

## Filmic experience

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Let us try to consider cinema not for the technology it has developed, nor for the productive systems that have characterized it, nor for the films that have appeared within it, nor even in terms of the effects they have created. Let us try instead to rethink the type of experience that spectators have lived in front of a cinematic screen. It is an experience that began to define itself on the night of 28 December 1895, with the Lumière projections in the Salon Indien, and that was subsequently developed and perfected through film theatres, sound, colour, the panoramic screen, and so on – an experience that today faces a radical transformation in coincidence with the end of two of the most characteristic traits of cinema: its status as a photographic medium and its identity as a collective show.

The term *experience* has a specific (and binding) meaning here. On the one hand, it refers to the act of exposing ourselves to something that surprises and captures us ('to experience'). On the other hand, it relates to the act of relaborating this exposition into a knowledge and a competence, so that we are then richer in the face of things, since we are able to master them ('to have experience'). Indeed, *filmic experience* is arguably both that moment when images (and sounds) on a screen arrogantly engage our senses and also that moment when they trigger a comprehension that concerns, reflexively, what we are viewing and the very fact of viewing it. We have, then, a stretching of attention while facing something that strikes us, whilst we also have a 'knowing-how' to look and a 'knowing-that' we are looking, which make us protagonists of what is happening to us. From this point of view, *filmic experience* is something more than film reception – more than an interpretation or a

consumption. It is a situation which combines sensory or cognitive ‘excess’ (there is something that touches or addresses us, outside the taken-for-granted) to the ‘recognition’ of what we are exposed to and the fact that we are exposed to it (a recognition which makes us redefine ourselves and our surroundings). An excess and a recognition: it is thanks to these two elements that we ‘live’ a situation, recuperating contact with what we are viewing; and that at the same time we frame it, giving it a meaning. It is thanks to these two elements that we face things; and that at the same time we enrich our lives to the extent that we may confront new events.<sup>1</sup>

Why prioritize filmic experience? Why argue that it is central to film studies, or suggest that it might be discussed in terms of a historic typology? At least three points are relevant here. Firstly, a study of filmic experience allows us better to understand the role of cinema in twentieth-century culture. What cinema offered, in fact, was a space in which a number of new, unexpected, and even shocking, elements (novel perceptual forms, aspects of reality, questions and dilemmas) were able to play in the social scene, finding acknowledgment and legitimation. In this sense, cinema brought to a climax the dynamic of excess and recognition. At the same time, cinema challenged the very notion of experience. On the one hand, it was no longer the world that gave itself up to our senses, but an image of the world, filtered by and through technology. As Walter Benjamin reminds us, ‘The vision of immediate reality [has become] the Blue Flower in the land of technology’.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, cinema seemed to give us back the world as nothing else could: it allowed us not only to ‘see anew’ but also ‘as if for the first time’, refounding our relationship with and to reality. ‘Man will go back to being visible’, said Béla Balázs in 1924.<sup>3</sup> The capacity to connect excess and recognition, as well as the dialectic between immediacy and mediation, make cinema one of the touchstones of modernity.<sup>4</sup> It is against this backdrop that the present discussion must be situated.

Secondly, filmic experience allows us better to articulate the history of cinema. Indeed, it helps us understand the historical meaning of viewing a film, as well as the ways in which vision has been historically structured. What has watching a film signified? When can we say that we have done this? And why have we done it? If we start from these questions – questions of experience – we may outline a partially new course of events, based on the reasons and on the ways in which spectators faced an ‘excess’ and ‘recognized’ it. In what follows, I shall underline how early cinema embraced the provocative elements of modernity and inserted them into a new popular culture; how classical cinema offered a sense of freedom to the spectator, but controlled it through an institution; how so-called modern cinema destroyed the ‘safe’ position of its spectator in order to gain a more open sense of subjectivity and of reality; and how contemporary cinema responds to the challenges of an overwhelming media landscape, giving us the opportunity to ‘re-aestheticize’ our lives.

- 1 Filmic experience has been addressed in recent years by, among others, Miriam Hansen, Vivian Sobchack, Janet Staiger and Annette Kuhn. While my approach is different from theirs, I am indebted to their work.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, ‘The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility: third version’, in *Selected Writings, 1938–1940, Volume IV* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), p. 263; cf. ‘The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility: second version’, in *Selected Writings, 1935–1938, Volume III* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), p. 115.
- 3 Béla Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* (Vienna/Leipzig: Deutsch-Österreichischer Verlag, 1924), now in *Schriften zum Film, 1922–1926, Volume I* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982), pp. 51–3.
- 4 Miriam Hansen underscores both topics, respectively, in her *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), and in ‘Benjamin, cinema and experience: “The blue flower in the land of technology”’, *New German Critique*, no. 40 (1987), pp. 179–224. The same field, highlighting the negotiations implied in both processes, is explored in Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008).

This third issue is important. Cinema today is expanding its borders, but also risks losing its identity. When we see a film – or something similar to a film – on YouTube or on a mobile phone, are we still in the terrain of cinema, or have we moved elsewhere? We may answer this question only if we define what a filmic experience is – and conversely what a media experience or non-experience is. I shall devote my conclusion to this point.

Early cinema largely characterized filmic experience in terms of modernity and popularity. On the one hand, filmic experience seems to include all of the typical traits of its time: it realized a need for economy, a taste for speed, an investment in the progressive mechanization of life and the growing importance of contingent phenomena; and its flux could be paralleled with other flowing forms, such as the stream of consciousness.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, filmic experience was also accessible to everyone: it joined a cross-border and a cross-cultural public to an easily accessible language, it proposed themes of general interest and it expressed common values.<sup>6</sup> In short, cinema reflected its age whilst at the same time turning to a universal audience. Today, it is evident that film ‘re-transcribed’ the modern experience that was actually lived in factories, in the metropolis, even in the trenches of World War I. In this context, cinema ‘reinvented’ the modern just as it ‘reinvented’ the popular. What is interesting about this is that the two ‘reinventions’ overlapped. On the one hand, cinema joined modernity to the sphere of the show or to the space of the collective game, and film after film popularized this modernity.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, however, cinema associated popularity with the presence of a communicative device capable of involving multitudes: by transforming this into a ‘medial’ and ‘mass’ popularity, cinema modernised it.

We have, accordingly, the popularization of modernity and the modernization of popularity. I would go on to suggest that if, in the first twenty years of its life, cinema has a strategic function, this consists in its very ability to recall these two terms and to redefine their reciprocity. The consequence of this move is important. What really qualifies early filmic experience is not the fact that it engages the gaze, but the fact that it offers a new range of sensations while also building a new type of collectivity. And, in parallel, what characterizes the nascent cinematographic spectator is not the fact that she/he is constituted as an observer, but the fact that her/his body engages in a richer sensibility and through this becomes more involved and engaged with others. Among the critics of the time, it is perhaps Ricciotto Canudo who best articulates this aspect of filmic experience. In his writing constant attention is paid to the ways in which cinema enables new forms of feeling and new social aggregates to be ‘tried’, and ‘experimented’ with, by the onlookers.<sup>8</sup> This new horizon of experience is not, however, expressed only in theoretical writing. A group of US films, from *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edwin S. Porter, 1902) to *Mabel’s Dramatic Career* (Mack

- 5 It is interesting to read, in this light, a series of Italian contributions from the first fifteen years of the twentieth century: for instance, Giovanni Papini, ‘La filosofia del cinematografo’, *La Stampa*, vol. XLI, 18 May 1907; Enrico Thovez, ‘L’arte di celluloido’, *La Stampa*, vol. XLII, no. 209, 29 July 1908; Lucio D’Ambra, ‘Il museo dell’attimo fuggente’, *La Tribuna illustrata*, vol. XXII, no. 20, 17–24 May 1914; Luigi Pirandello, ‘Si gira’, *Nuova Antologia*, June–August 1915.
- 6 On this theme see the preeminent contribution by Louis Delluc, *Le cinéma, art populaire* (1921), now in Delluc, *Ecrits cinématographiques, 11/2: Le cinéma au quotidien* (Paris: Cinémathèque Française, 1990), pp. 279–88.
- 7 Miriam Hansen has underlined the cinema’s game-like nature in her essay ‘Room-for-play: Benjamin’s gamble with cinema’, *October*, no. 109 (2004), pp. 3–45.
- 8 See especially Ricciotto Canudo, ‘Lettre d’arte. Triomphe del cinematografo’, *Nuovo Giornale*, 25 Novembre 1908, now in *Filmcritica*, vol. XXVIII, no. 278 (1977), pp. 296–302. Among the recent contributions which retrace this period, a great insight in this direction is provided by Tom Gunning, ‘An aesthetic of astonishment: early film and the (in)credulous spectator’, in Linda Williams (ed.), *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 114–33.

Sennett, 1913) or *A Movie Star* (Fred Hibbard, 1916), illustrates this same theme through small, exemplary tales. These films depict an audience that is systematically surprised and engaged by what appears on the screen and by what happens in the cinema.

Throughout the 1910s, and particularly after the end of World War I, we can progressively identify a ‘regulation’ that imposed itself on the forms of representation depicted, on the comportment expected of spectators, and on the very spaces cinema used. Cinema had to offer appropriate contents on the screen, it had to induce proper behaviour in the audience, and it had to guarantee environmental conditions that were not harmful to public health and safety. In sum, film had to answer to the canons of a morale, an etiquette and a hygiene.<sup>9</sup> Such ‘regulation’ conceals, however, a deeper process: cinema is ‘institutionalized’ – that is, it stabilizes its own ways of being and doing – and at the same time it becomes a ‘social institution’, in that it is now a coordinated complex of objects, behaviours and expectations.<sup>10</sup>

What is apparent here is a new strategic goal. After redesigning the meaning of modernity and popularity, filmic experience now has to prove that it is a ‘good experience’. Going to the cinema, seeing a film, has to be a legitimate and legitimating act. The bitter division between ‘cinephiles’ and ‘cinephobes’ that marks the debate of the 1910s and 1920s (a good example is the quarrel between Paul Souday and Emile Vuillermoz in the columns of the French newspaper *Le Temps*<sup>11</sup>) clearly underlines this goal. Notwithstanding their divergent stances, both sides in fact draw an ‘ideal’ cinema. While for the one group film has not yet achieved this ideal and for the other it already offers good examples in this direction, the two sides nevertheless are in accord on an undertaking that can and must be realized.

Two observations may be added here. Firstly, the institutionalization of cinema is aided by an emerging need for narration and artistic expression. The first need is mainly expressed by a popular public, and is the grounds for the progressive rise of the full-length fiction film. The second need is expressed by an intellectual class, and is the grounds for the progressive ‘sanctification’ of cinematic work (this ‘sanctification’ began in the 1920s and culminated in the 1930s in the film exhibitions curated by Iris Barry at New York’s Museum of Modern Art). The satisfaction of these two needs saw a ‘standardization’ of the filmic product, whilst it also credited cinema with the stigmata of ‘quality’. Filmic experience becomes, accordingly, ‘safe’ and ‘precious’.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, the institutionalization of cinema brings with it a sense of equilibrium between diverging forces. For instance, film viewing can maintain tracts of great intensity, and yet images and sounds do not overwhelm the spectator. In the same way, it drives the onlooker so that she/he is immersed in the representation onscreen, and yet it ensures safety margins, both mental and physical. Moreover, although cinema tends to depict the world in fragments it nevertheless preserves a sense of unity with regard to what is shown. And finally, while film viewing

**9** For a reconstruction of this regulatory process on the levels of morale, etiquette and hygiene in relation to Italy, see Francesco Casetti and Silvio Alosio, ‘Lo spettatore disciplinato: Regole di etichetta, di morale e di igiene nella fruizione filmica dei primi tempi’, in *Storia del cinema Italiano*, Volume II (Venice: Marsilio, forthcoming). For an exemplary investigation into censorship, see Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909–1925* (London: Routledge, 1988). On the processes of early censorship in cinema, see Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004). On Hollywood’s ability to accomplish a process of normalization of consumption, see Melvyn Stokes (ed.), *American Movie Audiences: from the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era* (London: British Film Institute, 1999); Richard Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment: the Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

**10** Interestingly, Noël Burch names as an ‘institutional form of representation’ what others class as classic cinema, mainstream cinema or cinema of diegetic absorption.

**11** Cf. P.M. Heu, *Le Temps du cinéma: Emile Vuillermoz père de la critique cinématographique* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003).

**12** For interesting observations on this subject, see Janet Harbord, *Film Cultures* (London: Sage, 2002).

- 13 The characteristics of 'attendance' have been the subject of much discussion. The debate has been reconstructed in Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectatorship: the Practices of Film Reception* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 11–27.
- 14 In particular, viewing environments are built to contain the crowd and at the same time to focus attention upon the screen. They also create echoes of the world represented in the film. On this theme, see Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* (New York, NY: Verso, 2002).
- 15 I am referring, in particular, to the intervention of a 'film grammar' that smoothes over any distance between observer and observed. The writings of such theorists as Pudovkin, Arnheim or Spottiswoode contribute to this grammar. Vsevolod I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique: Five Essays and Two Addresses* (London: G. Newnes, 1933); Rudolf Arnheim, *Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933); Raymond Spottiswoode, *Grammar of the Film: an Analysis of Film Technique* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935).
- 16 On the concept of 'looking at' and 'looking through' in media, see David Bolter and Victor Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

depends on a machine, a device, at the same time it favours a certain 'naturalness' in the subject's gaze. Through this series of 'compromises', filmic experience becomes at once more constant and more practicable. Modern and popular, it makes modernity and popularity more liveable.

A consequence of this process is that we can delineate a form of experience that might appropriately be called *attendance*.<sup>13</sup> Against the background of widespread regulation (both in terms of the viewing environment,<sup>14</sup> ways of viewing, and the object of vision itself<sup>15</sup>) what comes to light are three key elements.

Firstly, we have *experience of a place*, the theatre. It is a delimited place, but not closed. The theatre is not a retreat, like the home, nor is an open world, like the metropolis. It instead forms something of a middle ground, where citizens converge and share the same emotional experiences. Looked at in this way, it provides a peculiar form of habitat: here one can be a mobile individual, a *flâneur*, and at the same time find a place of belonging. It is therefore a physical place, a little like the arcades or malls of the nineteenth century. And it is also a place permeated with a set of shared symbols which function, in a Heideggerian way, as language does for a community. Secondly, we have the *experience of a situation* that is both real and unreal. The spectator goes on living in an everyday universe, and at the same time also lives in an extraordinary universe. The first universe revolves around her/his encounter with other spectators, the second around her/his encounter with the film. Thus, what we find in cinema is an interface between two worlds, and it is here (also because of its profound regulation) that filmic experience manifests the character of a rite. Thirdly, we have the *experience of a diegetic world* which is made up of images (and sounds), but which can also have a consistence and depth of its own. Indeed, the spectator, viewing a film, sees pictures, but at the same time sees 'beyond' the pictures, to the reality that is represented.<sup>16</sup> This means that the spectator interprets filmic reality as something in which she/he might be immersed, thanks to a tight game of projection and identification with what appears onscreen. But the spectator also recognizes in these same images an exemplary portrait which can help her/him interpret the world in which she/he actually lives. Viewing then becomes an act that joins pleasure and productivity: the film stimulates and attracts, but also teaches and educates. The spectator consequently becomes a subject participating in a world that seems to offer itself as a gift, but is at the same time a subject that takes hold, on the cognitive level, of a world that can also function as prey.

There is, then, the experience of a place, the experience of a situation and the experience of a world. In *attendance*, the first two aspects converge towards the third: going to the cinema and joining other spectators activates a gaze (and also a capacity to listen) which allows the events recounted to be at once grasped and lived as an experience. What is important is that one exposes oneself to film, that one concentrates upon it and follows its unfolding. Moreover, what matters is filling one's

17 At the centre of attendance there is that 'to-be-looked-at-ness' which is examined by Laura Mulvey in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989). Under this aspect, the theory of 'subject position' of the 1970s and 1980s becomes a theory of attendance.

18 On the film, see Andrew Norton (ed.), *Buster Keaton's Sherlock Jr* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); in particular the essay by Henry Jenkins, "This yellow Keaton seems to be the whole show": Buster Keaton, interrupted performance, and the vaudeville aesthetic', pp. 29–66.

19 Alexandre Astruc, 'Naissance d'une nouvelle avant-garde: la caméra-stylo', *Ecran Français*, no. 144 (1948).

eyes with a world made into a spectacle, which allows us to become privileged observers.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the most efficient description of this form of experience is given not by a theoretical text, but by a film. This film – Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr* (USA, 1924) – is a work that is no less theoretical than other, written, texts.<sup>18</sup> In it, the main character, a projectionist, leaves the projection booth and penetrates the screen. Initially he finds himself confused by what he encounters: here we follow the trope of the early film spectator, who was surprised by the unpredictability of 'modern' experience. Keaton's character then, however, adapts to the world that the film discloses; he takes part in it, he accepts its lessons, and, back in the projection booth, he immediately applies to his own life what is represented on the screen. There is no better description available of the process I am trying to explain: in *attendance*, reality is available to be seen, and at the same time the spectator is ready to appropriate what she/he watches.

Nevertheless, the model of attendance has a sort of blind spot. The acquisition of the world on the screen almost hides two aspects. Firstly, this acquisition is made possible by the fact that the spectator inhabits space (the cinema) and participates in a collective rite (the vision). The risk is that she/he can master reality only by conforming with a residency and a collectivity. Secondly, this acquisition is accompanied by a strong sense of participation in what one observes: it is a matter less of 'grabbing hold' of things than of 'living' with them. The risk is that in taking hold of the world one cancels this availability and, with this, the possibility of a real 'opening'.

After World War II, the so-called 'modern cinema' highlights these two limits of attendance. What surfaces is a more ductile, articulated experience – one in which observer and observed no longer confront each other, but rather engage in a more subtle form of complicity. The emerging awareness of film as a political act (revived by Italian neorealism) and the emerging conception of film as an authorial and creative act (initiated by Alexandre Astruc<sup>19</sup> and subsequently taken up by the *nouvelles vagues*), constitute two important steps in this direction. In both instances, the spectator is no longer asked to 'attend' a show: she/he must instead 'respond' to the film and 'correspond' with its author. The viewer is asked to engage in a tight dialogue with what she/he has seen. Film has to be penetrated in order to be interpreted – what is at stake are both its open meaning and its masks. At the same time, the viewer is also asked to engage in a dialogue – direct or distant – with other spectators involved in the same task. Only an 'interpretive community' is capable of accessing filmic meaning as well as authorial thought.

Dialogue with the film and its author, in search of a meaning; dialogue with the other spectators, in search of a community: what comes to light is a situation in which the spectator loses her/his privileges and her/his exclusiveness as observer; she/he has to face – and to expose her/himself to – the world and the others. The effect is a profound

20 On the advent of multiplexes and new forms of viewing, see Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies and the Home* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Charles R. Acland, *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes and Global Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). The relationship between digital technologies (particularly the internet) and spectatorial attitudes is examined in Michele White, *The Body and the Screen* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

21 On remediation, see Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*.

restructuring of spectatorial subjectivity (no more ‘mastery’, but remaining ‘open’ to things). But the effect is also an increasing role for film’s perlocutionary effects, that is, its ability to do and make others do. The diffusion of ‘cinophile’ consumption, wonderfully parodied by Jean Luc Godard in *Masculin, Feminin* (1966), made this trend progressively evident.

From the 1980s onwards, change becomes even more apparent. New types of theatre are born, with specialized places such as the ‘X-rated’ cinema and the multiplex.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, alternatives to the traditional film theatre begin to emerge: television regularly shows films, and in some cases even acts as producer. Finally comes the development of the videotape – first Betamax, launched by Sony in 1975, and then VHS, which was to prove the successful format, launched by JVC the following year. A film could be recorded and rewatched in one’s living room, but also bought in a shop in video format. What consequently emerge are, on the one hand, new forms of access to filmic experience and, on the other, new surroundings in which this experience might take place. New forms of access: to watch a film, one is no longer bound to a single ticket that allows entrance to a particular venue. One can instead pay by subscription to a public television service (or to a channel, or for a particular package); one can be at the same time a spectator of films and advertisements on commercial channels; and lastly, one can buy films on video. New surroundings: the living room, with its changed spatial structure, joins the film theatre. Cinema thus begins to disentangle itself from its exclusive medium (film–projector–screen) and from what has long been its privileged place (the film theatre).

In other words, filmic experience begins to *relocate*: it finds new media, new environments. This move is a decisive trait of cinema. It works on a deeper level than the re-mediation process to which cinema is also subjected.<sup>21</sup> In fact, thanks to the new physical supports, there is the emergence of new spatial systems and, along with these, new viewing conditions. These sites are arranged very differently from previous places: for instance, they retain features of the home environment. They are also sites that boast different types of technology: for instance, a small luminous screen rather than a large reflecting one. Furthermore, they are sites that are ready to join, and perhaps even to absorb, film consumption into the flow of daily life (watching a film in the living room alternates with other activities). Most importantly, film consumption is joined to other ‘media’ activities (watching a film takes place alongside using the phone, listening to the radio, reading the newspaper, and so on). It is this relocation that drives, and will continue to drive, the process of transformation of the experience of film.

But why is this a relocation? And what are its consequences? As I shall note, at the end of the 1990s the relocation of cinema would impetuously ‘spread’ to other media and other spatial situations. It would become possible to watch a film in places other than the domestic video: on

- 22 The quickest medium to answer to this need of expressivity is, perhaps, fashion: cinema can only provide symbolic identification; that is, purely abstract or psychological 'clothing'.
- 23 Television is better able to adapt to this growing need: from being a dispenser of programmes, it became in the 1980s a medium of contact with viewers, thanks to the opportunity that audience members had to phone in during shows and to have their calls broadcast live.
- 24 Régis Debray, examining the passage to the 'videosphere', talks about the 'end of the show', also linking it to a general weakening of the role of sight. See Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image: une histoire du regard en Occident* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 228.
- 25 The word 'performance' is first used in Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991). In the present essay the term has a more specific meaning.
- 26 In relation to this, see Maria Grazia Fanchi, *Spettatori* (Milano: Il Castoro, 2006).
- 27 From this point of view the consumption practices of fans are exemplary. On fandom, see Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992).

computers, iPods, mobile phones; in waiting rooms, art galleries, on aeroplanes. In sum, films can be viewed on a number of platforms and in a number of situations. This occurs not only because of the pressure of the technological revolution, which facilitates a new diffusion of the cinema, but also because there is a new cultural scenario with which cinema must engage. This scenario is characterized by the emergence of two important needs. On the one hand, there is the need for *expressivity*: the identity of social subjects hinges increasingly upon the way they can put this into play. Cinema certainly presents an opportunity to attend a show, but it can only offer the possibility of becoming, at best, a virtual protagonist. Other media seem to do this better; cinema must update itself.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, there is a need for *relationality*: social subjects are less and less part of preestablished social networks, and so they must build their own. Cinema traditionally provided a representation of the world and was engaged far less as a space of social exchange (the social encounter before and after the screening, virtual dialogue with the director, conversations in film societies, and so on). Other media responded far better to this need for exchange. If cinema wanted to retain its centrality as a medium it had, therefore, both to recuperate and to depend upon these same media.<sup>23</sup> The urge to face these two needs (for expressivity and for relationality), as well as the competition with other media, pushed cinema towards an exploration of new possibilities. If cinema relocates itself, it does so in response to this situation.

The conquest of new spaces and new platforms – starting with domestic space and the video recorder – progressively opens up new forms of filmic experience. I have already noted that filmic experience became increasingly quotidian as it became connected with other media. It may be added here that filmic experience becomes increasingly elective, born of specific choices, and no longer dependent upon habit. Hence, even though it lends itself to being repeated, filmic experience does so as a hobby rather than as a custom. Moreover, the experience of film is increasingly individual and inter-individual. The act of seeing brings the construction of small 'companies', both immediate and at a distance. Lastly, filmic experience becomes increasingly private: something to be had inside 'reserved' spaces (such as the home) or in isolation (and this even though the barriers around us have become glass walls). In short, filmic experience becomes more and more personalized. In turn, it also becomes increasingly active. The spectator has ceased simply to consume a show and begins to intervene in the act of consumption: she/he is asked not only to see, but also to do.<sup>24</sup> That is why this type of experience may be characterized as a *performance*.<sup>25</sup>

Performances with which the spectator is engaged are multiple, and these increase as the act of viewing a film finds new places and new ways to articulate itself. There is a cognitive 'doing' linked to the varying interpretations and different uses of film's symbolic resources.<sup>26</sup> To see a film is more and more about speaking it and recounting it.<sup>27</sup> There is an emotional 'doing', precisely because of the increasingly emotive

- 28 On the emotional dimension, see Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (eds), *Passionate Views* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and from a different perspective, M. Brütsch et al. (eds), *Kinogefühle: Emotionalität und Film* (Marburg: Schüren, 2005).
- 29 On this type of doing, see Francesco Casetti and Maria Grazia Fanchi (eds), *Terre incognite* (Florence: Carocci, 2006).

elements connected to the act of viewing film.<sup>28</sup> Watching a film is more and more about putting oneself in the condition of being amazed and moved (perhaps also because of the presence of both ‘special effects’ and ‘special affects’). There is also an increasingly practical ‘doing’ which is linked to the behaviours triggered by the process of consumption. One negotiates concrete spatiotemporal limits as well as the possible composition of the ‘menu’ of what one wishes to view.<sup>29</sup> Watching a film is more and more about organizing oneself for vision. But there is also a new relational ‘doing’, connected to the fact that one has to build a social network of sharing and exchange – and that this might also be undertaken virtually. At the same time, there is a new expressive ‘doing’, linked to the fact that viewing ‘that’ movie, in ‘that’ way is related to the construction of identity. Choosing a film is, increasingly, a declaration of belonging. Finally, there is a textual ‘doing’. This is determined by the fact that the spectator increasingly possesses the chance to manipulate the text that she/he is consuming, not only by ‘adjusting’ viewing conditions (keeping or transforming the format, choosing high or low definition, and so on), but also by intervening in it (as with the clips, and the reedited and new soundtracks, on YouTube). Thus, filmic experience is a performance based on an act, rather than a moment of attendance. It places the individual, not the group, as its focus. It allows selected relationships, rather than generic gatherings. It develops abilities as well as interests. It entails a continuous handling, rather than an adaptation to preestablished situations. And, finally, filmic experience boasts liberatory values rather than the celebration of a discipline’s glory. This, then, is how filmic experience adjusts and responds to the appeal of a new historical and cultural situation. It changes form in order to adapt to the times.

I have mentioned that since the end of the 1990s, cinema has been perfecting its relocation process. Film viewing takes place on single-screen theatres, in multiplexes, on the home television; but also on DVD, on home theatre systems, inside rail and underground stations, on buses, on aeroplanes, in art galleries, through one’s computer, by surfing online, in virtual spaces such as YouTube or Second Life, through personal exchanges via the internet (peer-to-peer), on mobile phones. Cinema now disperses itself through social space and invades virtual space. And it multiplies its products: fiction films, documentaries, docudrama, final cuts, clips, reeditings, sound reeditings, narrations rendered from videogames. What emerges from all this is a multiplicity of *windows* which both open and frame our viewing experience. This enormous relocation of cinema, which relaunches and radicalizes a form of filmic experience based on performance, raises at least three issues.

Firstly, at a time when the spectator seems to become more ‘active’, what is really her/his degree of freedom? What of the ‘disciplinary’ bounds at stake in *attendance*: do they dissolve through performance or do they simply become new limitations? It is clear that through new

*windows*, subjects often ‘invent’ ways of building their ‘own’ experience. This invention can be seen as a negative act (when they give up the linear viewing of a film and simply linger on privileged clips), and as a positive spectatorial proactiveness (when they use home theatre systems to reintroduce a certain sacredness to the act of viewing). Such creativity is, however, ambiguous. It is often simply an execution of preestablished rules (DVDs allow – and actually anticipate – viewing ‘in pieces’). Creativity is often also dictated by nostalgia (the ‘sacred’ value of viewing is no longer on the agenda). Further, creativity is more often invested in lateral activities than in film viewing proper (for instance, it manifests itself in blogs rather than in actual modes of consumption). In these cases, the freedom of the neo-spectator reveals its limits. It is more like choosing a game than the actual possibility of playing it. There can, however, be more dialectical moments in less regulated situations. From this point of view, the most interesting *windows* are not those linked to non-places (such as airports or buses) where filmic engagement is too contingent; nor are they those linked to artistic environments of particular interest (such as gallery installations), since here the spectator has no choice but to ‘play by the rules’ set by the artist. The most interesting windows are, rather, those which enable and facilitate peer-to-peer exchange, meaning that they introduce a viewing practice that extends into the rewriting of the text; and those linked to domestic space, where the creation of one’s ‘own’ viewings calls for constant negotiation with other household members. In these cases, filmic experience illustrates how disciplinarity in contemporary society is less an application of previous rules and more a self-construction of contextual and contingent rules.

Secondly, inside these new windows are we still dealing with filmic experiences or are we instead dealing with more generic ‘media’ experiences? It is clear that cinema, in widening its definition, risks losing its specificity. At the same time as it relocates, its identity is subject to question. However, filmic experience remains specific in at least two, very different, cases. The first is where new technological platforms work simply as delivery tools: they create a cinematographic situation in so far as they offer a film. This is what happens when, for instance, we use our computer on a train to watch a DVD or a film we have downloaded: it is not the viewing environment that makes us film spectators, but simply the viewed object. The second case is where there is a readaptation of the environment: here the film’s permanence is ensured by the fact that the conditions of film viewing are reinstated. This is what takes place in the living room when we turn off the lights, sit comfortably and watch a broadcast, following the old rituals of the theatre (even though we may be looking not at a film but at a television series, or even a football game). The characterization of a window as more or less ‘cinematographic’ occurs between these two poles.

But why, thirdly, should we even seek to preserve film experience? Should it not be consigned to the attic, so to speak, or to a museum? It is

clear that cinema is not a contemporary medium: it enjoys esteem, it continues to celebrate its most traditional rituals (after all, old cinemas with projectors and screens still exist); but it is not here that the spirit of the times treads. However, there is perhaps one thing that is still guaranteed in the permanence of the cinematographic within a vast mediascape: this is an aesthetic dimension, in the proper sense of the term, that can pit itself against an otherwise generalized and growing anaesthesia. Filmic experience, in fact, still presents itself as a moment which ‘enlivens’ our senses and nourishes sensibility. This is true, above all, of the cinematographic in its performative variant. Thanks to this, the spectator does not simply consume film but instead seizes control of her/his given situation. At the same time, she/he reflexively engages with the object of vision; she/he produces and articulates meaning. Performance accordingly helps us elude the ‘channelling’ of experience that modern media seem to pursue, introducing the possibility of a new experiential foundation.<sup>30</sup> After the redefinition of the modern and the popular, after the establishment of a legitimate and legitimating experience, after the opening of a more articulate dimension, it is the reaestheticization of communication that might mark the last strategic duty assigned to film. This is why I would argue that filmic experience will survive: in order to allow the spectator of media to be involved in a truly exploratory way, in order to force eyes and ears to be opened as they are nowhere else. In short, filmic experience still advocates not just the simple management of a ‘bare life’ but asks that the spectator give it meaning and sensibility.

*Translation by Dafne Calgaro and Victoria Duckett*

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**30** On this theme, see Pietro Montani, *Bioestetica* (Florence: Carrocci, 2007).