imposing its definition of organization onto a weak civil society. Since the shift occurred after the turn of the century, the most recent frontier was the American West. As such, a western city

like Denver is particularly enlightening, especially regarding how citizens built and organized their environment.<sup>1</sup>

Movie theaters were a part of the built environment that best embodied social issues like those involved in the national-scale American identity shift. Movies and movie theaters paid homage to Denverites' pride in their city and country. They represented the transition between nineteenth century pioneers who had built the city in a wild frontier to the business and tradesmen who made it a prosperous modern metropolis by 1940. Frontier identity rested on self-sufficiency and hard work as a means to survive. Modern identity used self-sufficiency and hard work as a means to thrive. Aspects of both identities are apparent in movies and movie theaters

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<sup>1</sup> I build this idea of residual, dominant, and emergent ideas as presented in Steven Watts' book, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987): xx.

There is a vast literature on both frontier identity and modern identity. Some of influential and insightful works are listed below.

Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008); Louis S. Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show*. New York: Vintage Books, 2005; Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008; Elliot West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998; Mark Fiege, "The Weedy West," *The Western Historical Quarterly*, Volume 36, Number 1 (Spring 2005): 22-47; Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill" in *Frontiers in American Culture: Essays by Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick* edited by James R. Grossman (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); Lynda H. Schneekloth, "The Frontier is Our Home," *Journal of Architectural Education* Volume 49 Number 4 (May 1996), 210; Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Stephen J. Leonard and Thomas J. Noel, *Denver: Mining Camp to Metropolis* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1990); Lyle W. Dorsett, *The Queen City: a History of Denver* (Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing Company, 1977); Carl Abbott, Stephen J. Leonard, and Thomas J. Noel, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State*, Fourth Edition (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005); James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Reviel Netz, *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); Kate Brown, "Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana are Nearly the Same Place," *The American Historical Review*, Volume 106, Number 1 (February 2001): 17-48; William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, 20<sup>th</sup> Ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Production of Metropolitan Space, 1840-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Morton Keller, "Looking at the State: An American Perspective," *The American Historical Review*, Volume 106, Number 1 (February 2001): 114-118; Timothy LeCain, *Mass Destruction: The Men and Giant Mines that Wired America and Scarred the Planet* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009); Frieda Knobloch, *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Charles Meier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era," *The American Historical Review* June 2000; Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004); Brodwyn M. Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights: Citizenship and Inequality in Twentieth Century Rio de Janeiro* (Stanford University Press, 2008).

since film exhibition was an easy way for Americans to tap into the rising industry while inviting it into their own cities. In fact, it is through Denver’s film exhibition from 1900 to 1940 that we can watch frontier ideals fade into the background as modern ideals take center stage.



**Figure 1. Curtis Street and Seventeenth Street, Denver, Colorado, January 2012 (Author photograph).**

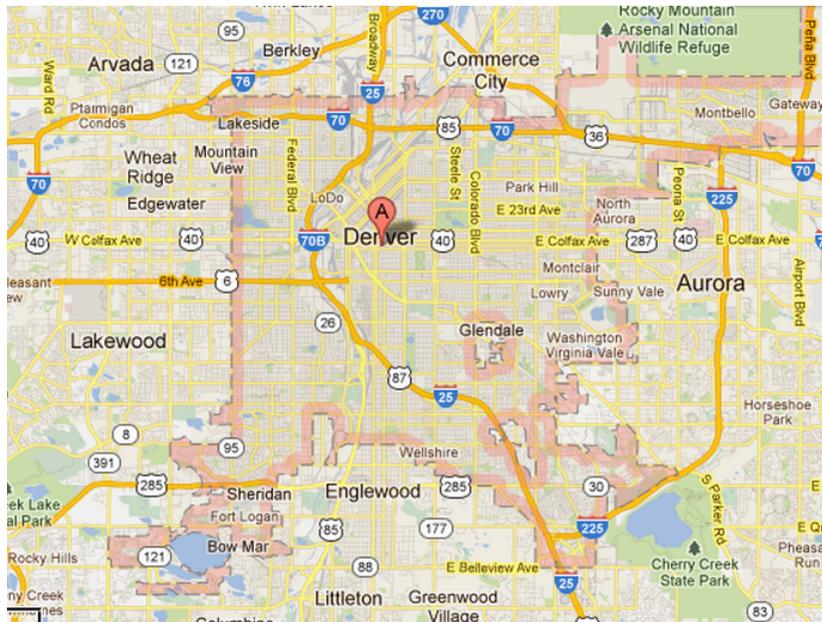


**Figure 2. “Theater Row,” Curtis Street and Sixteenth Street, Denver, Colorado, 1913.<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> “Moving Picture Row, Curtis St., Denver,” 1913, Denver Public Library Western History Photos, Denver, Colorado, Call Number MCC-1901, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/8687/rec/1> (accessed April 2012).

Denver was not the biggest city of the West from 1900 to 1940, nor was it the center of film industry and movie exhibition. In fact, Denver was a mid-sized city around 1900 that expanded through the 1920s until the Great Depression rocked the economy in the 1930s. The city limits during this time expanded from decade to decade, but the central business district and core neighborhoods remained within the boundaries of 44<sup>th</sup> Avenue on the north, Alameda Avenue on the south, Sheridan Boulevard on the west, and Monaco Parkway.<sup>3</sup> At an area of about 64 mi<sup>2</sup>, these boundaries include an area twice the size of Manhattan Island. Inside these borders were neighborhoods of varying social class, ethnicity, and race and therefore a variety of movie theaters that reveal how Denverites used theaters to perpetuate their frontier identity as well as launch a modern age.



**Figure 3. Map of Denver with 2012 city limits outlined in red. The city limits described in the above text are close to Federal Blvd on the west, 6<sup>th</sup> Ave on the south, Colorado Blvd on the east, and I-70 on the north.<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>3</sup> This area does not include the entirety of Denver city limits from 1900 to 1940, but includes the main neighborhoods.

<sup>4</sup> Google Maps, [http://maps.google.com/maps?ix=iea&q=denver+colorado&um=1&ie=UTF-8&hq=&hnear=0x876b80aa231f17cf:0x118ef4f8278a36d6,Denver,+CO&gl=us&ei=4LOiT\\_-KAaKZiALD2-m3Bw&sa=X&oi=geocode\\_result&ct=image&resnum=1&ved=0CD8Q8gEwAA](http://maps.google.com/maps?ix=iea&q=denver+colorado&um=1&ie=UTF-8&hq=&hnear=0x876b80aa231f17cf:0x118ef4f8278a36d6,Denver,+CO&gl=us&ei=4LOiT_-KAaKZiALD2-m3Bw&sa=X&oi=geocode_result&ct=image&resnum=1&ved=0CD8Q8gEwAA) (accessed April 2012).

Although Denver did not gain control of either film production or film exhibition, how those industries developed in Denver during the identity transition proves how far developments in each industry reached. Like Harry Huffman, Denver represented the battle between a nostalgic frontier identity involving independence, rugged individualism, and pride against a modern national-scale identity focused on innovation and efficiency. In particular, the way Denverites adopted, responded to, and perpetuated films and movie theaters demonstrated how they attempted to balance the two disparate identities.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Americans had forged various geographic frontiers and relied on certain ideals to help them prosper in unfamiliar lands. For example, architectural historian Mark Gelernter noted that, “To carve a new home out of what they regarded as an untamed and hostile wilderness required self-sufficient independence, incredible perseverance and the mutual support of neighbors. These qualities are still regarded by many as the core American virtues, and the frontier is regarded as the forge where these qualities were hammered into shape.”<sup>5</sup> Although America’s physical frontier shifted over time, the basic tenets of frontier identity remained the same: self-sufficient independence and hard work.

Furthermore, Denverites used these ideals as a base on which to build a new identity. For example, Colorado historian James Wickens noted that, “By no means did the end of that frontier in 1890 or the conclusion of any ‘new deal’ in 1941 extinguish them in the state.”<sup>6</sup> Coloradans then and now subscribed to ideals of individualism, hard work ethic, independence, and pride that were rooted in the earliest notions of frontier and the West. Such ideals survived the phases of innovation, decadence, and endurance from 1900 to 1940 and helped sustain national-scale and Denver-level identity.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Gelernter, *A History of American Architecture: Buildings in Their Cultural and Technological Context* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 125.

<sup>6</sup> James F. Wickens, *Colorado in the Great Depression* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), 396.

From its humble beginnings as a pit stop on the way to mining country in the Rocky Mountains, Denver developed into a burgeoning metropolis by the 1860s. After giving it their all to extract valuable minerals from the tight hold of rock, some miners trickled down to the plains below and settled in the growing town. For instance, H.A.W. Tabor gained a large fortune in silver from mining in Leadville in 1879 and returned to Denver where he erected the Tabor Office Block and the Tabor Opera House. Like him, other successful miners built beautiful homes with their newfound riches and set the standard for creating a beautiful city based on consumerism.<sup>7</sup>

When the population boomed in the 1880s and 1890s, miners continued to build mansions, business blocks, railroads, and banks for their bustling center of trade and commerce. In the early 1900s and throughout his time as mayor, Robert W. Speer pursued a “city beautiful” campaign, products of which included building new boulevards and parks, constructing a grand Civic Center, burying telephone and telegraph wires, and establishing distinguished public buildings. Speer also tightened legislative regulation on Denver, launching a war on poverty and advising large corporations to work with the community. A “clean, cool, beautiful city,” the “Little Capital of the United States,” Denver shone as a beacon of riches and urban life in a landscape of rustic plains and mountains.<sup>8</sup>

As the city’s trade, transportation, communications, manufacturing, and industry networks solidified, businessmen and other entrepreneurs capitalized on the needs of miners, mountain men, and Native Americans, pulling the city away from the frontier and into a new phase of innovation. When the frontier shifted away from the American West to the American

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<sup>7</sup> *Distinctive Denver: the Romance of an American Capital* (Denver: The Denver Chamber of Commerce, 1926), 42-43.

<sup>8</sup> Lyle W. Dorsett, *The Queen City: a History of Denver*, (Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing Company, 1977), 135, 137; “Robert W. Speer’s Vision of a Greater Denver,” *Rocky Mountain News*, April 26, 1934; Stephen J. Leonard and Thomas J. Noel, *Denver: Mining Camp to Metropolis*, (Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1990), 140-149.

city in the late nineteenth century, Americans questioned whether or not the American West still constituted a frontier. Many Americans had infiltrated the land and set up their own ideas of working communities, making the West an established community rather than an unfamiliar frontier. Some Americans, like nineteenth century historian Frederick Jackson Turner and Wild West icon Buffalo Bill Cody, argued that the frontier had closed.<sup>9</sup> Yet, Americans clung to frontier ideas as they entered the twentieth century.

Their frontier identity not only included realistic ideas about the hard work and self-sufficiency that characterized the frontier, but also romanticized versions of the most recent frontier, the Wild West. As historian Richard White has explained, men such as Buffalo Bill Cody and Frederick Jackson Turner perpetuated a created vision of the West that exploited the frontier ideals of hard work and self-sufficiency. Beginning in 1883, Cody exploited this romantic image in his Wild West Show, revealing that the created vision of “the West” and “the frontier” were old ideas even at the turn of the century. This coincided with the period when Denverites first latched onto the use of films and movie theaters to form their identity.

But like Buffalo Bill and Harry Huffman, the 1900 to 1940 period was the bridge between the two identities. As the frontier faded into romantic memory, its ideals of hard work and self-sufficiency propelled Americans through a phase of innovation from 1900 and well into the 1910s. Although this rapid innovation in industry and trade, science and technology, and social practices continued into subsequent phases, it was the dominant identity during the first two decades of the twentieth century and shaped the film and movie theater industries. This innovative identity subsided when Americans began to identify with a spirit of decadence during the late 1910s and into the 1920s. Decadence had two faces that were intertwined sometimes and

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<sup>9</sup> Richard White, “Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill” in *Frontiers in American Culture: Essays by Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick* edited by James R. Grossman (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 9.

autonomous at others. These faces were indulgence and moral decay. Americans indulged their desires and lived according to impulse rather than keeping an eye on the future. The decadent Twenties were not without underlying contention amongst social classes, races, and ethnicities. Yet, the prevailing image of American identity at the time was one of rash indulgence. With such a reckless attitude, Americans set themselves up for the final phase of identity transition in the 1930s: endurance. Americans faced economic depression and drought that devastated the agricultural backbone of the nation. Their focus returned to basic survival instincts of frontier identity, but with indications of the organization to come in the post-WWII era. Throughout each of the three phases, hard work and self-sufficiency influenced the trajectory of the nation's identity shift.

Beginning with the 1900s and through the 1910s, the first chapter of this work centers on the spirit of innovation at the Denver and national-levels as a pivot point for the shift from frontier identity to modern identity. Denver was a relatively young city and Denverites interpreted the city's youthfulness as pressure to form a distinctive identity within the greater United States. Such concern bonded citizens to the equally raw film and theater architecture industries. Thus, in the first chapter, I focus on the idea that innovations in Denver film and movie theater architecture mirrored the innovation of the nation on the whole. This chapter begins with movie theater construction before independent entrepreneurs and small film companies built them specifically for the purpose of showing movies. The Orpheum Theater, a vaudeville venue, and the Strand Theater, a purpose-built theater, embodied how innovations in film and theater architecture reflected the overall national spirit of innovation.<sup>10</sup> They contained new technologies and new aesthetics as well as exhibited films containing innovative

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<sup>10</sup> I use the term "purpose built" in order to designate those theaters built primarily for motion picture exhibition. "Legitimate" designates a theater built for vaudeville, stage, opera, or other traditional uses.

technological and artistic techniques. The innovation of the film and movie theater industries paired well with the young, innovative spirit of Denverites as they continued to build their city on the pillars of hard work and self-sufficiency. Such rapid innovation contributed to a proliferation of prosperity during the next decade, but this prosperity encouraged a decadent spirit that couldn't be bothered by social problems.

When the nation exited World War I, innovation continued, but did so under this wave of decadence. In the second chapter, I argue that the hard work and self-sufficiency behind the innovative phase led to a 1920s decadence that dismissed social ills while simultaneously contributing to them. The term “decadence” addresses both the indulgence of the era and the underlying social sufferings. At one level, decadence refers to decay in areas like social morals and bodily boundaries as well as to the indulgence that often followed from moral and social decay. The indulgence that we see as decadent today was at the time seen as a marker of progress and modernity. Moreover, it was an attitude that straddled these multiple meanings while today's meaning leans heavily toward the negative connotations. In the 1920s, indulgence could be positive or negative. For instance, like the nation on the whole, the American West of the 1920s was a place of indulgence, but only for the wealthier portion of the population. This was apparent in the decadent feel of films and movie theaters as well as how these films and theaters highlighted the discrepancy between those with enough riches to indulge and those barely scraping by, those from Anglo backgrounds and those from a variety of other ethnic lineages, and those with white skin and those with dark skin. As moving picture technology developed and the demand for bigger, cleaner theaters rose, the number of purpose-built theaters also increased. This led to three distinct types of Denver theaters by the 1920s: the converted theater (vaudeville, opera, or stage), the neighborhood theater, or the movie palace. For this chapter, Huffman's

Aladdin Theater was on the border of downtown and neighborhood theaters, rich and poor neighborhoods, and ethnic and white Anglo-Americans and embodied the shift from innovation to the decadence that straddled indulgence and moral decay.

Finally, the movie theaters and films in Denver during the Great Depression of the 1930s reveal how the Great Depression sustained film, but not theater construction. In the final chapter, I argue that the tenets of hard work and self-sufficiency upheld film production and theater construction during the 1930s, which reflected a national-scale identity of endurance. While suffering and survival are common attributes of the 1930s, the way in which Denver theaters and films promoted as well as denied these attributes is a previously undocumented part of Denver history. Denver theaters and film were key players in helping Denverites recognize their sufferings, but also in encouraging them through uplifting stories. Using three Denver theaters, this chapter demonstrates how the film and theater architecture industries used the appeal of democratic ideals in order to maintain patronage while audience members found support through escapism and the realism in theaters and film. The Paramount, the Mayan, and the second Orpheum Theater form the spine of chapter three.

My study concludes at the end of the Depression and the beginning of World War II, because once the war hit, theater construction ground almost to a halt. Following the war, theater builders introduced drive-in theaters to capitalize on the intensified auto culture and cheap gasoline. Simultaneously, theater builders began constructing the strip mall theaters and multiplexes of today. The four decades that preceded these modern visions of movie theaters and film exemplify the innovative, decadent, and enduring transitional period between frontier identity and modern identity. Like Harry Huffman and Buffalo Bill, films and movie theaters embody the shift between identities. From the Wild West through the Dust Bowl, movies and

movie theaters provided a conduit through which Denverites could tap into the national-scale movement toward a modern identity while distinguishing themselves with explicit ties to frontier ideals.

## CHAPTER 1

### Straight, No Chaser

Responding to the need for a fresh start after the Civil War as well as the discovery of valuable minerals in Colorado, California, Montana, and other western states, American westward expansion intensified during the 1860s. Western lands were full of seemingly virgin landscapes ripe with natural resources. Native Americans had inhabited the region for centuries, but Euro-Americans believed western lands were open for conquest, the perfect stage upon which to perform their ideas of self-sufficiency and hard work in new communities that exploited the innovative attitude of the new century's first two decades.<sup>11</sup> Cities like Denver cropped up throughout the plains and mountains as Euro-American settlers established permanent settlements in the new frontier. Despite some growing pains and national-level economic blows to the young city's development, Denver survived the nineteenth century and entered an era of innovation spanning from about 1900 to the 1910s.<sup>12</sup> An identifying feature of thriving American communities at this time was their entertainment districts filled with vaudeville, opera, and stage theaters. These theaters and the new technology of film gave architects and filmmakers the opportunity to respond to national-level innovative spirit by experimenting with new designs and techniques. A city with a young and profitable population like Denver was the perfect place to test innovations in theater architecture and film as the nation transitioned from frontier to modern identity.

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<sup>11</sup> Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Leonard, 1.

The bond that formed between the young city and the earliest incorporations of film into theaters allowed Denverites to tap into their city's potential as an incubator for film and movie theaters. Building off of its citizens' tenacious, self-sufficient attitudes and appetite for adventures on a new frontier, Denver and its film exhibition formed a bridge between the innovative world of early twentieth century American West that stemmed from frontier ideals and the modern world that crystallized during World War II. Innovation demanded hard work and benefited from self-sufficiency, but in an increasingly modern arena. With theaters, innovation prompted development from legitimate theaters to the new movie theaters. First there was a burst in legitimate theater construction and design and then there was a new type of construction specifically targeted at movie theaters. In addition to the burst in construction, improvements in architectural design manifested the innovative spirit of the age. Thus, during the 1900s and the 1910s, the rapid development of theater construction and film technology prompted hardy Denverites to identify with and enact a national-scale identity of the West as innovative frontier by embracing the nascent movie theater and film industries.

The boom in Denver theater construction anticipated the national boom in movie theater construction by nearly ten years. Although many of Denver's 1890s and early 1900s theaters were vaudeville houses and opera stages, the owners added films to their programs or converted these original theaters in order to accommodate early film technology. Films originally acted as chasers for vaudeville programs, playing on the screen while patrons left the theater. In 1911, Robert Grau, writing for *Outlook* described "chasers" as "when the auditorium was overcrowded, and another audience [was] awaiting entrance, pictures would be thrown on the screen which had been seen before by the seated audience, and thus an exodus was created."<sup>13</sup> But some patrons

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Grau, "Fortunes in the Moving Picture Industry," *Outlook*, April 1911.

enjoyed the chasers more than the vaudeville, leading to demand for a new type of construction: straight movie theaters where there were no chasers because movies were the primary diversion.

In Denver, one of the first theaters to show moving pictures was the Orpheum Theater (1903). In 1903, just when moving picture technology gained popularity in the United States and Europe, two men from San Francisco extended their vaudeville circuit into the rest of the United States. M. Meyerfield and Colonel Martin Beck seized ownership of theaters across America or built new ones and signed the best acts to travel throughout their circuit. Clinging to remnants of Victorian ideals for a tidy and moral appearance in all parts of life, including entertainment, these men hoped to “present clean, high-quality vaudeville acts in attractive theaters,” making the Orpheum a prime location for high-class vaudeville and an avenue for Denverites’ pride in their city.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 4. Denver’s Orpheum with the intersection of Welton and 15<sup>th</sup> Street in the foreground, c. 1920 to 1930.**<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Denver Introduced to Vaudeville of the Most Advanced Order,” *RMN*, October 4, 1903.

<sup>15</sup> “Orpheum theater,” 1920-1930?, Denver Public Library Western History photographs, Call Number X-24697, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/35975/rec/1> (accessed April 2012).

Since Denver's Orpheum was part of a circuit, it allowed Denverites to connect with the national transition toward modern ideals and to take pride in their own growing metropolis. The day before the theater opened in 1903, a *Denver Post* article challenged the big theaters of cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York in noting "the general public realized that a huge theater, capable of seating more people than any house between the great cities of the East and the Pacific coast, was being constructed in their midst, 'unaided and unsung.'"<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it was a "center of interest, not only to the amusement-loving public, but also to all citizens who love Denver and take pride in each new metropolitan feature added to its architectural beauties."<sup>17</sup> This new theater meant not only that national companies took notice of Denver as a key point in their circuit, but also that Denverites wanted it in order to be "metropolitan" by having the latest and highest class forms of entertainment. Denverites were again pioneers in a new frontier—this time a frontier of modernism.

Construction of large theaters like the Orpheum augmented these feelings and stimulated a sense of enthusiasm for embarking on a new frontier. Up through World War II, Denver residents looked to their central business district for new and exciting entertainment. Within the boundaries of Fourteenth Street to Twentieth Street and Glenarm Street to Lawrence Street, Denver's legitimate theaters provided Denverites with a buffet of amusements. Theaters clustered on Curtis Street at the northeast end of the central business district on the border between downtown and the working-class racial melting pot of the Five Points neighborhood. The Orpheum was not on Theater Row, but it was only a few blocks to the southeast, similarly nestled among dance halls, dry goods stores, hotels, print shops, and other businesses. These businesses occupied large, rectangular buildings that emphasized proportion, material, and the

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<sup>16</sup> "Denver Introduced to Vaudeville of the Most Advanced Order," *RMN*, October 4, 1903.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

pattern of solids and voids on external façades. Theaters would have been an aesthetic break in the relative uniformity of this cityscape.<sup>18</sup>

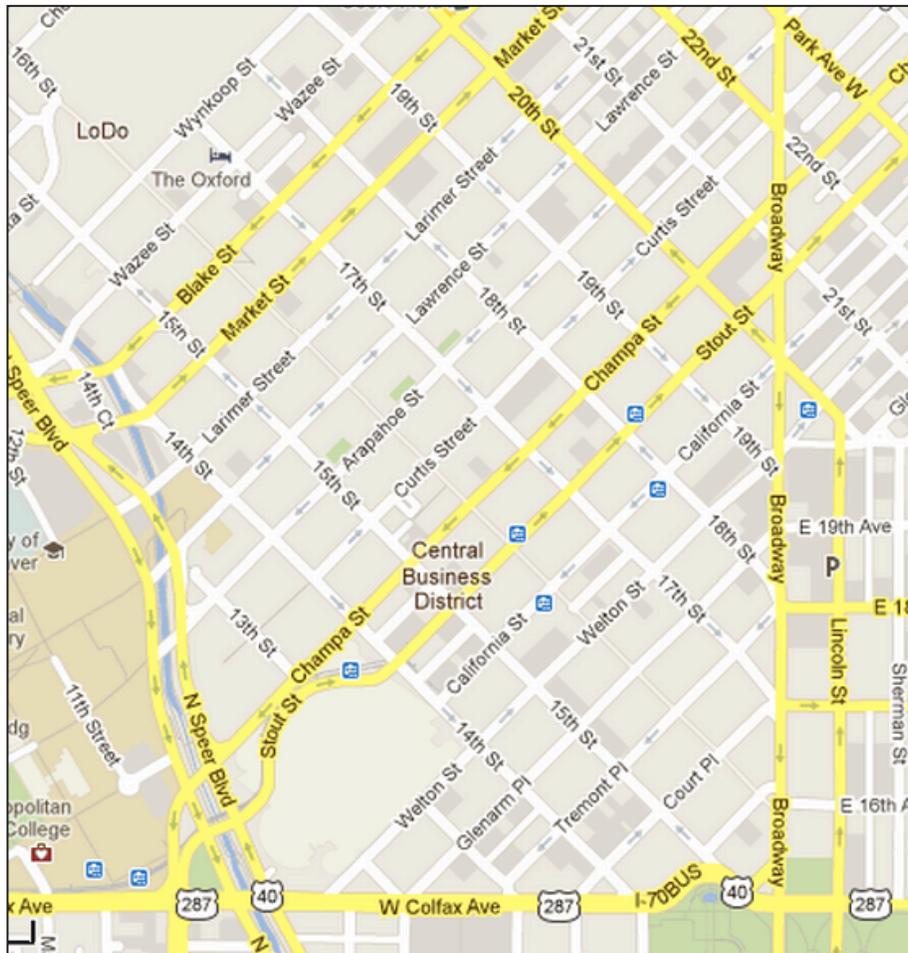


Figure 5. Map of Denver.<sup>19</sup>

In turn-of-the-century Denver, the central business district was the place to see vaudeville

<sup>18</sup> 1900 Corbett & Ballenger's 28<sup>th</sup> Annual City Directory, Denver Public Library Western History and Genealogy, Denver, Colorado; 1905 Corbett & Ballenger's City Directory, Denver Public Library Western History and Genealogy, Denver, Colorado; Halbert W. Marsh, "Commercial Map, City of Denver, Colorado," Denver, Colorado, H.W. Marsh, 1939(?), DPL Western History and Genealogy Department, DPL, Denver, Colorado.; DPL Western History and Genealogy Department, "Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970," DPL, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.denverlibrary.org:2048/co/0985/dateid-000009.htm?CCSI=2555n> (accessed November 2010); L.F. Eppich Realtors, "Locational Map: Denver Retail Business District," (Denver, Colorado: L.F. Eppich, Inc.), 1939; Denver City Council, "Building and Zone Map: City and County of Denver," Denver, Colorado: 1929. DPL Western History and Genealogy Department; Gelernter, *A History of American Architecture*, 184.

<sup>19</sup> Denver, Colorado, Google Maps, [http://maps.google.com/maps?ix=iea&q=denver&um=1&ie=UTF-8&hq=&hnear=0x876b80aa231f17cf:0x118ef4f8278a36d6,Denver,+CO&gl=us&ei=5vaZT8X\\_LOai2QXq7IDPBw&sa=X&oi=geocode\\_result&ct=image&resnum=1&ved=0CCsQ8gEwAA](http://maps.google.com/maps?ix=iea&q=denver&um=1&ie=UTF-8&hq=&hnear=0x876b80aa231f17cf:0x118ef4f8278a36d6,Denver,+CO&gl=us&ei=5vaZT8X_LOai2QXq7IDPBw&sa=X&oi=geocode_result&ct=image&resnum=1&ved=0CCsQ8gEwAA) (accessed April 2012).

and other stage productions.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the 1900s and 1910s, many of the Curtis Street theaters and others of the central business district began as vaudeville theaters that later converted to movie theaters or included movies as part of their vaudeville program.<sup>21</sup> The Plaza, The Rialto, The Empress (later the Victory), The America, The Princess (later another Victory Theatre), The Curtis (which went by many other names, including the Iris and the Gem), The Paris (also Rivoli), The Novelty (Old Isis Theater), The New Isis Theater, The Colonial (Colorado), The Strand (later the State), The Palace, and more all began as vaudeville theaters. The owners either added short films to the vaudeville program as the popularity of movies increased or converted entirely to moving pictures.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> DPL History/Genealogy Department, "Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970"; *Denver Householders' Directory, Volume V, 1929*, Creating Communities DPL; Arthur S. Meloy, *Theatres and Picture Houses* (New York: Architects' Supply & Publishing Company, 1916), 1.

The 1929 Denver Householders' Directory lists fifty-two theaters in Denver, one was listed as vacant. However, "theatre" did not necessarily mean "motion picture theater," so the number of motion picture theaters is uncertain.

<sup>21</sup> *Denver: Queen of Mountain and Plain* (unpublished manuscript: Colorado Writer's Program of the Work Projects Administration, 1945), 22, 28, 40, 57, 67, 68, 71; *Distinctive Denver*, 21, 30.

<sup>22</sup> Forrest Johnson, *Denver's Old Theater Row: The Story of Curtis Street and its Glamorous Show Business* (Denver: Litho Printers, 1970).



**Figure 6. “Night-Curtis Street,” this south-facing photograph depicts five theaters on the 1600 block of Curtis, c. 1910 to 1920.<sup>23</sup>**

The Curtis Street cluster of theaters gave Denver a distinctive identity in the United States, because their close proximity created an entire district of light that, while similar to theater rows in other cities, caught the eye of the nation. Curtis Street’s brilliant glow gained the city national fame when Thomas Edison declared it the “the best lighted city in America.”

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<sup>23</sup> “Night- Curtis Street,” 1910-1920?, DPL Western History photographs, Call Number X-22625, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/31390/rec/1> (accessed April 2012).

Moreover, Theater Row demonstrated how Denverites used the new theaters to nurture and promote new film technology. Visitors and inhabitants alike admired the city as the “great recreation center of America.”<sup>24</sup> Denver was not the only place where film technology found willing investors, but it was a city far enough removed from the eastern businesses and the expanding commerce and trade of the west coast that its citizens distilled the innovative influences of both.

During the 1900s and 1910s, the east and west coast cities careened into modern movements of trade, commerce, and industrialization so quickly that it is difficult to see the shift between old frontier ideals and the new focus on speed, international markets, and power. But Denver was far enough removed that the shift in identity is more visible. For instance, in the big cities of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, national-level identity often overshadowed regional identity. These were the centers of cultural definition, of trendsetters. Denver was not. Although Denverites did not set the trends, they did not simply accept them. Rather, they clung to the remnants of frontier identity as it disappeared from the rest of the nation and in doing so, distinguished themselves from the rest of the nation. Because of its distance from the coastal centers of modernism, Denver lagged ever so slightly behind in modernization. This tiny bit of lag time exposes the actual shift between the two identities of frontier and modern America. The movies and movie theaters infiltrated Denver quickly, but not until after they proved successful in big coastal cities. Denver’s acceptance of new theater design and films in theaters like the Orpheum was generally a few weeks behind the trendsetting cities and as such, is a window into the national-level shift from frontier to modern identity.

The remnants of frontier identity were both physical and psychological in Denver. Physical remnants included the legitimate theater buildings. These buildings represented the hard

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<sup>24</sup> *Denver: Queen of Mountain and Plain*, 22, 28, 40, 57, 67, 68, 71; *Distinctive Denver*, 21, 30.

work and self-sufficiency of local men. Hard work and self-sufficiency did not equate to morality and upper-class entertainment, but they lent to the high-class craftsmanship. For instance, the Horace Tabor built the Tabor Grand Opera House, one of the most magnificent theaters in the city as well as the state. It had set the standard for Denver theater architecture with its five stories, pilasters, cornices, arched doorways, and towers. Yet, the age of innovation spawned buildings that overtook or equaled the Tabor Grand. In the 1900s and 1910s structures like the 20-floor 1910 Daniels & Fisher Tower and surrounding buildings easily challenged the heights and impressiveness of the Tabor Grand (see figure below).<sup>25</sup> Psychological remnants are more difficult to trace, but the continued investment in large buildings indicated the persistent prosperity of the city throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century and were proof that hard work continued, if not self-sufficiency. Denverites had not yet let go of their beloved frontier. And they never would.

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<sup>25</sup> Carl Abbott, Stephen J. Leonard, and Thomas J. Noel, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State*, Fourth Edition (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005), 251.



**Figure 7. Denver skyline, September 15, 1914. The pyramid top of the Tabor Grand is visible in the center of the photograph; the tip of the Daniels & Fisher Tower is barely visible behind the large building on the right. Other structures dwarf the Tabor Grand's five stories.<sup>26</sup>**

To balance this frontier identity with modern “metropolitanism,” supervising architects Marean & Norton designed Denver’s Orpheum Theater similarly to other Orpheum-built theaters across the nation and exhibited Orpheum-approved shows. At a proposed cost of \$225,000—an amount equal to that of maintaining a mansion with a staff of about twenty-four servants—the

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<sup>26</sup> “Colo. National Bank bldg., W.E. & A. A. Fisher architects, Seerie brothers construction Co.,” DPL Western History photographs, Call Number MCC-3858, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/31084/rec/54> (accessed May 2012).

Orpheum was an architectural dream.<sup>27</sup> Construction in the fall of 1903 meant that it was also twelfth in the Orpheum Circuit, so the Orpheum chiefs were still in the process of establishing a standard design and feel for their theaters. A 1903 *Denver Post* article's author described how its 3,000 lamps stretched "like a necklace of diamonds across its entire façade, wreath[ed] and festoon[ed] the marble wainscoted lobby and blaze[d] in constellations on ceiling, arches, balcony, box fonts, footlights and borders."<sup>28</sup> Through such grand lighting and the inclusion of films, vaudeville theaters and opera houses planted a seed for national trends in movies and movie theaters to grow in cities like Denver.

At its opening in October of 1903, Denver newspapers heralded the Orpheum as the beginning of rapid theater construction, which ultimately contributed to the city's modernization. Before the Orpheum, the most recent theater built in Denver was the Tabor Theatre from twenty-three years prior. Therefore, it was the Orpheum that ushered Denver into the innovative spirit of the early 1900s. One 1903 reporter observed that the Orpheum, "has not only vastly improved Welton street itself, but has already caused the erection of another handsome business block, and will undoubtedly result in other notable architectural improvements."<sup>29</sup> The Orpheum was a "veritable electrical palace" staffed by experienced men who carried weight in show business. These men came from working-class backgrounds, relying on hard work and self-sufficiency in order to enter the era of innovation. With such an opening report, the Orpheum quickly became known as Denver's premier vaudeville venue.<sup>30</sup>

The architectural features of the Orpheum incorporated innovative materials and elements. For instance, the classical details such as the prominent triangular pediment at the top

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<sup>27</sup> Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> "Denver Introduced to Vaudeville of the Most Advanced Order," *RMN*, October 4, 1903.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

of the structure, the concave dome of the entrance, the tooth-like dentil molding along the pediment, and the eave returns mimicked Grecian temples and contributed to the Orpheum's grand, high-class ambiance. Even in daylight, the large dome was a distinctive addition to the monotony of rectangular business buildings, making it an important identifying feature for the Welton Street section of the central business district.



**Figure 8. Denver's Orpheum Theatre, c. 1910-1920. The bright lights illuminate Welton Street and contrast with the unlit façade next to the entrance.<sup>31</sup>**

The interior of the theater was equally as impressive. Along with a portion of the theater's total 3,000 lights, the most striking features included 2,000 parquet seats (seats on the

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<sup>31</sup> "Old Orpheum Vaudeville Theater," 1910-1920?, DPL Western History photographs, Call Number X-24698, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/35976/rec/6> (accessed April 2012).

auditorium floor) and two galleries (balconies).<sup>32</sup> Around the turn of the century, many theater architects reduced the number of galleries, some even eliminating them entirely. With two galleries, the Orpheum rejected the modern notion of reducing balcony seating.<sup>33</sup> Apparently not all modern suggestions canonized in theater architecture. Although metallic-painted plaster swags and columns contributed to the opulence of 1900s and early 1910s theaters, the interior was impressive more in size than in decoration. Theaters of the mid-1910s and beyond were impressive because of both.



**Figure 9. Denver's Orpheum Theatre interior with box seats and swag detailing on the balconies as well as plaster cast molds on the box seat exteriors, c.1910 to 1930.<sup>34</sup>**

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<sup>32</sup> "Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970," DPL Western History and Genealogy Department website, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.denverlibrary.org:2048/co/0985/dateid-000009.htm?CCSI=2555n> (accessed January 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Walter Prichard Eaton, "Class Consciousness and the Movies," *The Atlantic*, January 1915.

<sup>34</sup> "Orpheum Theater," 1910-1920?, DPL Western History photographs, Call Number CHS.X7752, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll21/id/13096/rec/9> (accessed April 2012).



**Figure 10. Denver's Orpheum Theatre interior with two balconies and 3,000 seats total, c. 1910-1930.**<sup>35</sup>

Beyond incorporating both design innovations and traditions, the Orpheum Theatre represented the shift to a modern identity because it was one of the first Denver theaters to include the latest technology in the entertainment industry: moving pictures. The motion picture industry arguably began with the first kinetoscope parlor in 1894. Invented by Thomas Edison, individuals peered into a viewing piece on the top of the machine to watch brief action sequences. By 1896, people sat in awe of short motion pictures displayed on large screens in old vaudeville theaters. In 1903, the same year the Orpheum opened, Morris Kohn and Adolph Zukor set up the Automatic Vaudeville Company in New York City to house a bank of arcade machines. It was the first successful major penny arcade theater and hinted at the large motion

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<sup>35</sup> "Denver theaters, Orpheum," 1903-1930, DPL Western History photographs, Call Number MCC-3695, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/33062/rec/25> (accessed April 2012).

picture theaters to come.<sup>36</sup> Such methods of moving picture or film exhibition quickly infiltrated the West through vaudeville circuits and independent penny arcades or storefront movie theaters.



**Figure 11. Kinetoscope with open side door revealing the film and mechanisms.<sup>37</sup>**

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<sup>36</sup> Steven Joseph Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 15, 16, 30; Ross Melnick and Andreas Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures: a New Look At Classic Movie Theaters* (St. Paul: MBI, 2004), 12.

Vaudeville theaters actually provided a venue for stage shows rather than film projections. Vaudeville was a type of stage show involving a variety of subjects, from comedy to song and dance routines. As projected movies became increasingly popular during the early 1900s, vaudeville theaters began including moving pictures on their show docket. They simply hung a screen on the stage and projected the film onto it.

<sup>37</sup> Kinetoscope photograph, American Movie Classics website, <http://blogs.amctv.com/movie-blog/2009/07/history-of-movie-experience-1.php> (accessed April 2012).



**Figure 12. Kinetoscope parlor, San Francisco, c. 1895.<sup>38</sup>**

Whether in the East or the West, the earliest films catered to the interests of working-class men who valued the hard work and self-sufficiency of the old frontier identity. Building their techniques from scratch, filmmakers of the 1890s such as Thomas Edison, Eadweard Muybridge, and the Lumière brothers were scientists, inventors, and laymen who exploited the scientific benefits of moving pictures in studying movement frame by frame. However, the storytelling and entertainment potential of moving picture technology torpedoed the industry into a whirlpool of innovation. Not only did filmmakers begin experimenting with film techniques

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<sup>38</sup> Kinetoscope parlor in San Francisco, California, c. 1895, Lake County History, <http://lakecountyhistory.blogspot.com/2010/08/edward-hill-amet-1860-1948.html> (accessed April 2012).

such as French magician George Melies' film trickery in movies like *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), but they also extended the subjects of their films into lengthy stories.<sup>39</sup>

In these early movies, techniques were rough. Cameras sat in one position and filmed actors who overemphasized their facial expressions and gestures in order to convey the story without words, an imitation of stage acting. These early films did not synchronize moving images with recordings of speech or sound effects, so films up until the 1910s and 1920s were silent. To fill the silence, a pianist or record in the theater played musical accompaniment.<sup>40</sup> Acting style changed from stage to film because with film, a filmmaker could capture his actors' expressions up close. This was good for conveying emotion through facial expressions and without the possibility of sound, but bad for stage actors as they transitioned to film acting. Audiences wanted young, beautiful actors such as Mary Pickford for films.<sup>41</sup> Distance from the stage and heavy makeup had hidden indications of age in popular stage actors, but close up film exposed them. Even so, in Denver and most other American cities, theater audiences continued to appreciate stage and vaudeville acts while marveling at motion pictures. In fact, stage and vaudeville theaters did quite well into the 1920s.

Besides the transition in acting style from stage to film, filmmakers also improved techniques like camera angle, *misé en scene*,<sup>42</sup> and transitions. Their experiments with new styles quickly evolved from the standstill camera to tracking shots and shooting from low or high angles to convey emotions of depression and pride. In exhibition, projectionists had to crank the projector and could vary the speed at which they cranked in order to create fast or slow motion

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<sup>39</sup> Hampton; Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964; originally published 1926), 394-395; *Trip to the Moon on The Movies Begin—A Treasury of Early Cinema, 1894-1913*, DVD, Directed by George Melies (1902; Kino Video, 2002).

<sup>40</sup> Hampton.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

<sup>42</sup> *Misé en scene* means "what elements are visible in each scene and contribute to the mood."

scenes.<sup>43</sup> The development of such techniques and acting styles naturally led to development in moving picture content.

Most of these early moving pictures were documentary in style. One of the most popular early moving pictures was *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895), a French film from the Lumière brothers which depicted exactly what the title said: workers leaving a factory.<sup>44</sup> There was little substance to the film's plot, and such films became popular as the chasers at vaudeville theaters. As one historian quipped, "many groups were not prepared for the mental concentration of anything more than three- to six-minute episodes and incidents."<sup>45</sup> Further advances in film content that added length as well as story proved him wrong.

In fact, story pictures soon peppered vaudeville docketts. Since these films were twenty minutes or less in length, they allowed vaudeville acts to continue dominating theater programs. Entrepreneur G.M. Anderson not only helped bring story pictures to life, but had acted in one of the first popular story films, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). This was an eleven-minute picture touted as one of the first plot-driven motion pictures and a leap in film techniques. Edwin S. Porter, the filmmaker, planted a camera on a moving truck in order to track alongside a running horse, thus developing the "tracking shot," a common film technique ever since. He also included a dramatic final close up of a robber shooting directly at the audience, putting audience members into the story.<sup>46</sup> It was entertaining, but short enough that film could still coexist with vaudeville in theaters like Denver's Orpheum.

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<sup>43</sup> Virginia Wexman, *A History of Film*, Sixth Edition, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> "La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon," YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI63PUXnVMw> (accessed January 2012).

<sup>45</sup> Hampton, 40.

<sup>46</sup> "The Great Train Robbery," Google Video, <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-7949193416885414135> (accessed January 2012).



hinted at the organization to come as both industries transitioned to the systems and organization of the modern era.

In 1905, Harry and John P. Davis opened the first venue solely for the purpose of showing moving pictures on a screen. Consisting of little more than a room with a white sheet, kitchen chairs, and scant lighting, these small movie houses, soon sprinkled the country.<sup>48</sup> Gus Heck's Nickelodeon at 1528 Curtis was an early storefront theater. Old timers in Denver remembered the storefront theater "with customers sitting on folding chairs and paying five cents to watch twenty minutes of movies. Business was never too good and Heck quit in about 1903."<sup>49</sup> Heck's may have been the first all-movie venue, but some historians debate that the Elitch's Garden Theater was Denver's first theater to include movies on a regular basis.<sup>50</sup> The twenty-minute movies at these theaters cost five cents, prompting the name "Nickel"-odeon. When the Curtis Nickelodeon closed in 1903, it predated grand vaudeville theaters like the Orpheum and died out apparently ahead of its time because by 1913, most cities with a population of over 5,000, like Denver, contained at least one motion picture theater.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, 55.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid; Richard E. Wood, *Here Lies Colorado: Fascinating Figures in Colorado History* (Helena: Farcountry Press, 2005), 90 [accessed on Google Books].

<sup>51</sup> Johnson, 55.



**Figure 14. “Early Denver nickelodeon on Sixteenth Street,” Denver, Colorado, c. 1903.<sup>52</sup>**

The spread of these purpose-built movie theaters into Denver revealed national-level trends in the design components that reflected the most recent innovations in construction, including new materials and new theories on theater floor plans and design. Such organized efforts in defining standards for movie theaters also foreshadowed the organization and focus on efficiency in the post-WWII era. The Orpheum struggled during the rise of purpose-built theaters, offering movies, but not fully converting to the film scene. Besides including design

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<sup>52</sup> “Denver theaters, Orpheum,” 1903-1930, DPL Western History photographs, Call Number Rh-1283, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/19560/rec/1> (accessed April 2012).

and construction innovations in their plans for purpose-built theaters, architects often considered other aspects of the surrounding built environment in order to create venues to best fit and best exploit nearby populations. Such practices stemmed from the design concerns of vaudeville, stage, and opera theaters. For the Orpheum, the design and construction concerns were similar to those of architects for purpose-built theaters, thus illuminating the Orpheum's inner battle between vaudeville and movies as well as the concerns that translated to purpose-built theaters.

For one, class was an important factor for the construction, design, and theatrical content of the vaudeville houses that converted into movie theaters and later the determining factor in purpose-built theater construction and design. The Orpheum Company certainly geared the Orpheum Theater toward middle- and upper-class Denverites. Such schemes worked. On opening night, thousands of Americans attended, some Denverites, others from out of town, and still others that were prominent citizens of Denver as well as high standing officials from the Orpheum Circuit Company, including General Manager Martin Beck. "Words of surprise and admiration were upon every lip" as patrons entered the rich atmosphere.<sup>53</sup> Beginning with the clock tower above the tiled half-dome roof of the entryway, those in attendance squinted past the exterior lights to the warm interior, a particularly welcome sight on that October night in 1903. An article written before theater construction began in May of 1903 noted that "the interior of the theater will resemble in general details that of the new Illinois theater, thought to be the finest play house in Chicago by many people." The walls would be "nile green, with decorations in red. There will be a great deal of polished brass railing about the parquet and the balconies. The hangings will be all in red."<sup>54</sup> Rich colors and decorative features would attract members of all

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<sup>53</sup> "New Vaudeville House Will Open Its Doors and Receive the Public Tonight," *Denver Republican*, October 5, 1903.

<sup>54</sup> "Interior of Orpheum Will Resemble Chicago's Finest Play House," *Denver Republican*, May 17, 1903.

classes, though the richness of the new setting drove ticket prices up and restricted attendance to those who could afford a ticket.

Before purpose-built theaters, other popular venues for film exhibition were cheaper nickelodeons or storefront theaters. These were not theaters because they were simple rooms that owners temporarily converted to places for showing films. A true theater was a structure built for the purpose of performance, which could be either the splendid vaudeville theaters or the cheaper storefronts and nickelodeons. As early theater historian Benjamin Hampton noted, “audiences were not accustomed to the luxury of comfortable chairs, carpeted floors, and elaborate decorations; they came to see the pictures not to admire the architecture and engineering. They didn’t have to dress up to go to the movies and they didn’t expect stylishness when they got there.”<sup>55</sup> His description applied to the predominantly working-class audiences that went to theaters specifically to see the movies rather than the mixed audiences at the enhanced vaudeville theaters with movies. The earliest purpose-built theaters were satisfactory for the working-class, but when the movies piqued middle-class interest, there was a demand for bigger, cleaner theaters. The transition from vaudeville and stage theater to purpose-built theater and then movie palace went into full swing.

This transition illuminates how vaudeville venues were precursors to movies and movie theaters in several ways. As a combined vaudeville and movie theater, the Orpheum was a site for the competition between vaudeville and movies during the 1900s and 1910s. Such vaudeville theaters attempted to lure the middle- and upper-class just as filmmakers and movie theater owners contracted to build large theaters and sink hundreds of thousands of dollars into films in order to create high-class entertainment for a high-class atmosphere. Vaudeville entertainment

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<sup>55</sup> Hampton, 32.

typically appealed to the working-class, but theater managers booked the best acts they could get in hopes of luring members of the middle- and upper-class.<sup>56</sup>

The idea of social class often dictated attendance at vaudeville theaters, which was also an issue in movie theaters. In both cases, most Americans believed vaudeville entertainment was unclean and thus unsuitable for respectable citizens. This was an issue of both entertainment content as well as condition and design of the venues. When the Orpheum Circuit celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 1922, a *Rock Mountain News* reporter praised the circuit for “lifting the standards of attractions from the plane represented by the old form of variety to its present wholesome and artistic heights” as well as a “house cleaning” that “continued until they had eliminated all objectionable features from programs as well as the theaters and their clientele.”<sup>57</sup> Denver’s Orpheum was important in helping Denverites form an identity based on the belief that having high-class entertainment in flashy, opulent theaters would give them greater clout as a metropolis filled with upstanding and cultured citizens, thus bringing them into the fold of modern America. Denver movie theaters fostered this modern identity of innovation just as they expanded the appeal of movies beyond the working-class.

As the novelty of moving picture technology surged across the nation, theater construction and film appealed to middle- and upper-class citizens, but only when theaters were in central locations and professionally designed. In the January issue of *The Atlantic*, a literary and cultural commentary magazine, Walter Prichard Eaton voiced the hopes of some reformists that, “as the motion pictures improve in quality...they will 'educate' many of their patrons to a desire for higher things. They will act as a school of appreciation for the spoken drama; they will

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<sup>56</sup> “From Doorkeeper at Orpheum to Military Dictator of Guatemala,” *RMN*, March 12, 1905.

<sup>57</sup> “Orpheum Circuit Celebrates Anniversary This Week,” *RMN*, October 22, 1922.

breed new audiences for the legitimate playhouse.”<sup>58</sup> These reformists believed in movies as an educational tool and stepping stone to whetting the appetites of Americans. In line with Progressive thinking, this would be in order to reform society on the whole and thus create a nation of middle- and upper-class citizens. What they did not acknowledge was that the nation, like the film industry and movie theaters, was built on the labor of working-class citizens. Without members of the working-class, there would be no one to provide manual labor or service jobs.

Despite their dependence on working-class patronage, movie theaters of the 1900s and 1910s cultivated middle- and upper-class entertainment. Eaton observed in 1915 that it boiled down to how conscious the classes were of their own social standing. In “a certain New England city of thirty-five thousand people,” a stage theater offered tickets for ten cents in order to compete with the movies. “But the theatre was on the ‘fashionable’ side of town, it was looked upon by the six thousand mill operatives and their families (constituting a proletariat which numbered more than fifty percent of the population) as something that belonged to the other class.”<sup>59</sup> Eaton remarked that the distinction between classes was sharper in larger cities. Since Denver’s population in 1910 numbered over 213,000, it was much larger than Eaton’s sample city, suggesting that similar experiments in Denver would also reveal a distinction between middle- and upper-class versus working-class entertainment.<sup>60</sup>

Another issue surrounding movies and movie theaters during the Orpheum’s struggle between vaudeville and movies in the 1910s was that of architectural design’s expected effect on audiences. Professionally organized modern architects believed that movie theaters needed to have grand designs. They recognized that for a working-class citizen, “the motion picture theatre,

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<sup>58</sup> Eaton, “Class Consciousness and the Movies.”

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid; Dorsett, 122.

where he does go for his evening's relaxation, is almost always much nearer to his home" where he can "sit on the ground floor, with his own kind, feeling as it were a kind of proprietorship in the playhouse."<sup>61</sup> Thus, the movie theater of the 1910s was an elaborate movie palace or a smaller neighborhood house, depending on its location.

Besides issues of social class, vaudeville theaters of the 1900s and 1910s were also precursors to the modern age of film in that they used organized corporations and circuits to send their acts and build their theaters across America. As part of the Orpheum vaudeville circuit, the Orpheum had to be large and attractive enough to give the Orpheum Company a good name. The Orpheum Circuit was a national company, making it important to citizens of cities isolated from the coasts like Denver who wanted to feel as though they were part of a national-level trend. This meant that the design of the Orpheum Theatre in Denver mimicked that of other Orpheum theaters. Looking at photographs such as those depicted below, one can see how the designs compared. Architectural similarities included classical detailing like strong pediments topping a large archway over a recessed, half-domed entrance with an awning. Such elements were impressive, but not quite on the scale or amount of decoration as the theaters of the mid-1910 and 1920s. If the Orpheum Company took over a theater building rather than building from scratch, the company generally made only cosmetic changes.

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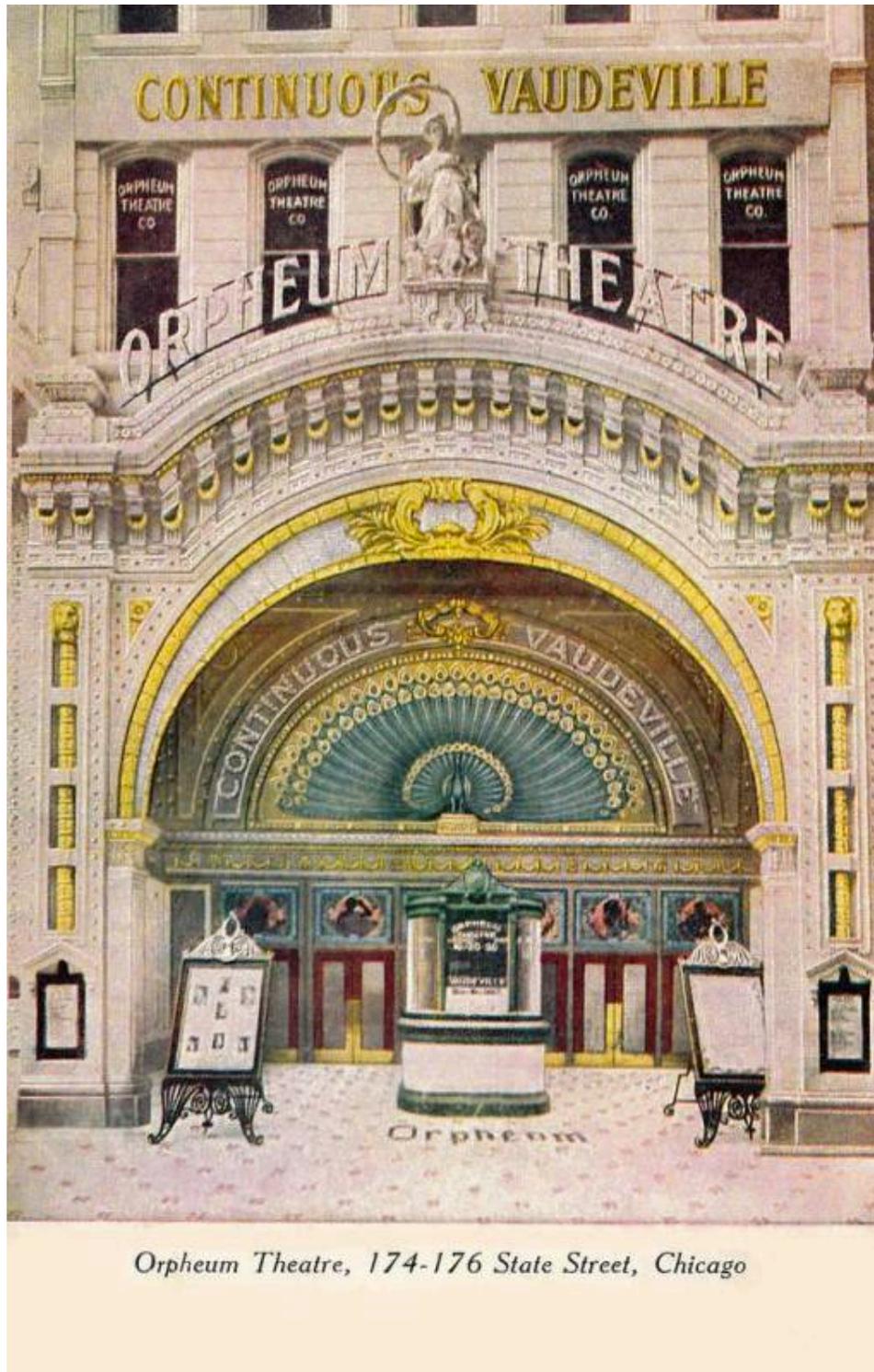
<sup>61</sup> Eaton, "Class Consciousness and the Movies."



Figure 15. Denver's Orpheum Theater at 1517 Welton Street, c. 1910-1920.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> "Orpheum Theater," 1910-1920?, DPL Western History photographs, Call Number X-24701, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/36002/rec/4> (accessed April 2012).



**Figure 16. Postcard of Orpheum Theatre, Chicago, Illinois, c. 1910. Note the similarities to Denver’s Orpheum’s entrance with the half-domed entrance and decorative brackets.<sup>63</sup>**

<sup>63</sup> Orpheum Theatre, 174-176 State Street, Chicago” postcard, Illinois Digital Archives, <http://www.idaillinois.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/lakecou02z/id/1410/rec/16> (accessed June 2012).



THE ORPHEUM THEATRE

This fine theatre building is located at the corner of Fulton Street and Rockwell Place. It is the leading house devoted to vaudeville in the city of Brooklyn. The building is a handsome structure without, and the auditorium within is acknowledged to be unsurpassed, for stage area and elegant appointments, by any of the great vaudeville theatres of the country.

**Figure 17. Orpheum Theatre, Brooklyn, New York, 1905. Architectural similarities to Denver's Orpheum include the large archway over the entrance, an awning over the doorways, and a pediment at the top of the façade.<sup>64</sup>**

The final way that vaudeville paved the way for movies and movie theaters was by gradually introducing them into their programs. As noted by Hampton, “Had film quality advanced too quickly, vast groups would not have formed the habit of seeing the movies.”<sup>65</sup> For

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<sup>64</sup> The Orpheum Theatre (1905), New York Public Library Digital Gallery, <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=1888611&imageID=1823536&total=1&num=0&word=orpheum%20theater&s=1&notword=&d=&c=&f=&k=0&lWord=&lField=&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&sort=&imgs=20&pos=1&e=w> (accessed June 2012).

<sup>65</sup> Hampton, 40.

example, a March 13, 1905, advertisement in the *Rocky Mountain News* included moving pictures as part of the program, as seen in the image below. At the end of a list of vaudeville acts, there was a new item, the “Kinodrome.” A man named George K. Spoor ran the Kinodrome Circuit through the Orpheum theaters of the West and showed moving pictures at the Orpheum theaters. In 1907, Spoor owned the National Film Renting Company and came into contact with former Vitagraph member, G.M. Anderson, the man who had worked with Edwin S. Porter on *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Anderson and Spoor joined forces to form the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company in February 1907 with the hopes of making business on story pictures. These types of filming businesses during the 1900s and 1910s translated into a full-blown movie industry by the 1910s.



Figure 18. Newspaper advertisement for Denver’s Orpheum Theater, which included vaudeville, but note the “Special”: “Roosevelt’s Inauguration In Motion Pictures.” Prices for the vaudeville-motion picture program ranged from 15 to 50 cents, with cheaper prices for matinees and pricier options to reserve box seats at \$1.00.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Advertisement, *RMN*, March 13, 1905.

As the nation matured from the 1900s to the 1910s, moving picture technology popularity continued, but slowly and only with the help of realistic settings, something that made films more appealing to the middle- and upper-classes and gained prominence in the 1930s as well. This desire for realism was particularly important for western films, which were some of the most popular films of the time. In order to create these realistic settings, filmmakers increasingly went west. For example, by the time Anderson and Spoor began working together, Anderson had a new western cooked up and scouted for filming locations in Golden and Morrison, Colorado, in 1908. He eventually settled on using California, but that he considered filming in Colorado testifies to Colorado's potential for being part of the motion picture industry.<sup>67</sup>

In fact, there were some established film companies in Colorado before the rise of Hollywood in 1913. Working for Thomas Edison, James H. White shot the first movies in Colorado in 1897. The Selig Polyscope Company of Chicago had its western agent, H. H. "Buck" Buckwalter, based in Colorado. Buckwalter shot most films for Colorado audiences, but the Selig Company also used the Colorado films to attract filmgoers and filmmakers to the state's production potential. The Selig Company's 1902 "Special Supplement of Colorado Films" claimed that, "all will cheerfully pay liberally to see pictures of this strange land of sunshine and beauty, of gold and precious stones. The very name of Colorado will attract hundreds, yes, thousands and the exhibitor first on the spot will reap a golden harvest."<sup>68</sup> The Selig Company liked Cañon City in particular, even using some of the locals to play bit parts. The Colorado base sent these films to Chicago for use in the main factory. Selig stationary even

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<sup>67</sup> Ramsaye, 443-444.

<sup>68</sup> David Emrich, *Hollywood, Colorado: The Selig Polyscope Company and The Colorado Motion Picture Company* (Lakewood, Colorado: Post Modern Company, 1997), 14.

listed Cañon City alongside Chicago and Los Angeles.<sup>69</sup> Clearly, the Selig Company believed in the filmmaking potential of Colorado landscape and industry.

Other Colorado film companies included the Columbine Film Company in Denver 1913, Pikes Peak Photoplay Company 1915, the National Film Corporation in Denver 1916-1917, and the Art-O-Graf Film Company in Denver 1919-1923. The Columbine Film Company later in 1913 became the Colorado Motion Picture Company, which dissolved in 1918. The presence of these companies suggests an interesting relationship between where production centered in Colorado versus where exhibition flourished: Cañon City was to Denver what Hollywood was to Los Angeles. Filmmakers worked in Cañon City, but the films played in Denver and sometimes across the nation, just as filmmakers worked in Hollywood, but most Californians in that area went to Los Angeles theaters for viewing. This is yet another way that Denver is a microcosm of the national-level developments in film production and exhibition. Moreover, these Colorado films spread the romanticized images of frontier and the West since most Colorado films were westerns and sometimes included Colorado citizens like Charles Canterbury, a member of the prominent Canterbury family in Cañon City.<sup>70</sup> Thus, while partaking in the modern movement of filmmaking, Coloradans allowed and even indulged in the old romantic views of the West that perpetuated through films filled with cowboys and Indians.

The West was an important starting point for plot-driven movies and grand movie palaces since the landscape lent itself to realistic settings and the cityscape lent itself to a revamping of Theater Row. With western films, filmmakers meshed the worlds of the romantic American West with that of the cutting edge Pacific and Atlantic coastal regions, just as Denver's cityscape meshed the workaday world of old miners and entrepreneurs with that of the metropolitan

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 42.

theater. The Los Angeles cityscape performed similar duties in mixing the working-class hardship and organized elements of modern city life, but Denver's cityscape is clearer in this shift since it happened at a slower pace than in Los Angeles. Movies and movie theaters became a significant part of Los Angeles life only when Hollywood gained notoriety in the 1910s.<sup>71</sup> As early film historian Benjamin Hampton remarked, "Unknown in 1912, [Hollywood] was famous the world over ten years later."<sup>72</sup>

This new site of filmmaking eclipsed serious movie-making efforts in other cities and states. In Colorado, production companies like the Colorado Motion Picture Company died out in the 1910s, just as movie production moved into Hollywood.<sup>73</sup> The relationship between movies and theaters in the early twentieth century West was a delicate interplay between citizens partaking in a national-scale identity of innovation and their desire to vocalize their pride in being citizens of the West. When the *Rock Mountain News* reporter had boasted about the Orpheum's ability to lift Denver entertainment to a higher level of class as well as give them a vehicle through which to take pride in their city, this reporter pinpointed a key aspect of theaters and their connection to the shift from frontier identity to modern identity. Vaudeville theaters like Denver's Orpheum paved the way for modern movies and movie theaters through enticing the middle-class, creating corporations, and introducing films to the general public. The reaction generated by the theater's architectural detail as well as its company's promise of high-class entertainment instigated the proliferation of purpose-built theaters that began in the early 1900s.

The national heyday of movies and purpose-built movie theaters emerged a decade after Meyerfield and Beck built the Orpheum in 1903. During this time, the Orpheum continued in its

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<sup>71</sup> John Mack Faragher, Mary Jo Buhle, Daniel Czitrom, and Susan H. Armitage, *Out of Many: A History of the American People* (New Jersey: Pearson-Prentice Hall, 2006), 616.

<sup>72</sup> Hampton, 116.

<sup>73</sup> Emrich, 61.

dedication to the vaudeville scene, but movies and movie theaters were a constant threat to the vaudeville business. The Orpheum Circuit Company attempted to compete with the surrounding theaters by offering both vaudeville and film. The Orpheum Theatre was primarily a vaudeville venue up until 1930 when the Orpheum Circuit Company demolished it after twenty-seven years and built a new Orpheum to withstand the demands of increased attendance and innovations in film technology. Thus, the story of the Orpheum Theatre is not a story of one theater, but two. The first represents the story of how theater companies dealt with the infiltration of the film industry, how the population influenced their designs and what films they projected, and how they ultimately failed to keep both old stage theater and movies alive within the same exhibition space. The second was a 1930s saga. At the first Orpheum, the battle between vaudeville and movies came to a head. Something had to give.

Early talkies came to Denver via the Orpheum in April of 1913, a death sentence to vaudeville.<sup>74</sup> It is surprising that talkies appeared so early in Denver since most theaters that showed movies during the 1910s showed silent films accompanied by pianists, organists, or orchestras. Yet, audience members at Denver's Orpheum had an early glimpse of the coming sound technology that condemned vaudeville theaters and their older forms of entertainment. Former theater organist Forrest Johnson noted that, "The people of Denver had their first chance to hear sound movies in 1913, when an Edison Kinetoscope was installed (as a novelty) at the Orpheum, and showed pictures complete with music and singing. But the 'Talkies' weren't a success until 1928."<sup>75</sup> This meant that Denverites were not at all behind the nation in film technology, but perhaps even a little ahead. The new purpose-built theater buildings that could

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<sup>74</sup> "Motion Pictures Arrived in Denver in 1896," *RMN*, January 17, 1954.

<sup>75</sup> Johnson, 15.

accommodate sound technology and larger crowds were not far behind. These would differ from the nickelodeons and store front theaters in size and amount of decoration.

Following in the footsteps of the first Orpheum Theater, Denver theater construction accelerated into the 1910s when Denverites shifted their attention to movies as entertainment. The theaters lining Curtis Street shone brightly each night and attracted people from all over the country. Though smaller in scale, these new purpose-built theaters offered much the same feeling as the palaces springing up all over the country, beginning with New York City's Strand Theatre in 1913.<sup>76</sup> At first, many of these theaters advertised strictly vaudeville acts. By the 1920s, movies were a common sight on theater marquees and in newspaper ads.<sup>77</sup> It was during this transitional period that purpose-built theaters like Denver's Strand Theater (1914) tied to national-scale innovation through the theater's architecture as well as the films that played there. The 1910s and early 1920s were still a period of innovation and experimentation in film, theater architecture, and frontier identity, but this period solidified the connections amongst the three.

During the 1910s and 1920s, national-scale ideas about movie theaters and film continued to waver between acceptance and rejection of modern movements, which the rapid overturn of theaters in Denver mimicked. These ideas centered around three issues: architectural effects on audiences, class, and national versus regional identity. For many Americans, the movies initially represented the cheap amusements that appealed only to the working-class. During the 1910s, filmmakers and theater owners began marketing in earnest to a middle-class with more elaborate designs for theaters and more intricate story films. These film entrepreneurs also used standards that proved effective in the coastal cities in order to attract more middle-class patrons. Since film technology developed to include lengthier plots in the first decade of the

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<sup>76</sup> Hampton, 117.

<sup>77</sup> DPL Western History and Genealogy Department photographs; *Denver Post*; *Rocky Mountain News*.

twentieth century, theaters had to change in order to accommodate them. Theaters needed to provide a place of comfort as well as have the equipment for projection, musical accompaniment, and eventually synchronized sound. Along with the rapid development in movie technology came rapid development in architecture and theater design that caught the eye of members of all social classes. Finally, these purpose-built theaters of the 1910s were a means by which Americans formed a national architectural identity as well as a regional identity. They gave architects the opportunity to be flamboyant and extravagant in their architecture as they searched for a pure American design. They also directed Americans' gaze westward for potential locations with guaranteed audiences. The Orpheum languished during this time, but the nation on the whole made movie theater construction a priority, such as in Denver's rapid overturn of theaters. These new theaters were most distinctive in their appeal to a variety of social classes.

Prior to the class antagonisms of the 1920s, Americans recognized and voiced the class challenges of movie theaters. Having purpose-built theaters as part of a cityscape meant inviting a new industry that catered to all classes. At the time, it was still a working-class based industry, but with the hope of expanding to include other classes.<sup>78</sup> Many middle- and upper-class Americans wrote about these issues in national magazines, voicing their dissatisfaction with the current trajectory of movies and movie theaters. They called for reform and the use of advanced architectural technology in order to create safe and comfortable environments. It was a reform movement that paralleled the national-level Progressive movement and encouraged theater owners to clean up their venues. Middle- and upper-class Americans wanted to see movies, but they wanted to see them in locations that did not compromise their social standing. Competing with vaudeville theaters, purpose-built theaters of the 1910s like Denver's Strand highlighted the effects of architectural detail, class, and regional versus national identity.

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<sup>78</sup> Ross, 16, 18, 31.

First of all, purpose-built theaters and the films they showed dealt with issues of change in architectural design and program content. One 1911 observer noted that “the ‘store’ theatre is gradually giving way to large and commodious [sic] establishments where a combination of moving picture films is seen with vaudeville acts of a minor order, but the outlook is now for theatres of enormous size, where the prices of admission will be from five to twenty-five cents, and where an effort will be made to present a superior type of entertainment.”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Mitchell L. Mark, a theater chain owner in Eastern cities, contracted well-known theater architect Thomas Lamb to design the Strand Theater in Longacre Square, New York in 1913. Specifically for moving picture exhibition, this 3,000-seat theater stimulated a massive boom in American movie theater construction.<sup>80</sup> Like many other movie companies, the Brown and Megahan Amusement Company built their own smaller version of the Strand in Denver’s central business district in order to scale down the design to meet the demands of a smaller city. This use of a national-level standard prefigured the organization and standardization of the post-WWII modern era. Some architects and entrepreneurs scaled down even further and built small neighborhood houses specifically for working-class citizens. Theater architects believed that, “the motion picture theatre, where [a working-class man] does go for his evening’s relaxation, is almost always much nearer to his home” where he can “sit on the ground floor, with his own kind, feeling as it were a kind of proprietorship in the playhouse.”<sup>81</sup> In any case, movie theaters appealed to a variety of citizens and offered everyone an equal experience through film and architecture.

In Denver, Curtis Street was already packed with theaters of varying sizes, but almost all of them used movies as part of their vaudeville or stage programs rather than dedicating their entire efforts to movies. A year after Mark’s Strand Theater opened in New York, the Brown and

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<sup>79</sup> Grau, “Fortunes in the Moving Picture Field.”

<sup>80</sup> Hampton, 117.

<sup>81</sup> Eaton, “Class Consciousness and the Movies.”

Megahan Amusement Company opened their Strand Theater in Denver. The company built the new theater on the site of the old Isis, a vaudeville theater. Denver's Strand Theater boasted less than half of the number of seats at New York's Strand, numbering at 1,129 rather than 3,000, but it was an imposing sight along the Curtis Street skyline and hosted many visiting western film stars when they came to Denver to promote their films.

The Denver Strand allowed Denverites to enact their ideas about national-scale innovation because it was an architectural feat as well as purpose-built. These innovations were part of Denverites' role in the new frontier of movie-making and movie theater construction. Denver was not a massive metropolis like New York, so a 3,000 seat theater would be out of place and would lose more money than it could make. A theater half the size offered Denverites a big city experience on a smaller scale and with the same films. Of course, Denverites held some sway over what movies they saw by attending the types they liked and telling managers which ones they preferred, but ultimately, they had much the same choice of films as Americans across the nation.<sup>82</sup>

Examining photographs of Denver's Strand Theater, both architectural details and film advertisements illuminate its architectural innovations as well as the modern films that showed there. Since Denver's Strand thrived between 1914 and 1925, it is a good example of the innovative spirit in architecture and film that gave western citizens a base on which to participate in a national-scale identity of innovation. In the first photograph pictured below, we can see how the Strand Theater was an imposing building along Curtis Street. Large decorative medallions and arches on the massive cornice gave the theater a heavy presence. The sense of grandeur continued down into the double archway that covered the ticket booth and entry. With strands of lights radiating from the center of the arches outlined by intricate moldings and framing the

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<sup>82</sup> Hampton, 86.

theater's name, the architectural design highlighted the use of electric light and detail to draw the eye down to the sign revealing the title of the latest movie. The second photograph highlighted how the Strand stood out against the two darker buildings on either side because of strings and sunbursts of light. The concave dome above the movie title sign is a bright shell of light just above the entryway, inviting passersby to enter an interior of soothing light and decorations. The overall effect was extravagant and indicated the mid-1910s and 1920s shift toward luxurious design that bordered on or even reached gaudiness.



**Figure 19. Denver's Strand Theater with classical detailing, an arched, domed entrance, domineering cornice, and eye-catching strings of light, 1921.<sup>83</sup>**

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<sup>83</sup> "Strand theater," 1921, DPL Western History photographs, Call Number X-24735, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/37493/rec/3> (accessed April 2012).



**Figure 20. Denver's Strand Theater at night with sunbursts of light and a bright shell entryway to entice passersby, 1921.<sup>84</sup>**

Denver's Strand was typical of the grandest theaters in a city with the size and population of Denver and its design included features that spoke to 1910s safety concerns. Former organist Forrest Johnson remembered that the projection booth "had hanging steel doors, held up by low-temperature melting clips. These allowed the doors to fall shut with a clang, in

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<sup>84</sup> "Strand theater," 1921, DPL Western History photographs, Call Number X-24737, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/37495/rec/1> (accessed April 2012).

case of fire.”<sup>85</sup> Fire was a major issue in building movie theaters, especially since the nitrate film used at the time was highly flammable. Fire was a major concern for architects, owners, and audience members due to several accidents. For instance, in historic Colorado newspapers, movie theaters were of little concern to reporters except on opening night or when a fire occurred. One Colorado Springs newspaper reported on the effectiveness of fire doors in their Orpheum’s projection booth. The film ignited, destroying seven reels of film, the projector, the transformer, and motor, a loss estimated at \$1,500. Though the theater lost capital, the “automatic doors of the booth, designed for just such occasions, closed as soon as the cord which held them up burned off, and the balance of the building was rendered safe by this means.”<sup>86</sup>

While fire safety was an important design feature that spoke to national-scale innovations, the types of films shown at Denver’s Strand were significant in revealing how Denverites reconciled their frontier identity with the innovative spirit that pushed the nation toward a modern identity. For example, Johnson remembered that western film stars visited the Strand in order to promote their films. Johnson clearly noted that it was stars of western films that visited rather than films of other genres, suggesting that stars and film corporations realized that Denverites would be most responsive to western film stars. Yet, the popularity of westerns extended beyond western cities. People across the nation and even in other countries responded with enthusiasm to westerns. Many newspaper and magazine authors noted that from Honduras to the streets of New York, “among the most popular of the American pictures are the Wild West type” and that “the ‘Indian play’- indeed, the Wild West drama generally- is understood to be a commodity that is ordered in large quantities for contemporary audiences.”<sup>87</sup> This demand for

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<sup>85</sup> Johnson, 49.

<sup>86</sup> “Fire Takes Booth of Movie Theater,” *Steamboat Pilot*, 16 January 1918, Colorado Historic newspaper collections, [www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org](http://www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org) (accessed January 2012).

<sup>87</sup> “Moving picture industry is Being Stimulated Enormously By the War,” *Current Opinion* 65 (1918): 100; Olivia Howard Dunbar, “Lure of the Films,” *Harper’s* 1913; Hampton, *A History of the Movies*, 41.

westerns pushed film production from the suburbs of New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, to the West in places like Colorado and California. Like the Selig Polyscope Company, production companies increasingly travelled west to make westerns, an oddly novel idea.<sup>88</sup>

These western films represented the connection between movies, movie theaters, and the spirit of innovation during the 1900s and 1910s. Early theater historian Benjamin B. Hampton described how these films' "stories of the lawless years in the western states of America, when the white man was pushing his settlements across plains and mountains to the Pacific Ocean, supplied perfect material for a combination of pursuit, physical courage, and romance."<sup>89</sup> The western films brought romanticized Western frontier ideals and settings to life for citizens across America, while movie theaters allowed Westerners to enact ideals of innovation. The types of films shown in Denver's Strand are just as telling for how it allowed Denverites to connect with other Americans over the subject of the West.

Like the New York Strand, the Denver Strand Theater was solely a movie theater and showed silent westerns films like *Skid Proof* and *Dr. Jim* with stars like Charles Jones, Tom Mix, and William S. Hart. Denver's Strand was a place where Denverites could go to experience the glitz and glamour of big city life, but also remain true to their imagined western roots by attending western films. At a time when "western" was synonymous with "frontier," western films spread romanticized versions of the Wild West to the rest of America. Moreover, film stars personally appeared with their pictures to help businesses. The ones who visited Denver were generally western film stars. Theater organist Forrest Johnson, remembered western stars coming to town and several photographs from after the Denver Strand's 1925 demise depicted visits from western stars. Apparently the trend in star promotion continued well into the 1920s. In one

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<sup>88</sup> Hampton, 77.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 41.

photograph dated between 1925 and 1935, famed western star, Tom Mix, stands with two Denver women. Another photograph from March 31, 1928, a crowd fills Champa Street outside the Denver Post office in order to see Tom Mix. Such visits reveal that westerns were popular amongst Denverites, just like the citizens of other American cities and thus connected Denverites to their nation for years to come.



**Figure 21. Tom Mix with two women in Denver, c. 1925 to 1935.<sup>90</sup>**

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<sup>90</sup> “Tom Mix,” 1925-1935, DPL Western History photographs, Call Number Rh-5917, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/20980/rec/2> (accessed April 2012).



**Figure 22. Crowd gathers in Denver on Champa Street outside Denver Post headquarters for western film star, Tom Mix, March 31, 1928.<sup>91</sup>**

Some of the types of films shown at this scaled-down version of a big city theater illuminate Denver's place within the modern national circuit of film distribution. For example, the first photograph of the Strand shows that *Dr. Jim* played there in 1921. *Dr. Jim* appeared in theaters November 28, 1921. This brings up an important issue of how film corporations worked by the 1910s. During the 1910s and continuing on into the 1920s, film corporations practiced the technique of selling films to theaters that promised to show only films from that company. For example, the Universal Film Company grew from an exhibition supplies company to a studio and exchange company and gave preference to theaters that promised to show only Universal Films. These and the preferred theaters of other corporations like Paramount Pictures, Biograph,

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<sup>91</sup> "Tom Mix in Denver," 31 March 1928, DPL Western History photographs, Call Number X-28815, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/64438/rec/1> (accessed April 2012).

and Fox, became the “first-run” or “principal” theaters for those companies. Each of these corporations controlled as much as they could in production, distribution, and exhibition, leading to the rise of theater trusts during the 1910s and 1920s.

Since the Denver Strand showed “Dr. Jim” in 1921 and Universal released the film at the end of November 1921, this suggests that Denver’s Strand was a first- or second-run theater. A first-run theater was a theater that got the movie on the release date. Second-run theaters got the film once the first-run theaters had finished showing it, usually a week or so later. Early theater historian Benjamin B. Hampton noted that “the growth of first-run theater power was natural, steady, and persistent, and was merely a result of the public’s increasing enjoyment of better quality in pictures and in theaters.”<sup>92</sup> The public’s demand was for both better quality pictures and theaters, and they associated names of film corporations with the big theaters of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Moreover, most modern film corporations that produced, distributed, and exhibited gave priority to the theaters they owned. Fox Film Company owned the Denver’s Strand. Thus, since *Dr. Jim* was a Universal Film and the Denver Strand was a Fox Theater, it is most likely that the Strand was a first-run theater for Fox films, but would have received *Dr. Jim* slightly later.<sup>93</sup>

The workings of film corporations at the level of film distribution and theater architecture fostered Denverites’ ability to enact their ideas of what they defined as national-scale identity in innovation. Most Denverites connected with the spirit of innovation that the rest of the nation associated with the 1900s and 1910s as well as with the West and frontier ideology. Furthermore, they could experience this innovation firsthand by attending a movie theater built with innovative design to exhibit the latest movies. All across America, these movies and movie

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<sup>92</sup> Hampton, 172.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

theaters contained similar designs and subjects, making it simpler for Denverites to feel like a rich New Yorker or a middle-class Los Angelean. Although Denverites took pride in building their own self-sufficient and independent city and their role in initiating some film practices, they maintained ties to the rest of the nation through their modern theaters. They believed in a national-scale identity of innovation, which evoked the pioneering of frontier ideology, but also presaged the organization of modern ideology. This commitment to a national-scale identity triggered Denverites' dedication to the movie and movie theater industries that blossomed at the same time as their city. The connection of the West with movies and movie theaters gave Denverites and other westerners an industry they could call their own.

Despite the pressures of World War I, movie theater construction industry and the film industry continued to boom and by the 1920s, they were in full swing. With the leaders in each industry increasingly confident in their abilities and their identities, the temptations of self-indulgent and corrupt decadence drowned out responsibility. The underlying problem of this period was that even though the spirit of indulgence swept the nation, only a certain portion of the population actually had the means to indulge. Moreover, there wasn't much room for vaudeville theaters as movies lengthened in time and attracted patrons more than vaudeville acts. The vaudeville theaters of yesteryear disintegrated in the wake of a wave in purpose-built theaters. Entrepreneurs and film companies put movies into purpose-built theaters where architects tailored acoustics, decoration, and layout to fit the demands of film technology and movie audiences. Denver's Aladdin Theater was one such 1920s purpose-built venue. These movie houses dominated the entertainment industry and cityscapes during the decadent Twenties. Yet, those years were not simply a time of wildness and parties, but also of racial violence and suppressed economic ills. The movies and movie theaters of 1920s are

characteristic of this struggle between the siren of indulgence and the accountant of responsibility.

## CHAPTER 2

### Decadent Facades: The Two Faces of 1920s Denver

On October 28, 1926, Harry Huffman, suited in all white with a rosebud boutonniere, strutted around his newest Denver movie theater, the Aladdin. Also owner of the Blue Bird and Bide-A-Wee movie theaters, Huffman was most proud of this exotic new movie palace slapped right on top of the intersection of East Colfax Avenue and Race Street, an intersection of social divisions as well as traffic. That night in October was the opening gala event, which brought a flurry of activity to the Capitol Hill neighborhood. Although not as heavy laden with décor as the downtown palaces, the Aladdin was an imposing structure amongst the lower heights of surrounding businesses. On the gala opening night, Huffman couldn't be more proud. He had worked hard to bring this modern technology to fruition and twenty years after purchasing his first theater, he was seeing results. Flowers from well wishers filled the lobby and congratulatory telegrams flooded in from local as well as national celebrities including Hollywood big wigs like Charlie Chaplin, Tom Mix, the Warner Brothers, and Myrna Loy. Local newspaper reporter A. De Bernardi declared, "That the house is a credit to Denver and the west cannot be denied" and, "...if good wishes count for anything, Denver's first out-of-the-business-district first-run movie house will enjoy a long era of prosperity."<sup>94</sup> Built on seven lots, this commanding four-story theater certainly would prosper. With a six-story Oriental tower and 1,700 to 1,800 seats, it had the second largest seating capacity of all Denver theaters and demanded attention even without

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<sup>94</sup> A. De Bernardi, Jr., "Aladdin Theater Premiere is Big Event in Denver History," Newspaper Clippings, Harry Huffman Collection (MSS#1252), History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

layers upon layers of decoration.<sup>95</sup> This was no mere neighborhood movie house. This was Denver's first neighborhood palace.

To be in the Aladdin Theater was to leave Denver and enter a land of mysticism and fantasy, to delve into the depths of exotic lands and indulge in decadent behavior. Like the dreams of movie characters and audience members, Huffman's dream of a Taj Mahal-inspired theater had come true. Upon entering the theater, heated or cooled air contrasted pleasantly with the temperamental Colorado weather. A mural of Aladdin on a flying carpet, the whimsical twist of wrought iron railings and lamps, and the soft gurgle of a bubbling fountain flipped a switch in the minds of the Aladdin's patrons. Seated in the plush auditorium chairs, a soft darkness stole over the room as lights twinkled in the ceiling and shadows flickered onto the screen.

Adolescents reveled in the privacy of darkness while working-class folk delved into the fast-paced, romantic plot of silent dramas like *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* (1927). They reveled in the fantasy and learned from the romantic ways of the heroes. Dashing despite his dirty work as a sewer worker, the young hero of *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* rescued a grimy, homeless damsel in distress from the beatings of another homeless young woman. Literally sweeping her off her feet, the sewer worker took her home and nursed her back to health. The scandal of a young man taking care of a single young woman in his home suited the decadent spirit in 1920s America. It signified indulgence in sexuality, which in turn reflected the decay in social morals. In fact, although movies and movie theaters were flashy and fun on the surface, they often reinforced and reflected dark themes of racial and ethnic strife, sexuality, labor conflict, and excessive consumerism.

From its 1926 construction and beyond, the Aladdin Theater was the epitome of decadence that evoked both indulgence as well as moral decay, paralleling broader American

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<sup>95</sup> "New Aladdin Theatre to be an 'Amalgamation of the Arts,'" *Denver Messenger*, Newspaper Clippings, Harry Huffman Collection (MSS#1252), History Colorado, Denver, Colorado; Opening Gala program, Huffman Aladdin folder, Box 1, Harry Huffman Collection (MSS#1252), History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

attitudes. Following the war-ravaged years of the late-1910s and the great flu epidemic of 1918, Americans welcomed the promise of a new decade. Due to the introduction of mass production and buying on credit, many Americans in the 1920s possessed greater purchasing power, which led to decadent lifestyles that indicated the modern ideals of standardization and organization. Such lifestyles included overindulging in consuming mass-produced commodities like automobiles, appliances, beauty products, and radios. With mass production came standardization of products, which in turn standardized American taste. Other indulgences disseminated from breakthrough psychology of sexuality and the culmination of American racist attitudes towards African Americans that deemed African Americans darkly sexual beings. It was a new era and Americans lived for the present, doing what they wished with no concern for the consequences.

Champagne flowed and jazz music drifted through the heat of a people in love with luxury, but something sinister crept beneath the sparkling surface of prosperity. Americans in the Twenties believed that being American meant indulging in the fruits of the nation's booming economy.<sup>96</sup> But the pained outcries of the working-class, women, African Americans, Jews, and other social groups tarnished the sparkle, revealing that the country still faced social issues in spite of reformist work in the 1910s. As a defining feature of decadence, indulgence reigned while a battle amongst laborers festered and the burgeoning middle-class scrambled to buy up goods and enact their ideas of consumerism and indulgence as a means of being American. These struggles culminated in big cities and mid-sized cities like Denver. The national spirit was one of decadence particularly through indulgence, but it was indulgence with negative consequences for marginalized groups.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 617.

In Denver, the experiences of these marginalized groups and their rich counterparts collided in the movie theaters and the films they showed. As a microcosm of the nation's battle between the joys of prosperity and the pains of a society in transition, the role of film and theater in 1920s Denver illuminated several key issues. After World War I, production decreased dramatically as wartime industries dropped their demands. In 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment challenged the American liquor trade while women gained the right to vote under the Nineteenth Amendment in August 1920. Some Americans rebelled against prohibition under the Eighteenth Amendment and bought bootleg liquor, a common practice in cities of all sizes, including Denver.<sup>97</sup> Empowered by their right to vote, women asserted themselves in other ways, including becoming more aggressive in their relationships with men and their roles in the public world. Reactions in favor of and against these political developments opened the door for the decadent attitudes of 1920s Americans.

Besides political changes, Americans reveled in the smoky atmosphere of speakeasies where liquor, loose women, and the men who enjoyed a little too much of both felt at home. African Americans expressed their sorrow and suppression through the silky notes of a somber blues song or seethed their anger through the rakish growl of a saxophone and quick tempos. For whites, there was something rebellious and decadent about listening to jazz. Like the exoticism of the Oriental motifs in the Aladdin Theater, Americans associated African Americans with sensuality and decadence, which they translated to the African American music called jazz.<sup>98</sup> White Americans did not love jazz simply because they admired its emotional expressions, but because they relished in its sensuality and its association with what they believed was a more sexually charged race. This openness of and indulgence in expressions of sexuality appeared in

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<sup>97</sup> Johnson, 32.

<sup>98</sup> Faragher, 634-635.

the deeply romantic and evocative films of the time. Anything different from the Anglo-influenced cultural elements gave off an exotic and sensual air. These exotic elements suggested luxury and relaxation, rather than the hard work and self-sufficiency of frontier ideals. American taste was deep in flux. Moreover, theaters and films reflected the American attraction to decadent elements that also embodied the nation's social strife.

Theaters in 1920s Denver reflected the increasing distinction between rich and poor citizens, accepted and shunned social groups, and edgy luxury and subdued comfort. They also less blatantly suggested the racial, ethnic, and labor struggles of Denverites. In terms of class, there were two worlds to please, and films and theaters proved worthy of the challenge. They appealed to all classes as they had during the 1910s, adopting formulaic plots and techniques as well as theater designs and decorations that drew the greatest crowds. Just as standardized commodities appealed to the masses, elements of mass culture like the movies homogenized and cultivated a shift toward fixed ideas of what Americans wanted and what Americans thought they wanted. Such a shift prefigured the standardization and organization of the post-WWII era.

In regard to race and labor strife, films and theaters reflected the attitudes of Denverites in a more abstract way. Their locations, designs, show times, film selections and ticket prices all suggested how Denver managers dealt with problems of race, ethnicity, and class division. Class division led to the clear division between a downtown movie palace and a neighborhood theater, while racial issues led to construction in carefully selected neighborhoods or the displacement of racial populations. It was in the life of a theater like the Aladdin that these social issues played out. In fact, such indulgent attitudes and the smothering of social ills like racism and labor conflict were national-level indicators of American's decadent spirit during the 1920s and emerged in films and movie theater design like that of Denver's Aladdin.

After opening in 1926, the Aladdin gained a cherished place in Denverites' attitudes because it bridged the gap between neighborhood movie house and downtown movie palace by including the same architectural styles as larger movie palaces. Like Denver's Ogden (1917), Oriental (1927), and Mayan (1930) theaters, the Aladdin's exterior reflected the architectural trend in "exotic revival" that lasted from the turn of the century to about 1940. Architects in 1920s America treasured Egyptian, Mayan, Aztec, Middle East, and Oriental themes. The Egyptian style became especially popular with the discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922. Other trends included imitations of John Eberson's "atmospheric" interior where the auditorium mimicked an outdoor setting such as a Persian courtyard. Such auditoriums contained blue ceilings with lights that twinkled like stars and plaster-cast city skylines, just like the Aladdin Theater. By including architectural themes similar to those popular across the nation, the Aladdin Theater allowed Denverites' to be part of the same moviegoing experience. Yet, the experience was on a different scale. Denverites going to a downtown movie palace saw the same time of architectural design and marveled at the same lavish décor, but going to a neighborhood movie house often meant going to watch the movie and less to stand in awe of boastful architecture and decoration.

Specific elements of the Aladdin's architecture evoked exotic impressions that built on the moral decay aspect of the age's decadence. For example, its façade featured a large dome with a spire reminiscent of a Turkish palace. The interior included jade green carpets, a sky blue ceiling complete with twinkling lights that imitated stars, Arabian murals, a running fountain, wrought iron lanterns, and ceramic tile.<sup>99</sup> It clearly spoke to the Art Deco atmospheric trend, but not overbearingly so. Carried away by the lavish touches of a far off land, members of the

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<sup>99</sup> Batschelet,,154.

working-class did not have to travel far to experience the exotic aura of movie theaters and film.<sup>100</sup>

The location, design, decoration, and scale of the Aladdin Theater were important to its impact on the city and its movie theater industry. Since working-class citizens viewed their theaters as neighborhood gathering places like they had the earlier nickelodeons, architects created neighborhood theater designs that paid homage to the humble frontier beginnings of the theater while incorporating modern trends such as the exotic revival style. For Harry Huffman, the Aladdin needed to be comfortable, to play off of the working-class's admiration of self-sufficiency and independence. Since Huffman was a self-made man, it was easy for working-class Denverites to connect with him. However, Huffman encouraged the working-class patrons to enjoy the luxuriousness of his theater just as the upper-class citizens did. He hoped to promote the benefits of indulgence such as relaxation and enjoyment, but used a morally-contested site to do so. Harry Huffman's Aladdin bridged the gap between movie palace and neighborhood theater by offering high-class entertainment in a tastefully sumptuous venue.

Denverites wondered at their 1920s theaters, which came as a result of intensified modern standardization and organization in the movie theater and film industries on a national-level. By the 1920s, Hollywood and Los Angeles were the most active hubs of business and growth west of the Mississippi. Growing cities like Denver were not far behind. Hollywood attracted innovators and businessmen, many of whom maintained close ties with their headquarters in New York and Chicago.<sup>101</sup> Members of the film industry continued to receive financial backing from magnates in the East and these magnates often traveled back and forth between the East and

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid; Aladdin Theater, Cinema Treasures, [www.cinematreasures.org](http://www.cinematreasures.org) (accessed April 2012); Photo 13, Aladdin Theater interior, 1920, DPL Western History Photos, Call Number X-24785, X-24786, <http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?10024785+X-24785> (accessed April 2012). The Aladdin managed to survive into the mid-1980s. A Walgreens now stands in its place.

<sup>101</sup> Hampton, 380.

the West, spending long hours on trains. Along the way, they stopped in cities like Denver. Movie magnate Carl Laemmle noted that “some of these men travel by automobile from San Francisco to Seattle, and from Seattle to Salt Lake City, from Salt Lake City to Denver and from Denver back to San Francisco.”<sup>102</sup> Denver was an important stop along film business circuits.

Yet these film business circuits were getting rather large and complicated. Built on the remnants of frontier hard work and self-sufficiency, the film and theater architecture industries of the 1920s were snarls of corporation, bureaucracy, and money that foreshadowed the increasingly strict standardization and organization of post-WWII modern identity. The film industry boomed in 1919 and 1920, leading to a rapid growth in the number of businessmen interested in films and the industry, which in turn led to a growth in corporations.<sup>103</sup> Small companies turned over as rapidly as their employment. For much of the period, a man named Adolph Zukor commanded the highly profitable companies such as First National, Paramount, and Artcraft. Although men such as Joseph Selznick and Marcus Loew were tough competition, Zukor managed to gain the most power in the film world by extending beyond production to exhibition. Early film historian and film entrepreneur, Benjamin Hampton, chronicled, “By purchase of all or part of the stock of existing houses or by building new ones Zukor acquired theaters in Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Baltimore and a dozen other cities in the United States.”<sup>104</sup> Denver was on the docket for important men in corporate theater organization like Zukor, suggesting that it was a city with which the film and theaters needed to reckon.

The film industry shifted rapidly during the 1910s and 1920s, transferring the main creative and financial forces from back East to Hollywood in the West. By 1920, the film industry had gained stability. Actors and actresses were no longer nameless, but “stars” that the

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<sup>102</sup> Carl Laemmle, “From the Inside: The Business of Motion Pictures,” *The Saturday Evening Post* (1927).

<sup>103</sup> Hampton, 214.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 258.

American public asked for by name and sought to emulate in style and manner.<sup>105</sup> A tangled mass of corporations, directors, producers, exhibitors, and actors arose from this boom and they in turn reflected and influenced major developments in fashion, politics, economics, and society. Yet, the industries remained somewhat autonomous from the negative effects of certain historical developments. For example, Hampton described how, “In spite of the World War, the volume of film commerce was growing rapidly each year. I believed that as soon as the war ended there would be many new theaters and that admittance prices would continue to rise.”<sup>106</sup> He was right. WWI grazed the film industry rather than penetrated it, and the film and theater architecture industries continued to grow throughout the 1920s. The interplay between the two industries and the public was just that: an interplay between cause and effect, with neither the industries nor the public dominating one role.

On one hand, the film industry often assumed the national-scale identity of decadence. Some individuals such as parents and church patrons challenged this self-indulgence, building from the efforts of reformists in the 1910s. These efforts included pressuring the film industry for the establishment of a censorship board. State censorship boards that banned films of repute caused filmmakers and producers to reevaluate their themes and innuendos.<sup>107</sup> Yet even these censorship boards and eventually Hollywood’s own 1930 Hays Code of regulations couldn’t rub the stain of decadence out of the film industry. Scandals including those surrounding Fatty Arbuckle and William Taylor contributed to the corrupt reputation of the nation’s eighth largest industry.<sup>108</sup> Arbuckle attended a party in San Francisco in 1921 where a young actress named Virginia Rappe drank herself into illness and then died four days later. Rappe’s friend, Bambina

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>106</sup> Hampton, 150.

<sup>107</sup> Hampton, 281.

<sup>108</sup> Carl Laemmle, “From the Inside: The Business of Motion Pictures,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 1927.

Maude Delmont, accused Arbuckle of raping and accidentally killing Rappe.<sup>109</sup> The Taylor scandal involved the death of William Desmond Taylor, popular actor and director. His valet, Henry Peavey, found Taylor dead on February 1, 1922.<sup>110</sup> The murder remains unsolved today and further tainted the already bitter taste of scandal in Hollywood. The film industry perpetuated the low-class, bawdy reputation it had begun with, though film magnates simultaneously responded to public demands for morally acceptable pictures.

There was some fear at the beginning of the decade that the film industry had reached its peak, but the popularity of certain actors and actresses sustained the industry. Audiences wanted films with Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford, asking “ushers and ticket sellers, ‘When will you show another Biograph picture with that girl in it?’ Those who wanted westerns called for ‘Broncho Billy’ and Selig’s thrillers...”<sup>111</sup> The star system helped revitalize the industry, but even with stars, movie audiences wearied of the same stories. In 1922, Charlie Chaplin surmised, “the public is not tired of old faces. It is tired of the old faces in the old material. It would have even greater apathy for new faces in the old material.”<sup>112</sup> Producers scrambled for something to feed the overindulgent public. They feared that there was no solution, that the theater industry had nowhere else to go.

The fear of a stagnating industry shattered in 1926. While that fear abounded in both film and movie theater industry, at Denver’s Aladdin Theater, a new feature in the movies revitalized the entire industry. In 1926, Warner Brothers introduced the Vitaphone and Fox introduced the Movietone, modernizing the industry by bringing sound technology into theaters like the Aladdin. Sound technology entered the exhibition scene in 1926, with the Vitaphone and

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<sup>109</sup> Hampton, 285.

<sup>110</sup> Helena Katz, *Cold Cases: Famous Unsolved Mysteries, Crimes, and Disappearances in America* (Denver: Greenwood, 2010), 86-87.

<sup>111</sup> Hampton, 85.

<sup>112</sup> Charles Chaplin, “We Have Come to Stay,” *The Ladies Home Journal* 39 (October 1922), 12.

Movietone, but theater owners and managers were wary of the new technology. Ever quick to jump on the bandwagon for movie-related technology and theater design, Harry Huffman contracted with Fox to install the Vitaphone apparatus in his theater in 1927 while most other theater owners across the nation were still thinking about it.<sup>113</sup> Denverites scrambled to attend the showing of *Don Juan* (1927), the first showing of a sound film at the Aladdin Theater only a year after the theater's construction. On February 18, 1927, the day before the opening night, a *Denver Post* reporter anticipated that "all Denver will be on hand for the event" and was particularly fascinated with the idea that even in the "prolog [sic]" portion of the program, world-renowned violinist Mischa Elman would perform and "it will seem that the music actually is coming from the phantom that is moving on the silver screen."<sup>114</sup> Excitement sizzled in the air. The Aladdin was Denver's claim to fame.

After the February screening, sound technology burst across the nation. The Aladdin Theatre was the first theater in Denver to offer "talkies." In the nation, it was the fourth.<sup>115</sup> A *Denver Post* article published the morning of the first talkie showing tantalized eager readers, explaining that "complete testing of the Vitaphone installation was perfected Friday morning, and the instrument is working without a hitch." Denver was to have its own sound theater. The reporter continued, the workers "never had seen nor heard anything of the kind before. It was beyond the wildest flights of their imagination."<sup>116</sup> Denver led the race into the next phase of film excessiveness.

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<sup>113</sup> "Denver's Early Film Days Recalled," Harry E. Huffman Collection (MSS #1252), History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

<sup>114</sup> "Vitaphone Bills Begin Tonight with 'Don Juan' at the Aladdin," *Denver Post*, February 18, 1927.

<sup>115</sup> Rena Andrews, "Aladdin Theatre: Still Film Magic Carpet," *Denver Post*, October 29, 1976; Larry Tajiri, "Harry Huffman Remembers When Screen Began to Talk," clipping, Harry E. Huffman Collection (MSS #1252), History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

<sup>116</sup> "Vitaphone Bills Begin Tonight with 'Don Juan' at the Aladdin," *Denver Post*, February 18, 1927.

It wasn't a cheap venture. According to 1920s historian and film entrepreneur Benjamin Hampton, "the cost of equipping a theater with talking apparatus was ten to thirty thousand dollars, depending on the size of the auditorium and the engineering-acoustical difficulties to overcome; and, as such an investment was not justifiable if the novelty was to be short-lived, many exhibitors hesitated."<sup>117</sup> They didn't hesitate for long. "By the spring of 1927, the movement of the public toward talkies was unmistakable; by the autumn of 1927 it was a stampede."<sup>118</sup> It was costly to install and then theater owners had to pay rent each month for use of the machinery. In the 1930s, sound leases were \$22,000 for the Aladdin, \$7,000 for the Bluebird and Bide-a-Wee, and \$14,000 for the Rialto.<sup>119</sup> This was at a time when \$7,000 could buy three "Aladdin houses," a type of bungalow for middle-class families.<sup>120</sup>

Despite the technology's rudimentary quality, Americans flocked to theaters that offered sound technology. In Denver, another reporter further tempted readers: "Denver is going to blink its eyes and gasp with pleasurable surprise when it views for the first time the colorful splendor of the three-quarter-million-dollar Aladdin Theatre, for the lobby of the gorgeous new house is a magic carpet that will transport one in the twinkling of an eye into an ethereal land of make-believe, where the fantastic tales of 'Arabian Nights' will come to life!"<sup>121</sup> Not only was the Aladdin going to be a theater wired for sound, but it was also the *only* theater in Denver to have talking pictures as part of a regular program. The *Denver Post* reporter explained that, "Denverites will have no opportunity to hear the Vitaphone at any other local theater, because Vitaphone has been licensed for the use only at the Aladdin over a long-term period. And there is

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<sup>117</sup> Hampton, 383.

<sup>118</sup> Hampton, 383.

<sup>119</sup> "Aladdin Theatre Corporation Annual Reports, 1930-1937," Harry E. Huffman Collection (MSS #1252), History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

<sup>120</sup> Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., *The American Family Home: 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 175.

<sup>121</sup> Rena Andrews, "Aladdin Theatre: Still Film Magic Carpet," *Denver Post*, October 29, 1976.

only one Vitaphone—the most perfect instrument of its kind that has been designed and perfected.”<sup>122</sup> The reporter did not even need such hype to generate excitement. Like other Americans, Denverites were eager to hear a movie talk.

The new sound technology at the theaters augmented another issue at hand for how audience members could experience the decadence of moviegoing: realism. The moviegoing public demanded more realism in their films, as they had been doing since the beginning of the industry. Dating back to the beginning of the century, men like William Selig had moved west in pursuit of bringing realism to the screen. The demand was the same in the 1920s. The innovation of the 1900s and 1910s had not quite led to a solid sense of realism in films. Thus, in 1922, Charlie Chaplin proclaimed, “I feel sure that the future of the films will take care of itself not so much because of new blood but by the demands of a tired and too long acquiescent public. The films can do much to depict actual life with its comedy and tragedy. Realism is needed, realism in the sense that there be truth and sincerity rather than forced and obvious moralizing, which we have had to satiation...”<sup>123</sup> He did not fear for the complete end of the film industry and instead believed that gritty realism would draw audiences. Sound technology as incorporated into theater designs proved the perfect tool for reinvigorating the industry and its sense of realism.

Simultaneously, theater designs and decoration deepened the decadent effect of the films. Theaters continued to provide patrons with the luxurious settings that they loved so much from the grand palaces of the 1910s, but such luxury encouraged indulgence at the cost of availability and appeal to all. Upper- and middle-class citizens appreciated the extravagant theaters and experience of going downtown, but some of the lower middle-class and working-class found

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<sup>122</sup> “Vitaphone Bills Begin Tonight with ‘Don Juan’ at the Aladdin,” *Denver Post*, February 18, 1927.

<sup>123</sup> Chaplin, “We Have Come to Stay,” 1922.

neighborhood theaters more accessible and less pretentious.<sup>124</sup> Ultimately, what differentiated the 1920s from the 1910s was that the opulent settings and embellishments seeped into neighborhood theater designs like Denver's Aladdin Theatre where only small, basic theaters had been available before. In 1926, the Aladdin's atmosphere certainly contributed to the feeling of opulence, but at a scale that patrons from the surrounding neighborhood were more than willing to attend.

From the sidewalk, the onion dome and the strikingly flat façade with rooftop finials reaching toward the sky struck passersby. The marquee was a simple horizontal element, held up by cables attaching it to the façade, a less imposing marquee than the vertical ones of many downtown palaces. There was also far less embellishment on the façade, most of the front was flat, with only a few carved borders along the top. Under the marquee, the entrance was a little more impressive. Unglazed, but colorful terra cotta surrounding the Moorish arches that framed balconies bordered with intricate wrought iron railings and wrought iron lamps. Two doors at the entrance and no ticket window suggested that patrons purchased their tickets inside. There were also two small storefronts on either side of the entrance.

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<sup>124</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 128.



**Figure 23. Exterior of Harry E. Huffman’s Aladdin Theater, 1927. One of the typical single-family homes peaks from behind the right hand side of the background. The sparse decoration, but large features demonstrate a move toward the Art Deco streamlined architectural style more popular during the 1930s.<sup>125</sup>**

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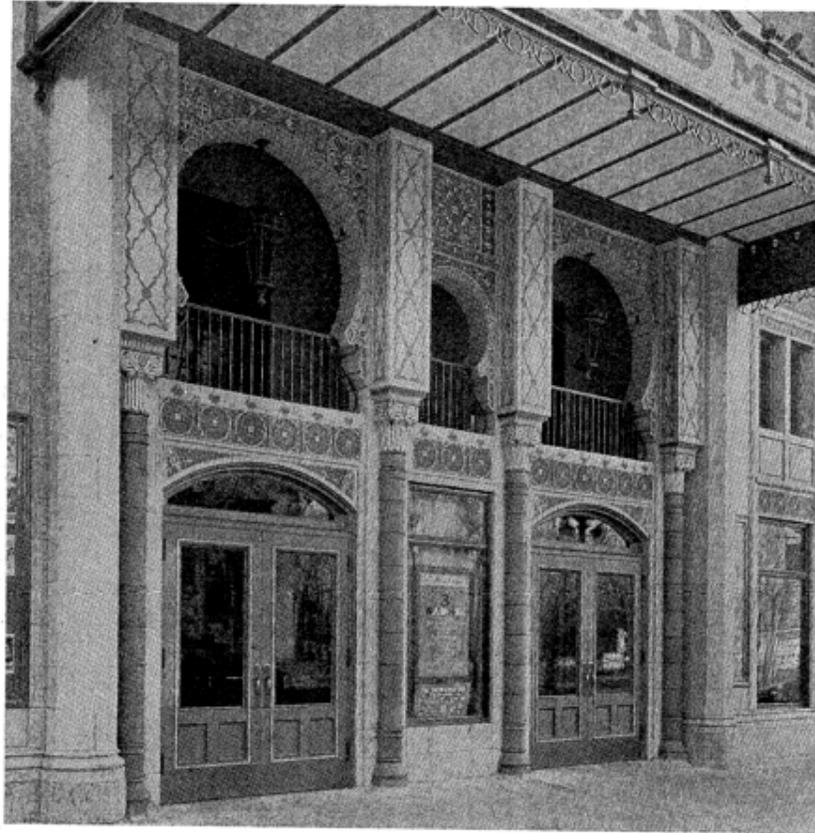
<sup>125</sup> “Aladdin theater, Denver,” 1927, Denver Public Library Western History Photos, Denver, Colorado, Call Number X-24785, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/37312/rec/5> (accessed April 2012).



**Figure 24. Detail of Aladdin Theater entrance revealing no exterior ticket window, but revealing elaborate unglazed terra cotta and elaborate polychrome (vivid contrasting colors), 1926.<sup>126</sup>**

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<sup>126</sup> "Entrance detail Aladdin theater, Denver, Colo, Ireland & Parr Architects unglazed terra cotta in elaborate polychrome," 1926, Denver Public Library Western History Photos, Denver, Colorado, Call Number X-24787, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/37313/rec/3> (accessed April 2012).



The Aladdin Theatre, Denver, Colo.—Ireland & Parr, Architects

The colorful architecture of the Orient, with its fascinating splendor and magnificent polychrome effects, is here shown in America, through the medium of

# Northwestern Terra Cotta

THE NORTHWESTERN TERRA COTTA COMPANY  
DENVER CHICAGO ST. LOUIS

Figure 25. The Aladdin advertisement in national architectural journal, *The Architect*, 1927.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>127</sup> "Northwestern Terra Cotta" advertisement, *The Architect* (February 1927), 528.

In the lobby were high arches and an impressive mural of Aladdin on his quest for the lamp, exotic elements that reflected the decadence of 1920s American identity. *Rocky Mountain News* reporter Helen Black admired the Aladdin for “not the garrish [sic], bizarre beauty, but the loveliness of cream walls, of an exquisite blue ceiling, or minarets of blue and gold and inspiring orange. There is a spaciousness, a soothing quality that rests the patron the moment he sets foot in the building.”<sup>128</sup> The trickle of a fountain in the lobby and two in the auditorium was a soothing bit of white noise as patrons strolled the exotic atmosphere. The auditorium was the crowning achievement of atmospheric architectural design.



**Figure 26. The interior of the Aladdin Theatre, c. 1920 to 1930. The Moorish archways crown two fountains, the seats are on a gently slope under a sky blue ceiling set with twinkling star lights.**<sup>129</sup>

<sup>128</sup> “Large Crowd Attends Opening of New Aladdin Theater Here,” *RMN*, October 29, 1926.

<sup>129</sup> “Aladdin theater, Denver,” 1920-1930?, Denver Public Library Western History Photos, Denver, Colorado, Call Number X-24786, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/37314/rec/2> (accessed April 2012).

With the soft sky blue ceiling, crawling greenery, Moorish arches, two fountains, balcony, and a Wick organ, the auditorium was exhilarating and relaxing all at the same time. It was exotic, but on a scale that made it more intimate and comfortable. Reporter Betty Craig cooed, “Harry Huffman, we owe you mighty much for giving us, Denver, such an enrapturing show; such an enchanting garden to play and dream in.”<sup>130</sup> The spirit of self-indulgence and moral decay towed the nation further away from the hard work and self-sufficiency of the frontier and toward the standardization and organization of the modern identity. Similarly, the Aladdin fostered self-indulgence and challenged moral decay through the use of high-class elements in a neighborhood theater.

Yet, this seepage in design did not fully dilute the distinction between most neighborhood theaters and downtown palaces. Both palaces and houses encouraged the decadent attitude of the era through their design influences, but palaces were large and elaborate while neighborhood houses were smaller and less pretentious. The Aladdin straddled the division between the two since it was a neighborhood theater, but larger and more elaborate than most neighborhood theaters. However, the distinction between these two types of theaters reflected social divisions of the Aladdin’s first decade or so. Although the Aladdin from 1926 to 1929 was a well-loved venue, it could not escape the social divisions that erupted when the nation’s economy crashed in 1929. The social divisions that had been boiling under the surface of the self-indulgent national spirit created instances of hotly contested space and experience within Denver films and theaters at the end of the 1920s. And these social results of indulgence were only precursors to the trouble that would come in the 1930s.

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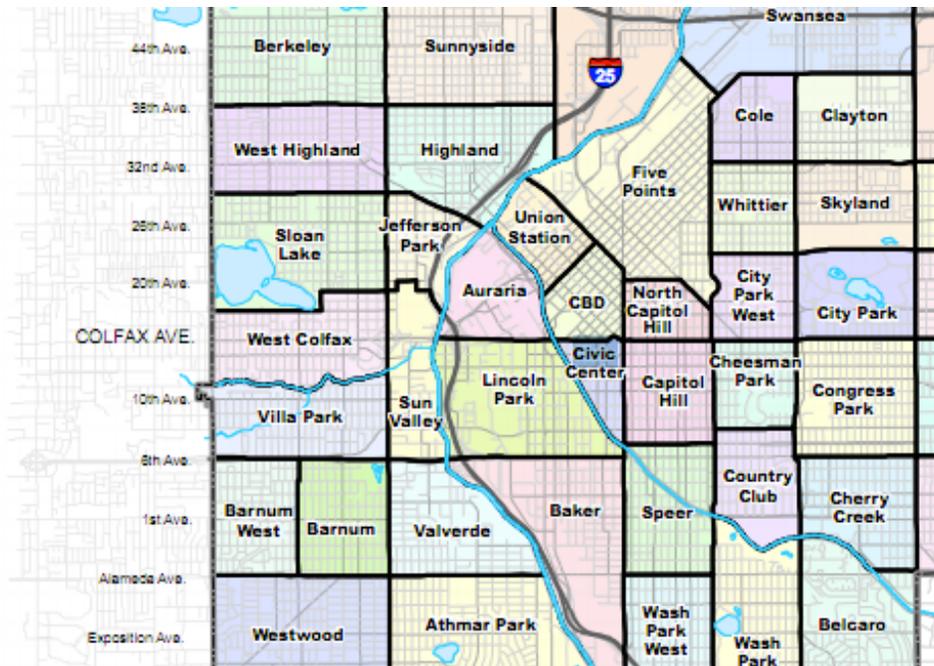
<sup>130</sup> “Initial Bill at Aladdin is One That Will Thrill All,” Harry E. Huffman Collection (MSS #1252), History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

Prior to the national stock market crash in 1929, the social divisions that haunted 1920s society in race, ethnicity, and class were part of the built environment such as the division of neighborhoods. Several neighborhoods provided alternative locations to the downtown Denver palaces and thus were more accessible to certain social groups. These areas included the Berkeley, Cheesman Park, North Capitol Hill, and Speer districts (see map below). In terms of social class, the 1920s elite generally collected in the Swallow Hill area just north of the North Capitol Hill district. Despite the nearness of the Ogden and the Aladdin theaters, many of the wealthier Denverites likely traveled into the central business district and visited its constellation of movie palaces, including the Paramount, Denver, and Orpheum Theatres. Since most of the elite expressed disdain for neighborhood theaters, they most likely avoided attending theaters such as the Ogden and the Aladdin.<sup>131</sup> These neighborhood divisions echoed issues of race and ethnicity, but only in terms of location rather than design.

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<sup>131</sup> DPL, "Assessor Records," Creating Communities DPL, <http://creatingcommunities.denverlibrary.org/assessor-records/CBD> (accessed April 2012); City and County of Denver, *Denver Neighborhood History Project, 1993-4: Overview History of Denver Neighborhood Development* by R. Laurie Simmons and Thomas H. Simmons, Report for the Denver Landmark Preservation Commission and Office of Planning and Community Development (Denver, 1995), 20.

I define social class in terms of an individual's occupation. For instance, those I consider upper-class and living in the Swallow Hill area include people working as govern amount of money. Those in the middle- and working-classes I define as those with an annual income of less than the upper-class. Therefore, my definition hinges on what type of job an individual had (middle-class tended to have white-collar jobs, working-class usually factory and domestic jobs), which in turn determined their annual income.



**Figure 27. Denver Neighborhood Map.**<sup>132</sup>

One architect acknowledged that “the first important step in designing a theatre is to analyze the location, the present and probably future trend in the development of the immediate vicinity, as well as the area upon which the theatre will depend for its patronage.” In realizing the social status of the surrounding areas, architects designed with an eye toward appealing to all social classes with easy access to the theater site.<sup>133</sup> For the outlying movie house, trolleys did not always stop or run along the same street, but these theaters usually lay within walking distance of trolley stops. Furthermore, family dwellings existed much closer to these theaters, so patrons often lived within walking distance to the theater itself and thus required no trolley.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>132</sup> City of Denver website, <http://www.denvergov.com/denvermaps/documents//citywide/Neighborhoods.pdf> (accessed April 2012).

<sup>133</sup> Randolph Williams Sexton and Benjamin Franklin Betts, eds, *American Theatres of Today: Illustrated With Plans, Sections, And Photographs of Exterior And Interior Details of Modern Motion Picture And Legitimate Theatres Throughout the United States*, Volume 2 (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Company, Inc., 1927), 22.

<sup>134</sup> Denver Streetcars, “In History,” College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado, <http://www.denverstreetcars.net/history.htm> (accessed April 2012); Meloy, 2; “Clason’s Guide Map of Denver, Colorado”; DPL Western History Photos, DPL Western History photographs, Denver, Colorado, Call Number X-23375, <http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?10023375+X-23375> (accessed April 2012); Ibid., Photo 9, “Curtis Street, Denver,” 1910. Call Number X-22624, <http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?10022624+X-22624> (accessed April 2012).

The city zoned the buildings directly on Colfax, including the Aladdin and the Ogden as commercial, but the streets to the north and south all remained purely residential. Most of the surrounding buildings included apartment homes, multi-family dwellings, bakeries, a Skaggs Safeway store, a Piggly Wiggly grocery store, Oriental rug stores, laundry facilities, and even a mortuary. Consequently, a neighborhood theater would prosper the most.<sup>135</sup>

The Aladdin was at 2000 E. Colfax Ave., the main thoroughfare into Denver from the east and the border between the middle- and working-classes living on the south side of the street and the elite classes living on the north side. On the south side, the main building types were apartment homes, single-family homes, multi-family homes, and a few business strips on the 1900 block directly west of the Aladdin.<sup>136</sup> The north side essentially was a mirror image, but the homes sold at higher prices. As such, the elite whites living along East Colfax Avenue during the 1920s were on the north side while many working- and middle-class families lived on the south side, the side with the Aladdin Theater. In fact, later Aladdin manager Ralph Batschelet, lived “in back of the Aladdin and had watched the theater go up, brick by brick.”<sup>137</sup> The intersection at East Colfax and Race Street was a racial, ethnic, and class dividing line. Originally named because it connected the nearby horse racetracks in the 1860s and 1870s, Race Street gained new meaning with these social practices.<sup>138</sup> Such lines of distinction revealed a division of accessibility similar to the national-level identity of selective decadence. Some could indulge at whim while others had to work day in and day out, with only small breaks and opportunities to indulge. Decadence’s self-indulgent side was not an equal opportunity spirit.

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<sup>135</sup> “Building and Zone Map: City and County of Denver”; “Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970,” DPL, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.denverlibrary.org:2048/co/0985/dateid-000009.htm?CCSI=2555n> (accessed April 2012); “Clason’s Guide Map of Denver, Colorado”; Marsh, “Commercial Map, City of Denver, Colorado”; *Denver Householders’ Directory, Volume V, 1929*.

<sup>136</sup> “Digital Sanborn Maps, 1867-1970,” DPL, <http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.denverlibrary.org:2048/co/0985/dateid-000009.htm?CCSI=2555n> (accessed April 2012).

<sup>137</sup> Batschelet, 156.

<sup>138</sup> Phil Goodstein, *Denver Streets: Names, Numbers, Locations, Logic* (Denver: New Social Publications, 1994), 18.

Americans of various backgrounds ensured that decadence did not reach all levels of society. When theater architects designed their theaters, they often left issues of segregation to the discretion of the community and theater owner. For instance, racist attitudes of Denver's white population forced African Americans into separate sections of the city, meaning that African Americans either needed their own theaters or hoped to find a way to get into Denver's main theaters. Early in Denver history, the African American population settled in the central business district—in fact, many lived along Curtis Street near Sixteenth Street where Theater Row later became the defining element of the area. Supported by prominent white Republicans, the Colorado Negro Business League in 1905 attempted to establish an agricultural community in Dearfield, a location about seventy five miles northeast of the city. However, most African Americans felt that they could find sufficient employment within the city limits and made their home in the Five Points neighborhood just northeast of the central business district.<sup>139</sup> They believed in hard work, just as the white population of Denver did. Five Points was also within walking distance of Denver's most popular movie theaters, and according to Denver African American J.E. James, African Americans could go to these theaters, but they could only sit in the balconies. No evidence suggests that Denver movie theaters offered separate show times for African Americans or theaters built specifically for African Americans during the 1920s. One might expect to see these more extreme measures in a place like Denver, where antagonism toward race, ethnicity, and other social groups found significant support in local divisions of national-level groups like the Ku Klux Klan.

The racial and ethnic issues were a big part of 1920s American society. In 1923 and 1924, there was a national-level reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan that prompted greater

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<sup>139</sup> Melnick *Cinema Treasure*, 70; John Margolies and Emily Margolin Gwathmey, *Ticket to Paradise: American Movie Theaters and How We Had Fun* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1991), 84; Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939), 9; Leonard, 198-199; Dorsett, 172.

antagonism toward African Americans, Catholics, Jews, and other racial and ethnic groups. The KKK had a particularly strong and active contingent in Denver during the 1920s, with about 30,000 as active members and thousands more that were sympathetic to the Klan's cause.<sup>140</sup> Like KKK contingents in other states outside the South, the Colorado Klan stressed nativistic patriotism, law and order, anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia.<sup>141</sup> The Colorado Klan had a perceptible target in Denver's African American population, which in 1920 reined in at 2.4 percent of the city's population, "a proportion far below that of southern cities or of northern metropolises such as New York and Chicago." Yet, Denver's African Americans were well-educated and moderately prosperous compared to those living in the larger cities.<sup>142</sup> Their education and prosperity was not enough to lift them out of the depths to which whites had condemned them. In general, the KKK was a group that standardized beliefs for the set of Americans that chose to follow it, but the frontier hard work and self-sufficiency of some African Americans and other marginalized groups opened opportunities for success.

Like other groups that the KKK targeted, African-Americans lived in separate neighborhoods from the white Denverites. Thomas Noel and Stephen J. Leonard noted that "whites in east-central Denver used custom, pressure, and restrictive real estate covenants to keep African-Americans west of Race Street."<sup>143</sup> East Colfax was still the main gateway into Denver for travelers from the east as well as home to elite neighborhoods such as Capitol Hill and Cheesman Park, so such practices forced African Americans out of the line of sight for incoming travelers.<sup>144</sup> It was also the location of the Aladdin Theater. Keeping the African

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<sup>140</sup> Dorsett, 203.

<sup>141</sup> R. Todd Laugen, *The Gospel of Progressivism: Moral Reform and Labor War in Colorado, 1900-1930* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2010), 157; Leonard, 189, 192.

<sup>142</sup> Leonard, 192.

<sup>143</sup> Leonard, 193.

<sup>144</sup> Thomas J. Noel and Barbara S. Norgren, *Denver: The City Beautiful and Its Architects, 1893-1941* (Denver, Colorado: Historic Denver, Inc.), 65.

American population “west of Race Street” translated to relegating the dark-skinned members of the population to the Five Points neighborhood, north of the elite white neighborhoods and northeast of the central business district.

Such a location positioned the African American populations close to the main entertainment district on Curtis Street, but much further from the more affordable 1920s neighborhood theaters like the Aladdin. In fact, no Householder and City Directories list movie theaters in the Five Points neighborhood, meaning that African Americans had to go downtown or find neighborhood theaters in order to see movies.<sup>145</sup> Essentially, movie theaters that African Americans could afford were the neighborhood theaters, but the central business district separated African Americans from these neighborhoods. The neighborhood theaters were all on the south, east, or west side of Denver and the African Americans were on the north side.

Few sources mention how Denver theater managers dealt with the African American population, though national trends indicated that most included separate show times for African Americans or relegated them to the balconies.<sup>146</sup> Moreover, the films shown at Denver theaters in the 1920s did not cater to African Americans. Films featured white actors and when they did have black characters, they were sinister or comical. Films were an effect of the industry’s standardization in appealing to white, generally middle-class America. D.W. Griffith’s extravagant classic, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), was one of the earliest examples of racism in popular films because it depicted an African American as the murderer of an innocent young white girl.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> *Denver Householders’ Directory*, 1924, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1929; *Corbett and Ballenger’s City Directory*, 1920, 1923.

<sup>146</sup> Leonard, 192.

<sup>147</sup> Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), DVD, Directed by D.W. Griffith (Image Entertainment, 1998).

In other instances, African Americans played comical characters. The second most popular film for 1927, *The Jazz Singer*, featured Russian-born Jewish actor Al Jolson in blackface.<sup>148</sup> Blackface was the use of dark makeup on white actors in imitation of black skin and exaggerating the mouth. The practice extended from vaudeville acts such as those in which Al Jolson acted. “Al Jolson came out of vaudeville and his use of blackface in *The Jazz Singer* and *The Singing Fool* (1928) recalled that tradition” and “by successfully harnessing the tropes of minstrelsy to nativist pressure to understand citizenship as a dialectical relationship between ‘black’ and ‘white,’ Jolson became the first Jewish person to be an ‘American’ idol for the masses.”<sup>149</sup> The film was not sinister in its mocking of African Americans, but the use of blackface was degrading and reinforced white Americans’ views of African Americans as foolish and comical.

*The Jazz Singer* had an important connection to Denver as well, which nationalized Denver connections to the film industry in general. In fact, the film might not have been the same if not for Denver theater mogul, Harry Huffman. Legend has it that Harry Warner of Warner Brothers asked Huffman to talk to Jolson while the vaudevillian was in Denver and convince him to film a talkie in Hollywood. Huffman informed Jolson, “Al, on the stage you play only to thousands and when you die posterity will forget you ever lived. Make a movie and millions will see and hear you all over the world.” Jolson agreed, telling Huffman, “I’ll give it all I’ve got.”<sup>150</sup> Without Huffman’s persuasion, Al Jolson would not have been the actor in *The Jazz*

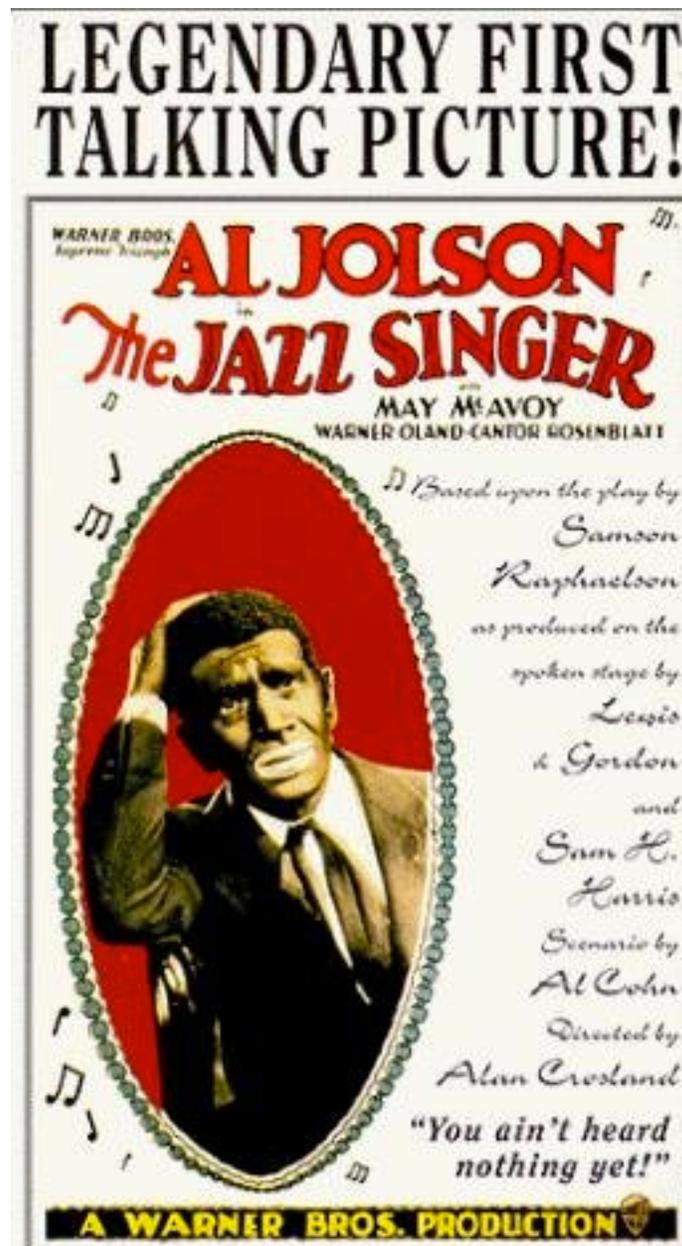
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<sup>148</sup> Charles Harpole, *The History of the American Cinema: An Evening’s Entertainment, 1915-1928* (New York: Scribner, 1990), 33.

<sup>149</sup> Paul Grainge, Mark Jancovich, and Sharon Monteith, *Film Histories: An Introduction and Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 153.

<sup>150</sup> Larry Tajiri, “Harry Huffman Remembers When Screen Began to Talk,” clipping, Harry E. Huffman Collection (MSS #1252), History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

*Singer* and the nationally-renowned ad lib, “Wait a minute, wait a minute. You ain’t heard nothing yet” would never have been.<sup>151</sup>



**Figure 28. The Jazz Singer poster, advertising sound technology and showing Al Jolson in blackface, 1927.<sup>152</sup>**

<sup>151</sup> Al Jolson and May McAvoy, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), DVD, Directed by Alan Crosland (Warner Home Video, 2007).

<sup>152</sup> *Jazz Singer* poster, 1927, Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm158899200/tt0018037> (accessed April 2012).

The issue of race was a significant part of Denver history, but even so, theater architects did not dwell on the challenge of whether or not to allow African Americans in theaters. Rather, much like other theaters across the country, the issue passed to theater owners and advertisers. It seemed that the only relationship between design and racial discrimination came from the use of the balcony in neighborhood theaters. Although not intended just to enforce racial segregation, many theater owners relegated African Americans to the balcony. In Denver, balconies more often indicated cheaper seating or seating for children, not simply racial segregation. In fact, in grand palaces, architects designed sweeping staircases to lure patrons to the balcony. The race issue fell to advertisers and theater owners, not architects.<sup>153</sup>

For example, like most Denver theaters, the Aladdin was pure of racial and ethnic slurs—at least on the surface. This was partially due to its location along the dividing line between the predominantly white upper-, middle-, and working-class Denverites rather than a more ethnically diverse area. Most ethnic groups settled in the north and west sections of Denver, leaving the area on East Colfax where Huffman built the Aladdin as a white neighborhood characterized by class division more than racial or ethnic divisions. Moreover, practice more than design reinforced racial divisions in theaters. For instance, balcony seating was a perfect tool for physically separating races. Architects put balconies in movie theaters in order to make use of space and add seating, not necessarily to allow for audience segregation, racial or otherwise. However, the balcony seats gained the reputation of being the cheap seats, a social stigma that had existed even in legitimate theaters. Architect Emil M. Mlinar, a former employee in renowned movie theater architect Thomas Lamb's office, observed how, "It is a rather interesting fact that in every case the balcony of the theatre seems to contain the key to the

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<sup>153</sup> Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts On the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 62.

design of the auditorium and the only explanation I know of for this is the fact that a special effort must be made to make the balcony attractive to the people—to *overcome their feeling that the balcony is markedly a second-class part of the house*” [emphasis added].<sup>154</sup> Early movie palace architect Arthur Meloy recommended that architects include elevators and escalators in order to “induce increased balcony and gallery patronage.”<sup>155</sup> Sweeping staircases also tempted theatergoers to the upper floors.

However, theater owners made convenient use of balconies in segregating audiences, often relegating African Americans to the highest and furthest seats. For instance, in 1940, Denver African American J.E. James of 2558 Welton informed University of Denver graduate student James Harvey that, “In the theaters we can only occupy the balcony or upper floors.”<sup>156</sup> Thus, the use of certain design features gave theater owners a tool with which to discriminate, even if that feature was not necessarily intended for such use. Discrimination on the basis of theater location was a result of theater corporations choosing to build theaters in the business districts of working- and middle-class whites. This may not have been intentional segregation or discrimination, but did cater to white citizens, allowing whites the opportunity to self-indulge more than other ethnicities or races. In fact, there were few alternatives to the downtown theaters for Denver African Americans. The Roxy Theater at 2549-2551 Welton St. was one, though African American Denver resident Abel Davis did not open it until March 1934.<sup>157</sup> Despite the strong KKK contingent in Denver, racism was a more ambiguous issue when it came to movie theater construction and design. Practice more than design determined African American

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<sup>154</sup> Emil M. Mlinar, “Motion Picture Theatre Data, Part IV,” *Pencil Points* as appeared in *Progressive Architecture*, Volume 3 by Eugene Clute, Russell Fenimore Whitehead, Kenneth Reid, Elizabeth L. Cleaver (Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1922).

<sup>155</sup> Meloy, 57.

<sup>156</sup> James Rose Harvey, “Negroes in Colorado” (master’s thesis, University of Denver, 1941), 135.

<sup>157</sup> *Denver Neighborhood History Project, 1993-94: Five Points Neighborhood; Denver Householders’ Directory*, 1935.

moviegoing, similar to how practice determined the moviegoing experiences of various Denver ethnicities.

During the 1920s, ethnicity was a factor in labor disputes that reflected national-level decadence and spilled over into the movie industry because of heavy ethnic influence in film corporations and movie theater construction. In fact, many of the most successful and influential men in Hollywood during the 1920s were Jewish. White fears about immigration increased during the 1910s, especially in industrial cities where immigrants accepted lower wages and thus undercut employment for native-born whites who demanded higher wages. Especially during the 1910s, waves of Eastern European immigrants flooded the United States.<sup>158</sup> While these populations mainly influenced industrial cities, Denver's own experiences with Mexican immigrants later antagonized labor demands during the Great Depression. However, on a national-scale in the 1920s, the influx of eastern and southeastern European immigrants and their subsequent flooding of the labor market did not create a favorable impression on the rest of the nation's working-class.

Even so, some of these immigrants recognized fruitful opportunities in film production. Jews in particular favored the low start-up costs and high customer demand of movie exhibition and many later moved into production. Men such as Universal Pictures founder Carl Laemmle, Paramount Pictures founder Adolph Zukor, Fox Film Corporation founder William Fox, head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Louis B. Mayer, and the Warner brothers Harry, Sam, Albert, and Jack of Warner Brothers fame were all Jewish.<sup>159</sup> Jews worked at all levels of industry in Hollywood and garnered resentment from the anti-Semitic groups of the nation such as the Ku Klux Klan.

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<sup>158</sup> Ross, 29.

<sup>159</sup> Ross, 18; Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988), 3.

Moreover, representations of Jews in films ranged from celebratory as in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) to negative in *The King of Kings* (1927).

*The King of Kings* was a technical marvel of the 1920s, using a two-strip colorization process that gave portions of the film a much more vivid and lifelike feel than the usual black and white films.<sup>160</sup> Cecil B. De Mille, son of a North Carolina-born father and British mother, directed the film, which tells the story of Mary Magdalene and her spiritual repentance after meeting Jesus Christ. After Mary's conversion to Christ's teachings, the film focused on the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The film vilified Jews through their demands to crucify Christ. In Denver, the film proved so offensive to the Jewish population that it prompted a court case.

In September 1928, the Denver Jewish population challenged the showing of *The King of Kings* at the Aladdin due to its "racially and religiously offensive" content. Simon J. Heller, chairman of the Anti-Defamation Committee of the Independent Order of the B'nai B'rith, stated that the film was offensive to Jews because it "would create a bad impression upon the Protestants in reference to the Jewish race and tend to stir up racial and religious antagonism." In response to the challenge, Huffman cancelled the showing. However, this angered the Pathe Exchange Company from which Huffman had rented the film. Bringing the case to Colorado court, Pathe claimed that the film was not objectionable and that Huffman had not given reasonable notice in accordance with their contract. The court ruled in favor of Huffman, that he had given reasonable notice and that the content could be considered objectionable.<sup>161</sup> The tension between Denver's Jewish population and the film embodied the national-scale friction in

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<sup>160</sup> Harpole, 130.

<sup>161</sup> Harry Huffman Collection (MSS#1252), History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

Hollywood with its many Jewish movie moguls. Furthermore, such ethnic dissension was a sign of the national-level moral decay that marginalized ethnic groups.

Racial and ethnic tensions certainly prompted local racial and ethnic groups to assert their voices at the Aladdin Theater, though these issues arose more in terms of location and film rather than theater design. When Huffman responded to the Jewish population, he demonstrated that he would rather foster Jewish patronage than lose it. Yet in regard to race, Denver theaters continued to segregate. Apparently, African Americans were on a lower rung of the Denver social ladder, but not so low that Denver managers prevented their attendance. Having an African American population might have been something to deal with and control, as Denverites did, but it also contributed to the indulgent feel of the city. Like big cities, Denver had an African American population that represented jazz and sensuality, but white Denverites kept that population at bay. African Americans might have brought indulgence through atmospheres of jazz clubs and the stereotyping of sensuality, but some Americans and Denverites believed the African Americans had their place.

Besides the racial and ethnic issues of the time, movies also reflected the increased interest in sexual expression that resulted from decadent attitudes. With the spread of psychologist Sigmund Freud's observations about sexuality and the need for sexual expression in order to live a healthful life, Americans became more open and frank about their sexuality. Women of all ages—but young women in particular—in Denver and other cities hiked up their hemlines, sheared off their long locks, and rouged their cheeks. These “flappers” were the extreme version of the “new woman” from the Progressive Era. The “new woman” advocated political equality and the blurring of gender roles.<sup>162</sup> A flapper of the 1920s far exceeded these

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<sup>162</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 158.

ideas, representing the new sexual freedom. Their rebellious fashion and their uninhibited behavior embodied the carefree spirit that so many Americans aspired to in the 1920s and was characteristic of the movie stars they admired.

In fact, movies and movie theater designs encouraged sexual expression through their use of suggestive themes and dark, sumptuous atmospheres. Conservatives lashed out against the necking and kissing in lewd films as well as against theaters with poor lighting and dark balconies that provided a semi-private place for young men and women to cavort. The call for reform in the movies and proper lighting in theaters ran rampant through popular periodicals and literature. One man even wrote an entire book on the subject, *Our Movie-Made Children*, expressing concern for children and young people who attended movie theaters, fearing for what racy subjects they might learn about outside the home.<sup>163</sup> In Denver, a woman brought Huffman to court over the issue of poor lighting, though her case dealt more with safety than sexual promiscuity.<sup>164</sup>

Films and theaters of the 1920s illuminate the movement toward freedom of sexual expression as well as concern about its effect on children and young people. Films contained racy subjects and parents and reformers demanded reform. In 1923, *Woman's Home Companion* contributor Anna Steese Richardson remarked that producers realized there was less attendance when they focused so much on sex themes and "bad taste." "The public was staying away," she claimed. But the issue continued to be a problem throughout the 1920s. Films with stories of intense romance played frequently at theaters across the nation. For instance, *7th Heaven* (1927)

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<sup>163</sup> Henry James Forman, *Our Movie-Made Children* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1933).

<sup>164</sup> Harry Huffman Collection (MSS#1252), History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

The woman in the court case had tripped in the theater and blamed her fall and subsequent head injury on the dim lighting in the theater. While dim lighting was a safety hazard, reformers of the time more often used it as tool for blaming theaters with fostering the immoral behavior of adolescents.

played at the Aladdin in February 1928, roping Denver into the national playing field that pitted moral concerns against films and movie theaters.<sup>165</sup>

The 1920s spirit of decadence translated to more than just liquor, jazz, and sexual expression, but also to the consumerism that swept the nation and became a particular tool of the film and movie theater industries. Due to the introduction of mass production and buying on credit, Americans in the 1920s possessed greater purchasing power. An increase in advertising augmented 1920s consumerism, including films and movie theaters. Films quickly adapted advertising schemes to their practices, using product placement within films to sell viewers on the merits of new manufactured goods as well as flashy posters and striking theater designs to entice those passing by the theaters. Such practices were common across the nation in cities like Denver and they resulted from the standardization of tastes that accompanied Americans as they moved into the modern era.

By adopting and responding to advertising practices that fostered decadent consumerism, Denverites allowed national-level ideas about standardized individuality and independence to permeate their world as well as recognize the roots of their own beloved city. Historian Thomas Noel pointed out that despite the “stately if occasionally flamboyant buildings” that “allowed the Queen City of the Plains to believe that she was truly regal, that her cow-town days had passed,” the city continued to host the National Western Stock Show, beginning in 1906. The show highlighted the Western roots of the town as farmers and ranchers flooded the city to showcase their livestock and technology. It may have been a city admired for its cosmopolitan civic beauty and brightly lit nightscape, but Denver could not escape its farming and ranching roots. Noel also remarked on the state’s early attempt at banning alcohol consumption in 1916, three years prior to the Eighteenth Amendment. The state law did not go over well and illegal drinking remained

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<sup>165</sup> “The Fortune Hunter is New Feature at Aladdin,” *Denver Post*, February 10, 1928.

high.<sup>166</sup> In spite of the law's failure, it reflected a pioneering attitude that projected the city's dedication to fostering the youthful film and movie theater industries. These industries embodied the national-level moral decay involving racial and ethnic riots, labor disputes, sexual freedom, and class division. The moral, economic, and social consequences of such reckless behavior would compound economic and social problems in the next decade.

The curious thing about 1920s movie theaters is that they represented racial, ethnic, and class divisions, but fostered a sense of unity within those groups. On the whole, film and movie theaters did not deal directly with issues of race and ethnicity, but many of their characteristic qualities *suggested* racial slurs and promoted discriminatory attitudes. On the other hand, movies and movie theaters fostered and reflected issues of class. Movies were a “democratic” entertainment, “a shrine of democracy where there are no privileged patrons,” in that they allowed members of all classes to partake in the same experience.<sup>167</sup> It was the theater's design that drove home any class distinction in the moviegoing experience. In order to conquer the issues of race and promote the film and theater industries to all classes, the trajectory of film and movie theater history shifted from the 1910s focus on richness and luxury like that of Denver's Orpheum and Strand Theaters to two types of theaters, allowing all classes to find a venue that catered to the level of decadence they could afford. Films and movie theaters were also democratic in the sense that they offered citizens across the nation a modern, standardized product. Denverites saw the same films and sat in similar theaters as the citizens in other American cities.<sup>168</sup> The Aladdin Theater was the best representation of 1920s Denver racial strife, labor unrest, and class division that characterized Denver as well as the nation.

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<sup>166</sup> Noel, *Denver*, 158.

<sup>167</sup> Gregory A. Waller, ed. *Moviegoing In America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 110; “Denver Theater,” 1937, DPL Western History Photos, Call Number X-24593, <http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?10024593+X-24593> (accessed April 2012); Ross, 22.

<sup>168</sup> Cohen, 128-129.

The 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression that followed the Aladdin's first few years of life aggravated these basic elements of film and theater distinction, which in turn reflected the larger social issues involving race, ethnicity, labor rights, and class division. Depending on the location of the theater within a city like Denver, it was more or less accessible to members of the working-, middle-, or upper-classes; to the Chinese, Russian, Mexican, German, or Slavic populations; or to the African-American versus Caucasian populations of Denver. If a theater was in the central business district, patrons had to have access to transportation via streetcar, walking, or automobile, which meant having access to enough money to pay for them. Many racial and ethnic groups of Denver settled in specific sections of the city that were separate from the central business district, so it was a challenge to get into downtown to see a movie. African-Americans settled in Five Points, Italian-Americans in the Union Station area, Jews settled in West Denver and West Colfax, and German-Americans settled in Berkley, far northwest of the downtown.<sup>169</sup> Such neighborhoods were set in stone by the time the Great Depression hit and they were the perfect stage for class, ethnic, racial, and labor drama.

This pattern of development in racially and ethnically segregated neighborhoods is a challenge to the calls for "community development" that so often cropped up in popular periodicals. On a national-level, architect Gerald Kaufman explained that "the part of our national character that expresses combination, co-operation, or (in-) corporation is shown in our national architectural body by factories, commercial buildings, railroad yards and shipping (with their circulation and nerve-systems radiated out over land and sea), manufacturing centers, and

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<sup>169</sup> Dorsett, 172-181.

industrial housing.”<sup>170</sup> He believed that the architecture of buildings like theaters reflected a melting pot of societies for which the United States was known. Structures such as the Aladdin with its Taj Mahal-inspired design testified to this principle. It was an exotic structure that did not reflect the ethnic background of the citizens, but represented the desire to perpetuate the image that the city accepted and celebrated “combination, co-operation, or (in-) corporation” of social groups and backgrounds.

While the theater designs reflected such a performance on the part of Denverites and architects, the films that showed at the theaters also enabled the desire of citizens to perform their roles as members of a national-level melting pot of ethnicities and races. O.G. Cocks wrote in 1922 that “the motion picture has been made by commercial agencies for national consumption.”<sup>171</sup> Filmmakers didn’t produce films for each specific demographic of cities throughout the United States. That would be absurd. Especially during the developmental period of mass culture. Instead, filmmakers created films that appealed to the “typical” American.

One of the unifying characteristics between design and films of palaces and houses was the element of speed. While the 1920s decadence suggested slow and smooth attitudes, architects in general recognized speed as an element of the decadent Twenties and advised that architecture should reflect it. Kaufman specifically cited theaters and films as manifestations of the American “craving for speed and motion” and argued that “our architecture should express speed; if it did not do so it would be false.”<sup>172</sup> While many of the great movie palaces and smaller neighborhood houses did not convey speed in terms of strong horizontal lines, they did use the “steel, bronze, glass, light, and electricity” that Kaufman believed expressed speed and efficiency.”<sup>173</sup> The

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<sup>170</sup> Gerald Kaufman, “City Architecture—Past, Present and Future: A Survey of Structural Progress and a Vision of Tomorrow,” *Arts & Decoration* 17 (May 1922), 16.

<sup>171</sup> O.G. Cocks, “How a Neighborhood Can Improve Its Motion Picture Exhibitions,” 1922.

<sup>172</sup> Kaufman, “City Architecture,” 1922.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

suggestion of speed through design was less a concern for Harry Huffman in designing the Aladdin, but other 1920s Denver theaters such as the Strand Theater used lights to convey speed and excitement. The Aladdin Theater was the exception to the rule since its façade was devoid of racing lights, but most theaters capitalized on the use of electricity and lights that flashed and blinked to attract attention.

Americans across the nation careened through the next decade and films and movie theaters were a sure part of the ride. Charlie Chaplin noted that, “The film demands speed not necessarily in the term of quick movement but in a combination of circumstances, one happening directly after another.”<sup>174</sup> Audiences ate up action adventure films because filmmakers had realized the story-telling capabilities of new non-dialogue technologies, such as quick cuts between scenes, jump shots, and juxtaposed angles that all conveyed a sense of speed. A reformist author for *Woman’s Home Companion* in 1923 cried out against the “speed mania and general wildness of youth” and the immorality of films, asking citizens, “Have you even noticed what wonderful results follow when an entire community is aroused to the fact that some evil must be stamped out, some good work accomplished?”<sup>175</sup> Here again was not only the reformist spirit, but also the use of that vague term, “community.” Reporters and authors across the nation invoked the term, but never identified for whom or to what extent. For Denver and its theaters, communities were small, individualized groups of varying ethnicities, races, and economic backgrounds. Yet theaters and films subjected Denverites to a similar moviegoing experience as citizens from New York to California, ultimately drawing them into the larger community of the United States.

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<sup>174</sup> Chaplin, “We Have Come to Stay,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* 39 (October 1922), 12.

<sup>175</sup> Anna Steese Richardson, “Better Films a Community Asset,” *Woman’s Home Companion* 50 (January 1923), 17.

Community was a local as well as a national concept, defined on the basis of many factors, including race, ethnicity, and class but movies and films worked on the national-level, while reaching into specific city populations like that of Denver. Many Americans would have agreed with movie magnate Cecil B. DeMille's hope that "the movie and the radio will bring people together. They will make for unity and for a certain great oneness in the world. Ultimately it may even be oneness with God."<sup>176</sup> It was an idealistic view and theaters like Denver's *Aladdin* testified to the *disunity* and strife of one of America's most tumultuous and decadent decades. On October 24, 1929, such idealistic hopes came crashing down.

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<sup>176</sup> Cecil B. DeMille, "The Public Is Always Right," *Ladies' Home Journal* 44 (September 1927), 14.

## CHAPTER 3

### Denver and the Film Industry's How-To Guide for Enduring the Depression

On October 24, 1929, the Denver movie scene was a mix of new, old, and yet-to-come: Denver's Paramount Theater was almost two-months old, the Orpheum Theater was less than a year away from its final curtain call, and the Mayan Theater wouldn't open for another year.<sup>177</sup> On that day, the stock market crashed. It pushed America's fragile economy over the edge and thrust the American people into an economic depression that lasted until the country mobilized for war in the late 1930s.<sup>178</sup> Despite Americans not yet knowing that they were in a depression, the immediate effects on stocks, farming prices, and other economic situations shifted national-level identity for the 1930s from one of indulgence to one of despair. First reacting with shock and disbelief, then with mixed feelings of nostalgia, anger, and depression, it took the passage of a decade, the introduction of a new economic deal, and the participation in a world war before Americans could escape the economic and emotional pit of the Great Depression. During this decade, Americans faced challenges to their independence. No longer was living about living, but simply about finding the will to push on with the hope that things would get better.

That late autumn day in October, thousands of miles away from the New York Stock Exchange, Denverites went about their daily lives almost as usual. But not for long. The crash had little immediate effect on the western city, but within a few months, Denver's plummeting farm prices and skyrocketing unemployment horrified the hardy westerners.<sup>179</sup> The Great Depression was a new frontier that challenged the core beliefs of frontier ideology and what

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<sup>177</sup> *Denver Post*, 1929, 1930; *Rocky Mountain News* 1929, 1930.

<sup>178</sup> Faragher, 674.

<sup>179</sup> Leonard, 204.

Americans believed had allowed them to succeed on past frontiers: self-sufficient independence and perseverance supplemented with community support. As the Depression hit Denver, citizens lost their jobs and resorted to subsistence doles, which were direct blows to their independence. Denverites fought the idea of surrendering their “dream of a world of frontier civilization committed to the idea that anyone worth his salt could find something to do,” but job loss and low wages forced the Queen City’s citizens to accept government assistance.<sup>180</sup>

In 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt introduced the New Deal, consisting of national programs to create jobs and offer government assistance to the Americans. The program allowed Denver men find work with groups like the Civilian Conservation Corps while both men and women could find employment in Works Progress Administration programs. However, making enough money for subsistence continued to challenge many Americans, especially farmers who suffered the consequences of drought and windstorms that created the Dust Bowl. “Frontier privatism had been struck a blow by the Depression.”<sup>181</sup> Indeed, such economic and environmental conditions stole the livelihoods of strong, proud Americans in both city and country. Besides accepting and seeking government assistance, Americans relied on a survival identity to help them cope with the effects of the Great Depression.

While labor issues intensified and financial problems wore Americans’ morale thin, the movies alleviated their fears. During the 1930s, movies and movie theaters were a tool for promoting ivory tower ideals of democracy and promote a realistic yet escapist movie experience. The film and theater architecture industries used democracy—aka the appearance of equal access and appeal to all—as a survival tool. The belief was that Americans would continue to attend theaters that they felt they were welcome at, no matter their gender or social class. Race

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<sup>180</sup> Leonard, 208.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, 218.

and ethnicity were still sticking points, but citizens of various racial and ethnic backgrounds weren't usually banned from theaters, just segregated. Both theater architecture and film also reflected two sides of the moviegoing experience that was a coping mechanism: realism and escapism. In order to survive psychologically, humans need clear realism and escapism. Films and theater offered both. Realism and escapism are two sides of the same coin and a balance between the two lends to overall stability and confidence that allows for survival. For example, an individual needs to stay grounded in reality in order to face and understand the problems that threaten their stability. Similarly, an individual must have some sort of outlet, some source of hope, which falls into the category of escapism. Escapism allows humans to find hope where reality might not offer it. This chapter explores how Denverites used 1930s movie theaters and films as advertisements for democracy, escapism, and realism in order to cope with labor strife, unemployment, and challenges to their rugged individualism.

When the Depression first wracked the stock market in 1929, geographic distance insulated Denverites from the problems in the East. But economically speaking, they were much too close for comfort. Merely a few months later in 1930, the economic troubles of the rest of the nation sank their claws deep into Denver business and labor. The average annual per capita income was almost \$100 less than the national-level.<sup>182</sup> Unemployment levels swelled in 1931 and 1932. The government offered aid through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, but Colorado did not receive funds from the RFC until 1932.<sup>183</sup> In 1933, Coloradans elected Democrat Edwin C. Johnson as their new governor. Johnson believed that Colorado should be run like a business institution and declared, “we need less of government rather than more.”<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> James F. Wickens, *Colorado in the Great Depression* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), 6.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 38, 40.

Denver was clearly not immune to the troubles of the rest of the nation and Denverites faced the reality that they would have to accept government assistance if they wanted to survive.

At the same time that Johnson took the governorship with his anti-big government beliefs, Franklin D. Roosevelt took the presidency with a plan to inject government assistance into as many facets of citizens' lives as he could. Known as the New Deal, the plan established a plethora of agencies, organizations, and funds with the purpose of getting the nation back on its feet as quickly as possible. Public service projects, public welfare, old age assistance, and government funds all pushed the nation into a new era. Programs and funds reached Colorado, but sometimes too late. Other times, they didn't arrive at all. For example, a stipulation in the Colorado Constitution ruled that the state could never go into debt. However, in order to get relief funds from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the state had to raise funds to match the FERA assistance. In order to do so, the state would have to raise taxes or go into debt. Colorado could not raise the funds, so FERA relief stopped in December of 1933.<sup>185</sup> Other New Deal measures like the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Public Works Administration, and the Works Progress Administration met with general success in Colorado. These agencies provided Coloradans with jobs and some monetary assistance in return.

Beyond general relief efforts, Colorado also needed relief for farmers. Although these farmers lived outside Denver city limits, they were just as entangled in Denver business and trade as those people living and working in the city. The eastern part of the state fell victim to drought, soil erosion, and grasshopper plagues. Cattle starved and crops withered, unable to find sustenance in the parched soil. Farmers received some assistance from the Agricultural Adjustment Act, but the act dissipated by 1936. Competition for jobs in both agriculture and manufacturing was also a flash point for ethnic and racial tension. For instance, many

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<sup>185</sup> Wickens, 71-73.

immigrants worked for pittance whereas many Coloradans demanded higher wages. In a move that smacked of anti-democratic sentiment, Governor Johnson ordered the National Guard to seal the state's southern border to keep indigent people out. The blockade only lasted ten days, but indicated the level of ethnic and racial tensions present in Colorado during the 1930s. Furthermore, the drought, grasshopper plagues, and thus farm production of 1934, 1937, and 1939 scarred the state. It wasn't until wartime production began for World War II that the nation would see any economic upturn.<sup>186</sup>

The nation's shift from frontier America to modern America was almost complete. The frontier ideals of self-sufficiency and independence faded but did not disappear as the modern age swept the nation. The Great Depression wore away the frontier ideals of hard work and self-sufficiency as it forced citizens to rely on government assistance and enveloped them in an age of big business and industry. Survival was the new American identity and Americans had to sacrifice old ideals in order to continue on. During these turbulent years, Americans latched onto one of the institutions that had preserved their ideals of hard work and self-sufficiency while simultaneously embracing modern technologies and business practices. This institution also appealed to Americans of all backgrounds because it offered each American the chance to be a part of the same experience as everyone else. It was the best way to steep in nostalgia, marvel at the advancements of modern technologies and themes, and a connection with people across the nation. This institution was the production and exhibition of film. The film and movie theater architecture industries used democratic ideals to cope with the Great Depression while giving patrons the realism and escapism they needed in order to manage their own troubles. The movies and movie theaters of Depression-era Denver offered Denverites of varying social class, race or

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<sup>186</sup> Wickens.

ethnicity, religion, gender, or age access to experiences that reinforced their romanticized frontier identity while reflecting their embrace of modern technologies and business practices.

The democratic appeal of these theaters was one of the film and theater architecture industries' keys to surviving the Great Depression. Although films and theaters reflected social and ethnic divisions, they were democratic to many Americans in the sense that filmmakers, distributors, and exhibitors used the appearance of equal access to attract more patrons. This meant building theaters in downtowns as well as in neighborhoods. It also meant offering tickets at affordable prices so that working-class citizens could attend. Institutions that offered equal access to products or entertainment allowed Americans to escape some of the Great Depression's fears. For instance, the movies and movie theaters were appealing because they appeared to offer all moviegoers similar experiences. But they were even more appealing because these similar experiences embodied the need and desire for escape as well as the need and desire for realism. Despite their racial, ethnic, religious, gender, age, and social class differences, these Denverites were *all* Americans and they *all* needed coping mechanisms during the Depression. They often coped best when they went to the movies.

In 1930, Denver theater owners found themselves facing the challenges of the new decade as well. For example, Denver's Orpheum Theater and its combination program of vaudeville and movies succumbed to the coming of sound and the Great Depression. Other Denver theaters, especially those with predominantly vaudeville programs, struggled to stay open. At the Gem on Curtis Street, owner-manager Ed Mapel lowered admission prices and showed low budget films in order to stay open.<sup>187</sup> This not only meant that the theater could stay open, but also that Denverites from any economic background might still be able to afford a show. Directly across the street from the Gem, the Rivoli was not so lucky and closed in the mid-

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<sup>187</sup> Johnson, 20.

1930s.<sup>188</sup> Depression patrons couldn't afford to support as many theaters as they had in the 1920s, especially when there were several theaters right next to each other. Even so, the Plaza Theater next to the Rivoli managed to stay open, because "it was a low-priced house during the 1920s and 30s, the admission policy being anytime—any seat, 15¢."<sup>189</sup> Two other theaters, the Paramount at Sixteenth St. and Glenarm St. and the Mayan on S. Broadway, were also mainstays of the 1930s, using pricing strategies as well as new architectural designs and attractive feature films in order to keep attendance up. In a sense, staying open in the 1930s was a matter of democracy—democracy in price as well as in the moviegoing experience. At the same time that democracy was the hook, the realism and escapism of movies and movie theaters were what sustained attendance.

On the one hand, the film and theater architecture leaders needed a way to maintain attendance so that they could cope with the economic threat of the Great Depression. For example, the Radio Keith Orpheum Vaudeville Circuit took the idea of democratic appeal to heart when building and promoting a new Orpheum Theater at 1537 Welton. It was the same central business district site as the old Orpheum Theater, but with an entirely new building. Opening its doors on February 11, 1932, the RKO used the idea of democracy in the theater's location, affordability, and the experience it provided in order to ensure continued attendance during depression times.<sup>190</sup> The 1537 Welton address meant that while the Orpheum wasn't on Theater Row, it was still in the heart of Denver's central business district and therefore accessible to most Denverites. For instance, it was close to public transportation networks, a cheap and easy way for Denverites to get into town without having to pay for a cab or own a car. Cars had become more affordable since Henry Ford made production far cheaper with his use of

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid, 16.

assembly line manufacturing, but like most city downtowns, parking was fairly limited.<sup>191</sup>

However, trolleys and cable cars were a fast, cheap, and convenient way to get downtown. In fact, 1933 official map of the Denver Tramway Corporation indicated that Denverites had their choice of hopping on a tram, trolley, or motorbus to reach theaters like the New Orpheum.<sup>192</sup> The Paramount was similarly accessible by tram or trolley and while the Mayan was outside the downtown area, a tram or a trolley transported Denverites in mere minutes.<sup>193</sup> In general, these theaters were accessible to any citizen within walking distance, with a car, or with a few cents to spare for fare on the trolley, tram, or bus.

Theater corporations also advertised the Orpheum, Paramount, Mayan, and other Denver theaters as democratic in terms of affordability. While most theaters prior to 1930 offered shows at a reasonable price, prices dropped in the 1930s in order to ensure continued attendance. Most theaters across America had a policy of “any seat, any time” for prices ranging from 15 to 50 cents, varying throughout the decade. Movie theaters and movies appealed to democratic sensibilities because of the experience they offered everyone—everyone that could afford a ticket, that is.

At the Orpheum, Mayan, and Paramount, shows were reasonably priced for most citizens and did not blatantly discriminate on the basis of class or race. Of course, if the citizen was of the lowest class or of racial background that prevented him from making a living wage, he might not be able to afford a ticket. Denverites on the lowest rungs of society who couldn’t even buy a loaf of bread for nine cents certainly couldn’t afford the balcony seats at the Orpheum that were

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<sup>191</sup> Faragher.

<sup>192</sup> “Official Route Map of the Denver Tramway Corp.,” 1933, Denver Western History and Genealogy Department, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15330coll8/id/674/rec/1> (accessed April 2012).

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

going for twenty five cents.<sup>194</sup> Although ticket prices may have excluded the poorest of citizens, theater managers did their best to keep costs affordable so that anyone could attend their shows. For example, on August 30, 1930, advertisements for the Aladdin Theater and the Paramount Theater offered competitive prices. Shows from 11 to 1pm cost 20 cents (25 cents at the Paramount), from 1 to 6pm were 35 cents, and from 6pm on were 50 cents. Sundays and holidays were often slightly more expensive, but most Denver theaters advertised children's prices as "always 15 cents."<sup>195</sup> Paying these prices meant giving up from two to four loaves of bread or two to three quarts of milk in exchange for one person's entertainment.<sup>196</sup> That the Orpheum screened 118 films and the Paramount screened 160 from October 1934 to October 1936 reveals how Denverites and other Coloradoans chose escape over using money to help with living costs.<sup>197</sup> Taking these types of attendance records into consideration, Denverites as well as Americans on the whole chose to make the sacrifice on a regular basis. Food kept them alive, but movies kept them sane.

Bank nights were another way theater managers appealed to the democratic sensibility of citizens and encouraged attendance during the Depression. In Denver and other Rocky Mountain states, Frank H. "Rick" Ricketson, Jr. was the King of Bank Night, spreading the idea far and wide. Theater executive Charles U. Yaeger invented "Bank Night" in Denver and leased the idea to other theaters across the nation.<sup>198</sup> The notion was that patrons entered their name in drawings for food, cash, and other prizes, thus drawing crowds to the theater. Bank nights spread across the nation along with similar gimmicks and games such as "Dish Night."

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<sup>194</sup> Stephen Pearson, "The People History: News, Events, Technology, Prices, and Popular Culture," website <http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/1930.html> (accessed June 2012); Orpheum advertisement, *Denver Post*, 1937.

<sup>195</sup> *Denver Post*, 1930; *Rocky Mountain News*, 1930.

<sup>196</sup> "American Cultural Heritage, 1930-1939," Lonestar College, <http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade30.html> (accessed April 2012).

<sup>197</sup> Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen, eds., *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Great Britain: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 186.

<sup>198</sup> Abbott, *Colorado*, 293.

Denver's Blue Bird Theater manager Ralph J. Batschelet also conducted the "Deluxe Country Store." For the Deluxe Country Store, he gathered donations from local businesses and offered them as prize drawings. Donations usually included foodstuffs such as beef and bread, popular items during a time when prices were up and supplies were scarce. Batschelet even remembered inviting a butcher to cut beef onstage, a publicity stunt that was "always a hit."<sup>199</sup> Such popularity suggested that Denverites not only had access to the theaters, but also could pay for them. Moreover, crowds responded to the gimmicks—either out of real need or due to simple hope for a little distraction from the tugs of the Depression. Batschelet fondly remembered these nights when he could be a great showman and bring happiness to Denverites. Through low admission prices and attractive gimmicks, theaters like Denver's Blue Bird appealed to the masses and allowed anyone and everyone to attend.

During the 1930s, leaders in the film industry capitalized on the democratic appeal of cheap ticket prices and Bank Nights in order to deal with economic threats of the Great Depression. Furthermore, they inundated citizens with familiar plots and bestowed the same royal treatment upon almost all patrons. Theater owners still segregated some groups like African Americans, but these marginalized groups still got to see the same movie and be in the same theater. While the film industry had the power to extend emotional aid during a time of crisis, it did not escape economic dangers. Rather, the Depression affected it less than other industries of the time. The amount of excitement that accompanied the arrival of sound technology busted the film industry through the major shock of the Depression in 1929 and 1930 when theater attendance *increased*.<sup>200</sup> Yet by 1932, the industry's deficit was more than \$85

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<sup>199</sup> Batschelet, 15.

<sup>200</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 161.

million.<sup>201</sup> Compare this to the capital involved in the filming of *Grand Hotel*, one of 1932's biggest movies—a cool \$700,000 budget with a gross of \$1.2 million.<sup>202</sup> The film industry was in deep trouble, but it maintained American interest by helping Americans feel like *they* weren't in trouble. Warner Brothers, MGM, Columbia, and United Artists used this power to increase their revenue thus cope with the Depression. Others like Adolph Zukor at Paramount, William Fox at Fox, Louis B. Mayer at MGM, and Marcus Loew at Loew's battled one another for power, battles which continued through the 1930s and fell subject to anti-trust laws.<sup>203</sup> The common coping mechanism amongst them all was the idea of democratic appeal. However, the film and movie theater architecture industries could not escape dealings with the federal government's efforts to cope with the Depression.

In fact, battles arose between the industry and the federal government as a result of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs. First, the National Recovery Administration, a part of the New Deal's National Industrial Recovery Act (1933), dictated that the movie industry would work under a single code for both buyers and sellers. This caused an outcry from independent small-town and neighborhood theaters. The independent exhibitors fought the NRA on issues such as double features, overbuying, and gimmicks like Bank Night. The NRA code outlawed gimmicks, but allowed premium gifts like china. However, the Supreme Court declared the NRA unconstitutional in 1935, and gimmicks reappeared.<sup>204</sup> Theater financial struggles with the federal government would not end, but they would fade into the background for the rest of the 1930s as Americans focused more on their own survival rather than political and financial stability of movie theaters. Such theater practices were supposed to

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> "Grand Hotel," Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0022958/business> (accessed March 2012).

<sup>203</sup> Hampton, 242, 277.

<sup>204</sup> Sklar, 169.

attract more patrons, but federal government regulation threatened the film and theater industries' use of power in advertising schemes based on democratic appeal.

While the film and theater architecture industries' democratic advertising schemes helped industry leaders survive the Great Depression, the two elements of the moviegoing experience—realism and escapism—helped Americans cope with Depression-era woes. Realistic materials and realistic plot themes kept patrons grounded in reality, but fantastic decoration and fantastic plot themes simultaneously allowed patrons to escape from reality. Americans had to stay connected with reality in order to confront effects of the Depression, but they also needed mental and physical respite in order to keep their sanity, to revitalize their will to live. Thus, in tandem with the industry leaders' use of democracy to survive, both the realism and the escapism of the moviegoing experience were essential in helping moviegoers deal with the psychological, emotional, and physical effects of the Great Depression.

One of the main film and theater design connections to American concerns was through their effects on and reflections of moral issues. Morality was a connection to real issues that lent a sense of realism to the moviegoing experience. In 1930, the movie producers agreed to a Production Code, which Catholic layman and motion picture trade publisher Martin I. Quigley and Jesuit priest Daniel A. Lord prepared as standards for moral values in the movies. With the Depression, filmmakers fought to include crime and sex in their films because those were the subjects that drew audiences. Quigley and Father Lord made allowances within the code for depictions of immoral behavior, but only if the film balanced it with some element of good.<sup>205</sup> With a strong Catholic population, many Denverites would have appreciated these new practices.<sup>206</sup> The reaction against and regulations for immorality in film allowed filmmakers to

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid, 173-174.

<sup>206</sup> Leonard, 196.

include instances of immorality, but with oftentimes unrealistic consequences. The films that played at the Paramount, the New Orpheum, and the Mayan were often those that contained the immoral themes of sex and crime counterbalanced with an element of good.

At Denver's Ogden Theater in 1937 and likely in prior years, Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934) provided a vehicle through which Denverites could stay connected to reality, but escape into another world. The film begins with a realistic crime when a man robbed the female protagonist (played by Claudette Colbert) at a bus stop far from her home, leaving her with no money to get home. Crime was a real issue; the man who saved the day (played by Clark Gable) was the outcome of wishful thinking. Besides the crime, there were other "racy," but very real elements of the story. For instance, Clark Gable's character and Claudette Colbert's character had to spend the night in the same hotel room, a challenge to on-screen morality. Capra used the situation as a comedic plot device, tastefully writing into the script Gable's character using a sheet to separate the beds, jokingly referred to as the "walls of Jericho."<sup>207</sup> The whole story was believable, but not an everyday occurrence, thus combining realism and fantasy. Popping up at theaters around Denver in its first run, it reappeared at least once on March 3, 1937 at the Orpheum.<sup>208</sup>

Anyone who could afford a ticket could see these types of films, but what really made the experience an equalizer for audiences was the atmosphere, a mixture of realism and escapism. In Denver, newspaper reporters broadcasted their high regard for the New Orpheum's democratic design elements that contributed to moviegoing realism and escapism. The acoustics and sound system made it such that one reporter praised the theater for how "the voices and sounds from the screen carried to my ears as keenly as the calling of church bells on a cold, still night. One

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<sup>207</sup> Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert, *It Happened One Night* (1934), DVD, Directed by Frank Capra (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006).

<sup>208</sup> Advertisement, *RMN*, March 3, 1937.

will need do no ear-cupping when he sits in the last row at the Orpheum.”<sup>209</sup> With the headlines “No ‘Best’ Seats in Orpheum, All Equally Good,” another *Rocky Mountain News* reporter noted that “you may see and hear the de luxe picture presentation of the Orpheum with the same clearness and distinctness” when sitting in any of the 3,000 seats.<sup>210</sup> The unobstructed view of the screen was a feature that another reporter touted as a “great feat of engineering.” Through the use of “double sets of steel girders,” engineers eliminated the pillars that usually supported balconies and had long been hindrances to theatergoers. Moreover, “unlike the old theater, with its ‘peanut heaven’ in addition to balcony and parquet, the new showhouse will have but two floors.” One reporter said this was because “galleries are passé,” but it also put patrons on the same level, literally and figuratively.<sup>211</sup> Even the seats facilitated an equal experience for all patrons since they were uniform “in line of sight to stage, in pitch, in relative height, [and] in back support.”<sup>212</sup> Movie theaters like the New Orpheum in Denver promoted their democratic qualities, both in the accessibility of the theater as well as the experience.

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<sup>209</sup> Kelly Loudon, “Gives Denver Playhouse of Unique Beauty,” *RMN*, February 12, 1932.

<sup>210</sup> “No ‘Best’ Seats in Orpheum, All Equally Good,” *RMN*, February 12, 1932.

<sup>211</sup> “Governor to Turn First Earth for Erection of New Orpheum,” *RMN*, April 19, 1931.

<sup>212</sup> “3,000 New Orpheum Seats Designed to Give Patrons Solid Comfort,” *RMN*, February 12, 1932.



**Figure 29. The New Orpheum Theatre, 1930.**<sup>213</sup>

Besides representing and reinforcing democratic ideals, Denver films and theaters contained distinctive escapist elements in order to support Americans through the Depression. Like many other Americans, Denverites worried about their livelihoods, about their families, and about their food. Movies guaranteed a few hours to escape these realities. Sometimes theater owners used advertising schemes like that at the New Orpheum in the above photograph where

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<sup>213</sup> “Orpheum theater,” 1930, Denver Public Library Western History Photos, Call Number X-24700, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/35989/rec/5> (accessed April 2012).

an effigy of “Old Man Depression” hangs in front of a sign claiming, “Good Times Are Here!” This reveals how Denverites as early as 1930 felt the choking hold of the Great Depression. But the theater ad declared that “good times *are* here.” The theater offered audience members time to lap up the light-hearted stories of the movies and escape their own worries for at least a little while. Patrons could sink into a plush seat, get comfortable, and enter another world. This was always an attractive characteristic of going to the movies, but the Depression heightened American desire for a way to forget their worries and boost their morale. Watching a movie in a cool, beautiful theater was a way to leave the humdrum, dusty world behind. In fact, because movie theaters highlighted escapism and thus maintained popularity, they scooted through the Great Depression with a little more ease than other industries.

Denver’s Paramount, New Orpheum, and Mayan theaters exemplified the use of architecture and design to heighten the sense of film fantasies. Like 1920s theaters, these theaters contained elements that spoke to the royal, palatial experience to which managers aspired. Whether in the central business district or a Denver neighborhood, movie theaters were gateways into a fantasy world. During the 1920s, theaters were more elaborate if they were in the central business district whereas neighborhood theaters contained elements that hinted at the grandeur of downtown palaces without being pretentious. This trend continued into the late 1920s and early 1930s because theaters were one of the few places that Americans felt they could let go and relax. However, both types of theater advertised the same escapist qualities while simultaneously advertising democratic ideals. The Paramount and New Orpheum represented the architectural style of movie palaces that followed in the wake of the 1929 stock market crash while the Mayan represented the neighborhood theater designs that mimicked movie palaces on a smaller scale. All three movie theater designs fostered Americans’ desire and need for escape.

During the 1930s, architectural design in general was in flux. Architects were struggling to define American architecture. In 1929, one architect theorized that “architecture in America has not been stifled because it never so much as existed” and believed that Americans had not found a specific architectural style because America lacked the extensive historical roots of Europe.<sup>214</sup> Instead, it was a transient nation. Moreover, during the Depression there was little headway in creating new styles. Although Art Deco became popular during the 1930s, it was more popular in some areas than others and had actually begun in 1925 in France, not America. Furthermore, due to the construction booms of the 1920s, there was little reason to build something new when money was so tight. Renowned architect Le Corbusier argued that “there is no architecture *during* periods of crisis; architecture comes *after* periods of crisis.”<sup>215</sup> This was generally the case during the Great Depression, although movie theaters were the exception to the rule. In fact, Denver theater entrepreneurs and chains built the Paramount, the Mayan, the New Orpheum, and other large theaters across the nation in the years immediately following the stock market crash and created the illusion that the movie industry had escaped the effects of the Great Depression. In reality, the industry faced economic woes along with everyone else. The industry moguls just knew how to use architectural designs to keep patrons coming.

The architectural design that dominated these newer theaters hinted at an internationally popular style known as Art Deco. Following a French modern art exposition in 1925, Art Deco cascaded into American architecture. The movement synthesized modern and classical elements, attempting to revive old styles and inject them with modern attributes. This new style incorporated geometric patterns, classical figures, curving lines, arches, color, texture, light, and exotic elements. With its stylized flowers and streamline curves, it echoed the carefree attitude of

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<sup>214</sup> Paul Fechter, “The Failure of American Architecture,” *American Architecture* (November 1929).

<sup>215</sup> Le Corbusier, “Architecture, the Expression of the Materials and Methods of Our Times,” *The Architectural Record* 66 (1929).

the 1920s. But its smooth minimalism transitioned well into the simplified 1930s architecture when companies had less money to spend on building materials and embellishments. Architects revived exotic styles such as Egyptian, Mayan, Aztec, Middle East, and Oriental themes.<sup>216</sup> It was easy for the film industry to include such themes in their theaters and films to enhance escapism and ease the minds of weary Americans. It was an added benefit that the new style often required less ornamentation and thus less money. However, this sparseness did not always translate to movie theater design. Some movie theater architects chose to use Art Deco themes on a grand scale, including geometric feathers, angular patterns, and curving leaf like molds to compliment impressive façades and expansive auditoriums as in the 1930-31 Western Theatre in Los Angeles, California (see Figure 2). In some of these theaters, layers of pattern and texture echoed the ornate decorative tendencies of Victorian homes rather than the sparseness of Art Deco, perhaps a rejection of the modern or an attempt to mesh the old with the new.

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<sup>216</sup> Valentine, 39.



**Figure 30. Wilton Theater, Los Angeles, California, estb. 1930-31. This theater is a green-gilded goddess with the same type of sunburst ceiling element seen in other Art Deco theaters. Note the layering of geometric patterns and colors.<sup>217</sup>**

Even so, the film industry suffered some of the economic tightening effects of the Great Depression. More importantly, the industry was one of the few sources of emotional relief and morale for the American people. Le Corbusier noted that a general rule of architecture was “to transport us to an inspired state and thus to bring us enjoyment,” a statement dripping with 1930s escapist sentiment. He also noted a trend toward Art Deco shapes and lines, describing the new style where “geometry is supreme. Precision is everywhere. The right angle prevails. There no

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<sup>217</sup> 2 Down Front website, <http://www.2downfront.com/venues/the%20wilton.htm> (accessed April 2012); Carla Breeze, *American Art Deco: Architecture and Regionalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 250.

longer exists any object that does not tend to severity.”<sup>218</sup> These elements crept into the designs of Denver theaters. The geometric friezes along the top of the Mayan’s façade and the Paramount’s Gothic cathedral-like exterior, ornate moldings with leaf, rosette, and feather motifs reaching toward the sky were a distinct nod to the Art Deco fusion of classical and modern themes.<sup>219</sup> At the New Orpheum, vertical lines on the stone exterior and the zig zagging lines of the marquee were also distinctively Art Deco.<sup>220</sup> Art Deco broke from the overstated styles of the earlier 1900s. The clean lines and minimal embellishment liberated structures from the plaster, stone, and metal encrusted structures of the 1920s, a liberation that echoed 1930s escapism.

On the other hand, the new style tied directly to the Depression because it was a style that used fewer materials and took fewer risks with design, whether intentional or not. In a 1933 article for *The Nation*, architect Talbot Faulkner Hamlin observed that “‘playing safe’ in design seems increasingly a phenomenon of the Depression.”<sup>221</sup> Rather than being a new architectural design style, perhaps it was the desire to play it safe and to use fewer materials that pushed Art Deco into the forefront of architectural design in the 1930s.

The Mayan’s architecture in particular displayed foreign influences that fostered a sense of escape to a far off land. Built originally as the Queen Theater in 1915, the building underwent modifications in the 1930s that modernized the marquee and attached Mayan-influenced elements to the façade, including geometric patterns and a Mayan figure, the inspiration for the theater’s new name. The Mayan figure watched over all who entered from his perch at the top of

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<sup>218</sup> Le Corbusier, “Architecture, the Expression of the Materials and Methods of Our Times.”

<sup>219</sup> “Thousands Attend Paramount Opening, Brilliant Festival Attracts Big Crowd to Palatial House,” *Denver Post*, August 30, 1930.

<sup>220</sup> “Orpheum theater,” 1930, Denver Public Library Western History Photos, Call Number X-24700, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/35989/rec/5> (accessed April 2012).

<sup>221</sup> Talbot Faulkner Hamlin, “The Architect and the Depression,” *The Nation* 137 (August 1933), 153.

the marquee. The interior sported colorful walls and terra cotta fixtures and tile straight from the exotic revival style.<sup>222</sup>



**Figure 31. The Mayan Theater, Denver, Colorado, November 1930. Note the plainness of the façade, but the intricate detail on features like the space behind the vertical sign.<sup>223</sup>**

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<sup>222</sup> Thomas J. Noel, *Denver Landmark and Historic Districts* (Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1996), 117.; *Denver Householders' Directory, Volume VI, 1930*, 28; "Denver Theaters Fox Mayan," 1930, DPL Western History Photos, Call Number X-24681, <http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?10024681+X-24681> (accessed March 2012).

Looking at the exterior of the Mayan today, one would be hard-pressed to find any difference between it and the 1930s version.

<sup>223</sup> "Mayan Theater," November 1930, Denver Public Library Western History Photos, Call Number X-24681, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/35958/rec/5> (accessed April 2012).

The Mayan wasn't the only theater in Denver to exploit the meshing of 1920s grandeur with 1930s streamlining and promises of regulated air, cushioned seats, an open auditorium with clean lines, and an uplifting film. With a style "devoid of architectural frenzy or gargoyles," the New Orpheum boasted a "spacious grand foyer, with its 40-foot ceiling, simple in design but majestic because of this simplicity, is trimmed in silver color, while the grand staircase leading to the balcony floors from this lobby strikingly presents the silver theme of the theater."<sup>224</sup>

Imagine walking into this theater on a bright afternoon in the middle of summer, a breath of cool air stealing across your skin, an atmosphere of hushed reverence, and the soothing silver lines of stair railings and the balcony's Juliet openings. This was another world, far from the hustle and bustle of the city or the dirt and grim of hard labor. Life here was the stuff of dreams. Music and laughter bubbled from the screen. This was the sanctuary of nymphs and fairies, the all-American girl and the boy next door, the regal queen and the charismatic rogue, the romantic historical fiction and the swift adventures of pirates or cowboys. This was escapism at its finest.

This escapist appeal was a strong attraction in other Denver theaters as well. In the 1930s, a *Rocky Mountain News* article proclaimed, "New Orpheum Makes Weather," that "Air Washed and Tempered to Proper Degree Before Drawn into Theater."<sup>225</sup> Another reporter noted that the theater contained the "Finest Technical Equipment Matched by Luxurious Comfort of Furnishings."<sup>226</sup> The New Orpheum was a wonderland of comfort and dazzling light. "Long lances of light shot along both sidewalls from floor to ceiling. They changed colors constantly— ambers, oranges, the blue of a Gershwin rhapsody." It was a palace with the tapestries and cushioned seats like the 1920s palaces, but "the channels for the indirect, diffused, reflector lighting system in the theater accentuate[d]" "the modern idea of straight, swift lines in

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<sup>224</sup> "Straight Lines Mark the Orpheum," *RMN*, February 12, 1932.

<sup>225</sup> "New Orpheum Makes Weather," *RMN*, February 12, 1932.

<sup>226</sup> Kelly Loudon, "Gives Denver Playhouse of Unique Beauty," *RMN*, February 12, 1932.

architecture predominates throughout the new Orpheum Theater.”<sup>227</sup> The indirect light framed multi-colored, “specially designed and treated tapestries” of “russet and gold, bearing the designs of the leaves of a walnut tree harmonize with the decorative motif.”<sup>228</sup> This theater was “the most modern theater in America,” designed “with the peculiar acoustical qualities of sound or talking pictures in mind” and fifth in the United States to have a the latest controls for electric lights known as a thyatron.<sup>229</sup>

Several reporters were particularly impressed with the theater’s seats. One reporter noted that, “the seats themselves are something to talk about. They are very richly upholstered, and have spring seats and backs” as well as “widely spaced so that no matter how long your legs are, you can stretch out in the utmost comfort.”<sup>230</sup> Another ensured readers that the seats were a very important aspect of the theater because they “received the careful thought, not only of the architects, builders and management, but of experts with the nation-wide experience and knowledge of seating from a scientific standpoint” and how “the hinges on each of the 3,000 seats are absolutely noiseless and free-working, permitting free passage to and from the aisles, and ease in arising and in being seated. No slam or bump occurs when the late comer arrives.”<sup>231</sup> The seats in the New Orpheum were a little more advanced than those in theaters from prior years. For example, the American Seating Company built the seats used in the Aladdin Theater, which were of the “Bodiform” variety like the reproduction pictured below (see Figure 5). Such seats allowed patrons a level of comfort, which in turn set their minds at ease as they settled in for show time.

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<sup>227</sup> “Straight Lines Mark the Orpheum,” *RMN*, February 12, 1932.

<sup>228</sup> Loudon, “Gives Denver Playhouse of Unique Beauty”; “Orpheum Beats Acoustics Bogy,” *RMN*, February 12, 1932.

<sup>229</sup> Frances Melrose, “Orpheum Radiated Elegance,” *RMN*, June 5, 1974; “Orpheum Offers Fine Acoustics,” *RMN*, February 12, 1932.

<sup>230</sup> “No ‘Best’ Seats in Orpheum, All Equally Good,” *RMN*, February 12, 1932.

<sup>231</sup> “3,000 New Orpheum Seats Designed to Give Patrons Solid Comfort,” *RMN*, February 12, 1932.



**Figure 32. Close up of interior photograph for Paramount Theater, c. 1920 to 1930. The seats have soft fabric and cushioning.<sup>232</sup>**

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<sup>232</sup> “Paramount Theatre Denver, Colorado,” between 1920 and 1930?, Denver Public Library Western History Photos, Denver, Colorado, Call Number X-24718, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/36262/rec/107> (accessed May 2012).



**Figure 33. Advertisement for twenty-first century reproduction of American Seating Company’s “Bodiform” theater seat design that featured cushioning on the seat and a small amount of cushioning on the back.<sup>233</sup>**

Besides the New Orpheum and the Mayan theaters, Denver’s Paramount offered Denverites a truly cosmopolitan experience and escape into a fantasy world. The Paramount was part of the Publix Corporation theater chain and occupied a plot directly across the street from Publix’s other Denver theater, the Denver Theatre (1927). The Denver Theatre was a palatial magnate, a “movie cathedral” complete with a crystal chandelier in the seventy by fifty foot, five

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<sup>233</sup> “Majestic” theater seat, American Seating Company website, [http://americanseating.com/architectural/uploads/resources/Majestic\\_1.pdf](http://americanseating.com/architectural/uploads/resources/Majestic_1.pdf) (accessed May 2012).

stories high recessed dome and mirrored lobby laced with intricate grillwork and pilasters.<sup>234</sup> Publix built the Denver Theatre at the height of the nation's movie palace construction. Two years later, the company enlisted local architect Temple H. Buell to draw up plans for the Paramount Theater. With the intent to create a less pretentious exhibition space, the leaders of Publix asked for a slightly smaller, slightly more economical theater. Although these Publix leaders wanted a less pretentious theater than the Denver Theatre, Buell's brainchild dazzled Denverites and held its own across the street from the movie cathedral. The Paramount Theater was the Depression-era version of a movie palace, still beautiful, still an impressive sight, and, most of all, still offering a much needed and affordable way to escape the real world.

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<sup>234</sup> Batschelet, 123.



**Figure 34. Denver Theater lobby, c. 1920 to 1930. This was one of the most elaborately decorated theaters in Denver. The iron-heavy chandeliers, mirrored walls, and marbled columns all evoke the grandeur of a European palace. The title of the photograph calls it a “grand foyer.”<sup>235</sup>**

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<sup>235</sup> “Grand foyer—as it looked when the theater first opened,” between 1920 and 1930?, Denver Public Library Western History Photos, Denver, Colorado, Call Number X-24613, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/36359/rec/31> (accessed April 2012).



**Figure 35. Denver Theater, 1934. Indicates opening night crowds for films with popular stars like Greta Garbo.<sup>236</sup>**

With such competition in mind, Temple H. Buell embarked on creating one of the last great motion picture palaces of Denver, the crown jewel of the Queen City's theaters. Although theaters along Curtis Street such as the New Victory Theatre, the America Theatre, the Rialto Theatre, and the Tabor Theatre dominated the movie and vaudeville scene, Publix's two Denver

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<sup>236</sup> "Calif. St. studios opening," 1934, Denver Public Library Western History Photos, Denver, Colorado, Call Number X-24602, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/36383/rec/36> (accessed April 2012).

theaters took precedence in imitation of New York's and Hollywood's majestic motion picture theaters. The Paramount was most revealing about theater architecture during the aftermath of the stock market crash. Housed in A. Morris Stuckert's 1891 Kittredge building, the Paramount Theatre was a product of late 1920s, early 1930s sentiment. In 1929, the Publix Theater Company commissioned Buell to design the theater. His design epitomized Art Deco style in its use of classical-inspired carvings on the façade, a mirrored lobby housing filigreed banisters on the prominent staircase, and an auditorium blending geometric lines and leafy patterns on its walls, carpet, and seats.



**Figure 36. Paramount Theater, c. 1930 to 1940. The entire building housed the theater as well as offices, hidden behind the smooth, stark white Art Deco façade.<sup>237</sup>**

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<sup>237</sup> "Paramount Theater Building," between 1930 and 1940?, Denver Public Library Western History Photos, Denver, Colorado, Call Number Rh-12, <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/17128/rec/31> (accessed April 2012).

People flocked to opening day. Since Publix wanted the theater to fit into an existing building, the design dealt with architectural restraints of the lot as well as the existing architecture of the main building. And, it needed to attract citizens with a new and impressive façade. In one architectural drawing, Buell noted to “remove [the] present store front.” Other sheets of the building plans documented a design much in line with general theater architecture ideology of the late 1920s. In drawings from late 1929, Buell noted his desire to include a “terrazzo pattern in five colors as selected by the architect” for the floor of the lobby and bordered with marble, along with mirrors on the doors and terra cotta and marble on the exterior. Such authentic materials lent to the overall feeling of fantasy. It was “a theater of an entirely new type to Denver.” The lavish design generated a sense of opulence and grandeur, the result of an anticipated \$450,000 budget for building and grand characteristics in Buell’s original drawings, such as the planned 2,024 seats. *The Denver Post* documented opening night of the theater, hyping its seating for 2,400, its \$1.25 million budget, and its cameras recording the attendees.<sup>238</sup>

With its lavish style and prominent publicity, the Paramount possessed the means to draw from an expanded class base for its audiences. Working- and middle-class citizens alike attended, but once the initial hype receded, the working-class likely attended the downtown palace on occasion, preferring to avoid the hassle of going downtown except when they wanted

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<sup>238</sup> “Paramount Theater Building”, 1930, DPL Western History Photos, Call Number Rh-12, <http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?00185012+Rh-12> (accessed March 2012); *Architectural and Historical Survey of Downtown Denver, Survey Forms, January 1984, Central Business District: West Colfax Avenue, 12<sup>th</sup> Street, 13<sup>th</sup> Street, 14<sup>th</sup> Street, 15<sup>th</sup> Street, 16<sup>th</sup> Street*. Vol. I, January 1984; City and County of Denver, “Real Property Records,” Denver Government Website. <http://www.denvergov.org/tabid/37889/Default.aspx?link=http://www.denvergov.org/apps/realpropertyapplication/realproperty.asp&title=Real%20Property> (accessed March 2012); Paramount Theater architectural drawing, 16<sup>th</sup> and Glenarm Street, Denver, Colorado, Tube no.127A, Series1 Architectural Drawings—Commercial Buildings, Temple Hoyne Buell Architectural Records, DPL Western History/Genealogy Department, Denver, Colorado; “Thousands Attend Paramount Opening, Brilliant Festival Attracts Big Crowd to Palatial House,” *Denver Post*, August 30, 1930; “Paramount First-Nighters to See Selves in Motion Picture,” *Paramount Parade*, February 3, 1979.

an extra special night on the town.<sup>239</sup> Nevertheless, it initially attracted people in droves, the appeal stemming principally from the materials used in construction. To delineate the theater from the rest of the Kittredge building, Buell faced the new theater portion of the building with glazed white terra cotta and black marble to contrast the stone of the Kittredge building.<sup>240</sup> The exterior left passersby in awe, but the show didn't truly begin until they entered inside.

It was within these inner recesses that transformed citizens into royalty. Marble, mirrors, murals, and models of female characters adorned the lobby and auditorium. One journalist for *The Rocky Mountain News* found Vincent Mondo's artwork throughout the theater especially significant. He noted that, "one of the unusual things in the decoration is that there is little or no bas-relief work. The walls themselves depend for ornamentation not on elaborate plaster and border work, but on fantastic colors and designs." This journalist also remarked that, "When Denver women walk into the New Paramount Theatre...they will stare enviously at the great painted tapestries of Burgundy-colored moiré that cover the walls."<sup>241</sup> These were authentic materials and decoration that intensified the believability of this fantasy world.

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<sup>239</sup> Cohen.

<sup>240</sup> "Thousands Attend Paramount Opening, Brilliant Festival Attracts Big Crowd to Palatial House," *Denver Post*, August 30, 1930.

<sup>241</sup> "Tapestries and Silk Murals Beautify Theater's Interior," *Rocky Mountain News*, August 29, 1938; "Paramount Theater," 1930, Denver Public Library Western History Photos, Call Number X-24715, <http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?10024715+X-24715> (accessed March 2012).



**Figure 37. Paramount Theater interior with decorative tapestries and Art Deco detailing, c. 1920 to 1930.<sup>242</sup>**

The leaf, fern, and rosette motifs from the façade continued into the lobby, dominating the “plaster cast, gilded moldings of silver, gold, and copper.” The ornate décor and the sweeping staircase with floral ironwork railings captivated theatergoers. A fountain greeted those who ascended the stairs. Upon entering the auditorium, patrons’ breath surely caught in their throats.

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<sup>242</sup> “Paramount Theater,” 1930, Denver Public Library Western History Photos, Call Number X-24715, <http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?10024715+X-24715> (accessed March 2012).



**Figure 38. Paramount Theater interior with sunburst ceiling, silk tapestries, and one large balcony.**<sup>243</sup>

Meticulously painted columns, dramatic silver Indian figures, Mondo's sizeable silk tapestries, and intricate stenciling set off by the glow of pillared Art Deco house lights all created the ultimate movie-going experience. A sunburst design sparked the ceiling, and a feathered, red-glass-encrusted chandelier swept down from the center. Hues of gold and red, together with earthy greens, yellows, oranges, and a calming blue on the ceiling created a luxurious, but never pompous atmosphere. Clearly the Paramount aimed to please.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> "Paramount Theater," Paramount Theater website, <http://www.paramountdenver.com/photos/paramount-theatre> (accessed April 2012).

<sup>244</sup> Tamra Ohan, "National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, Paramount Theater, Description of Physical Appearance," "Compass: Colorado's On-line Cultural Resource Database," Colorado Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Colorado Historical Society, [http://www.coloradohistory-oahp.org/compass/OAHP/M\\_Search\\_c.asp](http://www.coloradohistory-oahp.org/compass/OAHP/M_Search_c.asp) (accessed March 2012); DPL Western History Photos, Call Numbers X-24710, X-22421, Z-318, X-24720, X-24719, X-24718, X-24717, X-24716, X-24715, X-24714, X-24711, [http://photoswest.org:8080/cgi-bin/cw\\_cgi?getBasicTerms+22390](http://photoswest.org:8080/cgi-bin/cw_cgi?getBasicTerms+22390) (accessed March 2012).

And please the crowd it did. Not only aesthetic features, but also technical innovations, including “indirect lighting, a neon marquee, [a] centralized vacuum system, heating and ammonia air conditioning” all contributed to a more comfortable movie-going experience so that patrons wanted to return. Air conditioning was an essential part of theater design in the late 1920s and early 1930s, often one of the main advertising features. In fact, people responded quite favorably to the “marvel of manufactured Weather.” They could enjoy their film in the utmost comfort, not bothered by excessive heat generated by machinery and so many bodies in one room. With such attributes, the Paramount generated interest despite the choice of numerous theaters in Denver. It did not disappoint. This culmination of the Denver motion picture theater era represented a far cry from the working-class nickelodeons that had promoted a relaxed “at home” feeling. In fact, it “elicited admiring gasps from the milling thousands.”<sup>245</sup>

Yet a world of fantasy can only hold audience attention for so long. There has to be a sense of realism, even in a world of fantasy. Fantasy must be believable on some level. A theater built with authentic materials and real decorations augmented the feeling of royalty. The costumes and sets of the films had to look authentic or they would lessen the depth to which viewers could dive into the fantasy world. If elements of a film don’t look authentic, viewers are less immersed in the fantasy. For the film industry, this meant realism in the materials used to lend authenticity to the royal or exotic atmosphere as well as realism in the movies they screened. Programs at Denver theaters ran the gamut from syrupy sweet musical escapism to nitty gritty social realism. But both ends of the spectrum satisfied audience tastes. Even though most Americans thought of the movies as a way to escape, they also supported films containing more realistic stories that hit closer to their struggles with jobs and basic survival. Moreover,

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<sup>245</sup> Ohan; Valentine, 69; “Thousands Attend Paramount Opening, Brilliant Festival Attracts Big Crowd to Palatial House,” *Denver Post*, August 30, 1930; William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 302-303.

architects intended their designs, while fantastic and rich, to be believable, to make patrons feel as though they were really in a palace. Even still, the most realistic features often emitted from the screen. The theater's architectural features and décor set the mood, creating a receptive mindset in patrons. Without the comfort and awe that the architectural features and décor created, patrons would have been far less at ease and far less likely to buy into the stories on the screen.

For example, as the lights darkened in the auditorium at the Paramount Theater, audience members turned their gazes to the glowing screen. They were comfortable in cushy, plush seats, well within sight of the screen and not distracted by the temperature of the room or an unforgiving seat. Furthermore, movies contained elements of realism that pulled audience members into the story and put them into the protagonist's shoes. There was an overwhelming sense of "the disillusionment and bewilderment of depression, and the desire to take them, if possible, lightly."<sup>246</sup> Patrons wanted escape, but they had to stay rooted in reality in order to manage the stresses of economic depression. In 1939, historian Frederick Allen reflected, "it is almost as if the people of the United States had walked backward into the Depression, holding for dear life to the customs and ideals and assumptions of the time that was gone, even while these were one by one slipping out of reach; and then, in 1933, had given up their vain effort, turned about, and walked face-forward into the new world of the nineteen-thirties."<sup>247</sup> Americans recognized that they had to face the realities of the Depression in order to conquer it. But they also recognized that indulging in the escape of the movies would help keep their courage and fighting spirits up. In fact, as much as fantasy was an element of the film and theater architecture of the 1930s, it was realism that gave them staying power.

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<sup>246</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday: The Nineteen-Thirties in America, September 3, 1929- September 3, 1939* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), 57.

<sup>247</sup> Allen, *Since Yesterday*, 129.

For movie theaters like the Paramount, the Mayan, and the New Orpheum, the sense of authenticity stemmed from both the materials used and the atmosphere they created. Architects spared no expense with these theaters despite the Depression's hold on funds. Indeed, the film industry was one of the few industries that seemed to be surviving the Depression in spite of its growing deficit. Theaters were just another way to encourage continued patronage. For instance, the architects of the New Orpheum included incredibly deep foundational supports as part of the design. One *Rocky Mountain News* reporter noted that, "although there was no fear of earthquakes for Denver, the builders have not overlooked such a possibility."<sup>248</sup> Apparently, the architects found it more important to include such extensive—and expensive—precautions. Other materials contributed to the authentic feel of luxury at the New Orpheum such as the cool, clean Colorado marble as the bases for the walls and the large walnut panels lining the auditorium.<sup>249</sup> Using Colorado marble was not only a way to lend authenticity to the theater's royal atmosphere, but also a means of cutting costs. Denver Mayor George M. Begole admired the New Orpheum because "thru [RKO's] adherence to the policy of local employment, you have aided materially in preventing our unemployment problem from becoming greater."<sup>250</sup> RKO could justify its Depression-era construction on the basis of providing jobs. The use of authentic and local materials under local labor contributed to the realism of the new theater as well as reflected the employment concerns of the time.

Besides the authenticity of the materials, improvements in sound technology contributed to the sense of realism in theaters. Theaters used a variety of designs, decorations, and building materials to contend with the acoustical challenges of projecting recorded sound. At the New Orpheum "subtle sound-carrying curves...introduced in carefully selected spots [carried] the

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<sup>248</sup> "...Against Earth Shocks," *RMN*, February 12, 1932.

<sup>249</sup> "Orpheum Beats Acoustics Bogy," *RMN*, February 12, 1932.

<sup>250</sup> "600 Civic Leaders View Interior of New Orpheum," *RMN*, January 12, 1932.

sound waves to the rear of the huge auditorium.”<sup>251</sup> At the Paramount, heavy tapestries absorbed some of the echoes of the sound system while also nodding to the heavy tapestries that occupied castle and palace walls, yet another nod to royalty. It was less the “canned” sound of the earliest sound systems and a more sophisticated way of incorporating acoustics into theater design that could accommodate and augment 1930s sound technology.

While the authentic materials and improvements in technology created realistic atmospheres that didn’t detract from the film, their most important purpose was in setting the stage for the films even before the black and white images flickered onto the screen. The films of the 1930s were not just pure fantasy, but also in tune with social realities. Due to this range of subject matter, patrons could indulge their escapist desires or recognize the all-too-familiar woes underlying the light-hearted attitude of a comedy or musical.

One of the greatest directors to make realism a primary focus of his films was Frank Capra. Capra’s films were popular across America and regularly appeared at Denver theaters. These films would also likely have appealed to Denverites since they focused on the stories of hard-working, small town characters. The heroes of Capra’s stories were always the underdogs. Capra worked under the belief that “if the world could be run according to the average man’s ideals, it would be Utopia” and that “the average man is a great guy.”<sup>252</sup> Denver was no New York City, Chicago, or Los Angeles, but it was a substantial city built on the hard work of pioneers. It was full of “the average man.” Although the Depression was a hard blow to American pride, Capra’s movies helped them realize that they were average guys, that they weren’t alone, and that they could overcome hardship. Capra’s social realism saturated the screen just as the New Deal seeped into the furthest depths of the nation. His most popular films

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<sup>251</sup> “Orpheum Offers Fine Acoustics,” *RMN*, February 12, 1932.

<sup>252</sup> Margaret Case Harriman, “Mr. and Mrs. Capra,” *Ladies Home Journal* 58 (April 1941).

corresponded with the introduction and implementation of the New Deal from 1933 to 1936 along with several films at the end of the decade that continued to bolster American morale. At big movie palaces and neighborhood theaters alike, these films and other social realism films like them reflected America's way of dealing with social struggles.

Most of Capra's films during the 1930s, like *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), depicted social issues in an entertaining manner. There is a reality that distinguishes most of Capra's pictures because he worked tirelessly and "work[ed] his actors as hard, to achieve that reality."<sup>253</sup> More importantly, the average Joes in Capra's films lured citizens of both town and country. These characters "encourage[d] the average people in a movie theater to identify themselves with the characters on the screen."<sup>254</sup> Denverites connected especially well with small town, heart-of-gold type characters like Longfellow Deeds.

For instance, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* told the story of a young man from a small town who inherited a fortune, which sucked him into the world of greedy lawyers and businessmen. He eventually decided to use the money to buy land and give it out for free to farmers if they worked the land for several years, an idea that took inspiration from the Homestead Act of 1862. This story's small town protagonist played on the sentimentality and sympathy of audiences, especially those in cities like Denver where farmers came to get a taste of city life or find a job.

The film was particularly important to Denverites and their long-held frontier ideals of self-sufficient independence, hard work, and community. All of these elements emerged in *Mr. Deeds*. Furthermore, the film stemmed from the film industry, revealing that the industry itself recognized national-scale concerns about capitalism in the 1930s. Modern capitalism had become so strong that it challenged the basic tenets of frontier identity and as residents of a

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

largely farm-based economy, Denverites struggled with the Depression's challenge to their independence. They had to ask the government for help, which dethroned their romanticized views of themselves as hardy pioneers of the western frontier. In the film, Mr. Deeds is one of the people. Although he came from a stable background, he was willing to reach out to his fellow men to provide for them.

In one particularly moving scene, a worn farmer comes to visit Mr. Deeds' at the large house he had inherited from his uncle. The farmer's face is drawn and desperate. As he shouts at Mr. Deeds and accuses the small town hero of hoarding his money while so many farmers were starving, he pulls a gun. His eyes glaze over as he continues babbling about the injustice of unbalanced incomes and firmly stating, "A job, that's all I want!" Awareness suddenly crosses his face and he breaks down, tossing the gun away as he weeps. He has a family and his kids are starving. His was the story of millions. Many Denver theatergoers were farmers and easily recognized their own story transpiring on the screen.

Mr. Deeds sits the farmer down at his dinner table and has servants bring the man piles of food. The farmer eats with ravenous enthusiasm, pausing momentarily to ask if he can take some home for his family. Mr. Deeds nods with a distracted smile. He's wondering how to help this man, if he can make a dent in the farming plight of American. And then the idea dawns on him: use the \$20 million to buy land and sign it off to farmers who were willing to work the land. Like the 1862 Homestead Act, Mr. Deeds' project injected the farming community with land to grow crops on. It allowed farmers to build their own lives and become self-sufficient once more. The basic frontier ideals lived on.

Besides films with elements of social realism as well as elements of fantasy and happy endings, the film industry and the federal government pursued documentary filmmaking. Makers

of these films claimed to accurately document social events or historical developments such as labor strikes, agricultural developments, speeches of important dignitaries, etc. Like newsreels, but longer, these films were about real life situations and events. But astute viewers would recognize that the director's editing and selection of detail influenced how audience's perceived the subject. These were important films in providing visual documentation, but they often possessed an agenda. For example, in *Our Daily Bread* (1934), director King Vidor portrayed the story of suffering farmers and individuals from the Dust Bowl who united together and formed a commune. The commune was a successful endeavor, reflecting Vidor's intent to advise viewers. It was a very realistic film in subject matter and in scenery, but Vidor certainly had an agenda.

Other films were more thoroughly documentary, but still biased. The federal government hoped to build on the educational potential of films and produced features such as *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936). This film was only 25 minutes long, but felt longer due to its grave subject. It explained the environmental causes of the Dust Bowl with accompanying long shots of devastated land. Hopelessness dominated the movie's concluding shot of the dry, cracked land. The last line, "All they ask is a chance to start over..." left viewers searching for a solution. Rather than offering hope, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* evoked national attention to push for government action in the Great Plains. By playing the film in commercial theaters the government managed to raise awareness for the issues confronting the Great Plains.<sup>255</sup> Clearly the government had an agenda. Even documentary films weren't pure of fantasy.

Films like *The Plow That Broke The Plains* also would have resonated with Denverites in particular. The thirsty land they saw on the screen was the same land they saw as soon as they left city limits. The film was also an instance of western frontier ideals permeating the national-

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<sup>255</sup> Tino Balio, *History of the American Cinema*, vol. 5, *Grand Design, Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*, rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 366.

scale identity, just like in *Mr. Deeds*. What had happened to the independence and self-sufficiency that Americans had valued so much each time they faced the challenge of a new frontier? The 1930s forced Americans to reevaluate how to maintain such ideals when they lost basic ingredients in creating and keeping a firm, self-sufficient community. But one of the other ideals, the ideal of perseverance, was also an element in *Mr. Deeds* and *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. Such films recognized the need for government and community aid, but also pushed Americans to press on and face the challenge with determination. The Depression-era was a new frontier, but with help from the government, Americans could regain the most basic elements of frontier ideology and apply them to a modern world.

Documentary and social realism films must have touched a chord with Denverites because citizens revived Denver and Colorado's old ties to the filmmaking industry. Like the Selig Polyscope Company of the 1910s, Denver schools in the 1930s tackled the task of making their own films. While home movies were not unusual across the nation, Denverites caught the eye of national publications due to how filmmaking had become a part of Denver schools' curriculum. Teachers used *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and another government documentary, *The River* (1938), to educate high school students in documentary methods. By 1941, Denver high school students used filmmaking in their classes to learn about researching and creating a permanent record that teachers stressed should be accurate. Not only did students learn about film and whatever social issue they were documenting, but also about interacting with professionals and how to research. In fact, a *Reader's Digest* version of the article noted that, "Education via the self-made cinema is in the Denver curriculum to stay. Pupils learn better and what they learn stays with them longer."<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Edith M. Stern, "These Students Make Their Own Movies," *The Reader's Digest* 38 (April 1941), 72.



**Figure 39. Article in Popular Science and Reader's Digest, 1941. Describes how students in Denver high schools used film to document and learn about their community.<sup>257</sup>**

After all these years—since the beginning of dedicated filmmaking from the Selig Company to Denver's high school students—Denverites had never let go of their ties to the film and movie theater industries. The various characteristics of the Depression such as democracy, escapism, and realism, all came to a pinnacle in the world of film and theater architecture. One field could not have survived the Depression without the other. They both played on the transient nature of the nation and soothed the weary, concerned citizens of cities like Denver. Both Denver

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

and the film industry survived the Great Depression, but not without troubles of their own.

Although the film industry advertised escape, the business itself could not escape the clutches of the Depression. Instead, the film and theater architecture industries used democratic ideals to attract patrons and thus endure the Depression. Simultaneously, patrons depended on the escapist and realistic elements of film and architecture to enhance their own endurance. It's a good thing the 1930s forced Americans to develop their endurance identity, because they would need it as they entered a second world war.

## CONCLUSION

When Denverites went to the movies from 1900 to 1940, they performed their ideas about what it meant to be “American” and what it meant to be a citizen of Denver. Before the turn of the century, the main identity that Americans latched onto was frontier identity. Although frontier identity dated back to the initial Euro-American settlement of North America, its values of hard work and self-sufficiency continued to inform American expansion until the late nineteenth century. Then, Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill Cody declared the frontier closed. Yet, frontier attitudes continued well into the future. The North American settlement frontier may have closed, but there were many other frontiers to come and Americans had to find a new way of organizing their world. No longer were they pioneers in new land, but pioneers in a modern world based on technology and efficiency. This modern identity was not a strictly new identity and could in fact be called “new frontier” identity or perhaps even “modern frontier” identity since it contained elements of frontier identity but with some additions. Moreover, the shift to modern identity was not a dramatic, clean-cut change from old frontier identity. Identity shifts rarely are. Instead, frontier identity faded into modern identity, like the colors that run from dark to light in a watercolor painting. The color is still there, but less dominant. Similarly, the hard work and self-sufficiency of frontier identity were still there, but less dominant. After fading through innovation, decadence, and endurance, the frontier identity gave way to the modern identity. The physical environments and cultural elements of Americans involved in the innovative, decadent, and enduring identities documented the gradients of the identity shift, especially in artifacts like movie theaters and movies.

While many historians have broached the topics of movie theater history, film history, and American identity history, they have not tied all three together in one concise study. This

work is the first to unearth the story of Denver film and movie theaters from 1900 to 1940 and describe how they embodied the transformation of American identity. The three historiographies of movie theater design history, film history, and American identity history are deeply intertwined, as are most historiographies since history contains innumerable threads. Examining all three on a local level illuminates how Americans dealt with the challenge to their beloved frontier identity and what types of identities emerged as a result. Future works in these historiographies might lean more on one or another, but they will need to address the post-WWII era of movie theaters and film as a time when the nation more fully identified with a modern attitude. Future works might also seek to define new identities or determine whether the United States relies on a modern identity in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, future works will need to address the shift in movie theaters and film under the guise of this new identity. How might these studies explain the more than fifty years phase of multiplex theaters in comparison to the fifteen to twenty year reign of movie palaces and neighborhood houses of prewar years? How do films of the latter half of the twentieth century reveal issues of American identity? The answers to these questions and more would be fruitful not only for the histories of film, movie theater architecture, and American identity, but for guiding future Americans in making sense of their world.

Movies and movie theaters from 1900 to 1940 were results of a society in flux and played two roles in society: dissemination of ideas and response to ideas. Movies and movie theaters might have looked a certain way, might have contained certain characteristics that local citizens accepted, but they were subject to the whims of those citizens as well. For instance, citizens responded well to the Aladdin Theater and continued to attend the theater. But some, like the Jewish population that challenged the showing of *The King of Kings*, were also sure to exert

influence on the types of films shown there. The formation of identity as seen through cultural artifacts like movies and movie theaters is clearly not determined only by national-level ideas, but also by the local-level groups that contribute to the national-level identity.

This bottom-up approach to formation of identity does not trump the top-down approach, but complicates the story so that we might understand how people determined which national-level ideas to keep and which local-level ideas to maintain. Denver's movies and movie theaters are an effective window into these attitudes since they were the product of not only the national versus local battle, but also the frontier versus modern battle. As part of the Old West, Denverites built their city on hard work. Many early Denverites were pioneers who had to figure out how to do things on their own. Once the city was on its feet, Denverites adopted national-level ideas that prefigured the abundant organization and standardization of post-WWII modern identity. Moreover, innovation in the 1900s and 1910s introduced new materials, technologies, and ways of thinking, which pushed Denverites to search for improvements on their city's appearance and develop cutting edge cultural elements like movies and movie theaters. Once national-level decadence infiltrated the city in the 1920s, Denver movies and movie theaters became symbols of indulgence that overshadowed the city's underlying problems. Denverites and Americans on the whole forged ahead with the initial age of innovation behind them and the age of decadence beneath them. The age of endurance in the 1930s forced them to identify what of the previous identities had helped them prosper. By selecting—whether consciously or not—the identity elements that enabled prosperity, Americans shaped new identities.

Since WWII, Denver has changed vastly, but its movies and movie theaters will always inform historians about what the city's people value. For example, as of May 2012, there is one place to go see movies in Denver's central business district: the United Artists Denver Pavilion

Stadium 15. Patrons go to see ear-blasting action films, saccharine-sweet love stories, amusing musicals, and sweeping historical dramas in a theater with stadium seating, plush upholstered chairs, a giant screen, and floors sticky with spilled soda pop. There's very little decoration in multiplexes like this. Their minimalism indicates the current focus on film rather than exhibition environment, but says far less about audience members than did theaters from the early twentieth century. The focus on film is a result of the American love affair with technology that flamed long ago with events like the Industrial Revolution and the nineteenth century innovation before blazing up after WWII. Some of the most recent theaters in Denver suburbs are multiplexes with architectural details that reflect the original movie theaters. For example, in Littleton, there is a multiplex for the Hollywood Theater chain that revives design features of old theaters like a large marquee and a shiny lobby punctuated by a sweeping staircase leading to an upstairs lounge and entrances to the fifteen theater balconies. Movie theaters like these are the norm and offer a severely standardized form of entertainment. The same movies play at almost every multiplex and sitting in one theater of the multiplex is the same as sitting in most any other, comfy seats, restrained decoration, and all.



**Figure 40. Hollywood Theaters, Littleton, Colorado, 2012.**<sup>258</sup>

Multiplexes and home theaters are twenty-first century American's preference for movie entertainment, suggesting an acceptance of standardization and a desire to make all elements of life convenient. Yet even in the face of such trends, the old movie palaces and neighborhood houses of the early twentieth century still function in some cities. Most are concert venues specializing in any number of musical or stage genres while others show independent films. In Denver, the Urban Renewal Authority of the 1960s demolished many of the original structures while others succumbed to lack of attendance in the 1980s. After several remodels, the New Orpheum at 1513 Welton became the International 70 in 1964 and then closed in 1976, the same year that its owners demolished it. As of May 2012, the site is a parking lot. The Strand Theater changed ownership in 1925 and gained a new moniker, the "State Theater," and thrived on new equipment and a complete redecoration. The State Theater prospered under ownership of E.P.

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<sup>258</sup> "Style Points," Interview with architect Colin Russell, Digital Cinema Report website, <http://www.digitalcinemareport.com/node/3026> (accessed May 2012).

“Buzz” Briggs from 1928 to 1948 when Briggs retired and sold the theater. After running a few more years, the owner sold it to Colorado National Bank, which tore it down sometime around 1950. The Aladdin Theater at the intersection of Race and Colfax was a fairly popular movie theater up until 1984 when its owners demolished it. Today, the site is home to a Walgreens. The Mayan still stands and the current owners use it to show independent films. The neon lights of the marquee still shine brightly at night and on show nights, the street is alive with young couples going out for the night. The Paramount is the last surviving great movie palace of the central business district. The interior still shines with gold and amber light, the tapestries still incite soft gasps of awe, and the colors still create a comfortable yet luxurious atmosphere. The original entrance in the Kittredge Building is now the Paramount Café and patrons now enter through the original exit on Glenarm Street. From outside, the marquee looks a little different, but still punctuates the cityscape just off the Sixteenth Street pedestrian mall.

These last vestiges of early twentieth century film exhibition are important for Denverites and Americans today because they allow people to see what values were so influential in the past that citizens would infuse their built environment and films with them. The theaters that still offer entertainment are even more important since they reflect the ideals of the early twentieth century while catering to twenty-first century tastes. Using surviving theaters as a window into how past Americans enjoyed their entertainment gives current and future Americans a more direct connection to how early twentieth century Americans felt. In connecting with their past and understanding how and why their ancestors identified with innovation, decadence, and endurance, current and future Americans can better understand themselves. Once Americans have a better understanding of themselves and their identity, they can connect better with people of other nations, which is a particularly timely concern considering the trend toward

globalization and acceptance. Although the western frontier “closed,” Americans are on an ever-changing frontier and thus in need of reliable tenets of identity. By looking to artifacts of the past, Americans can see what elements of various identities have survived and use those elements to help them not only survive, but thrive.

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