

The Filmic Experience: An Introduction

1. Cinema and the question of experience

Among the many ways of considering cinema, it is useful to keep in mind the manner in which film offers spectators a specific experience, the *filmic experience*.¹ The term “experience” in general, indicates, on one hand the possibility of perceiving reality as if for the first time and in the first person (“to experience”), and, on the other hand, the acquisition of knowledge and competence which allow an individual to face reality and create meaning from it (“to have experience”).² By analogy, we can define the filmic experience as that particular modality through which the cinematographic institution allows the

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¹ The concept of “filmic experience” was first elaborated within the context of filmology, which linked it to certain modalities of the perception of images in movement (cf. the great synthesis of filmological research compiled by Dario Romano, *L’esperienza cinematografica* [Florence: Ed. Universitaria – G. Barbera, 1965].) Beginning in the 1990s, the term has become part of the theoretical debate, as a phenomenological approach to cinema (Vivian Sobchack, *Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992]), or as a continuation of Benjaminian considerations (Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: ‘The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,’” *New German Critique* 40 [Winter 1987] pp. 179-224).

² For a definition of *experience*, see Paolo Jedlowski, *Il sapere dell’esperienza* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1994) and Martin Jay, “Songs of Experience,” *Cultural Semantics. Keywords of Our Time* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.]. Jedlowski characterizes *esperienza* as: a) perception of things, a call to the relationship with the surrounding world (“the experience of city life is different from that in the country”); b) practice with and about things; “doing” and “know-how” (“that doctor has a lot of experience”); c) the reflexive consideration of one’s own lived experience; lived experience revisited (“this experience has profoundly changed me”). Jay characterizes *experience* as: a) [an] immediate sentient observation, which is generally prior to any reflection on its meaning”; b) [the] acquisition of an insight or a wisdom (“only comes with experience”); c) mediating between abstract concepts and concrete particulars, which is why we can “learn from experience” p.44. In comparing the two definitions, it seems that on one hand, there is an *esperienza as perception*, which is tendentially outside of a situation in which the world is taken for granted, and on the other hand, there is an *esperienza as the re-elaboration of this perception*, which can give “meaning” to the perceived, transforming it into knowledge and know-how (and therefore into consciousness and competence).

spectator to perceive a film and to re-elaborate the perception into knowledge and competence. This is a vision that challenges the obviousness of the *scopic* activity, creating reflexive and projective relationships between the spectators and themselves and between the spectators and the world, and leading them to a “knowing how” and a “knowing that” they are seeing the film both as a film and as a reality represented.

There are at least three good reasons why we should examine the filmic experience with great attention. The first is that the experiencing of a film, in the different ways that this may occur, while, on one hand it may constitute a particular experience, on the other hand, it impresses and reorients our experience in general. Consider how cinema allows us to see anew that which habit or indifference has obscured, as Béla Balázs rightly pointed out in 1924.³ Or consider how cinema not only allows us to “see anew,” but also “as if for the first time” in a refounding of our relationship with the world.⁴ Or, finally, how cinema highlights unprecedented aspects, previously ignored, which sanction the reinterpretation of reality in light of what appears on the screen.⁵ In sum, everyday vision often finds itself following the example of filmic vision, to the point of becoming a “cinematographic” vision, and of demanding of the real to become a bit “cinematographic” in order to be truly apprehended. Cinema therefore is the site of an experience which has reshaped the meaning of experience⁶.

³ Bela Balázs, “The Visible Man”, in *Theory of the Film* (New York: Arno Press, 1972).

⁴ On this point, see the extensive essay by P. Montani, *L’immaginazione narrativa. Il racconto del cinema oltre i confini dello spazio letterario* (Milan: Guerini & Associati, 1999). Among the many possible references, it is important to remember the fundamental essay by Marcel Merleau-Ponty, “Cezanne’s Doubt,” *Sense and Nonsense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

⁵ The idea that a text (and, more generally, an event) “allows” a rereading of the real is asserted by Michel de Certeau. I’ll limit myself to citing the extraordinary passage on *Playtime* by Tati, “Ainsi, au sortir de *Play-Time*, le spectateur se met-il à remarquer l’humour des rues, comme s’il avait le regard de Tati. Le film a *rendu possible* une observation humoristique qui, sans lui, ne se serait pas produite. Il en va de même pour la lecture d’un poème, la rencontre de quelqu’un, le remuement d’un groupe. Si le registre de la perception ou de la compréhension s’en trouve modifié, c’est que l’événement a rendu possible et, en un sens très réel, a permis cet autre type de rapport au monde.” Michel de Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire* (Paris: Seuil, 1987) p. 210. I will take up this theme in a discussion of the capacity of cinema to *refigure* the world.

⁶ “Film corresponds to profound changes in the apparatus of apperception—changes that are experienced on the scale of private existence by each passerby in big-city traffic, and on a historical scale by every present-day citizen.” Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its

The second reason is of a historical-cultural nature. In the course of the 20th century, experience in general confronted a profound crisis. How the world was perceived and how these perceptions were interpreted formed an argument of increasing difficulty. Given the complexity of events and a reality in continual transformation, “having experience” now seemed an insufficient basis for finding solutions, while the very possibility of “experiencing” things, as they really occurred, seemed now impossible.⁷ At the heart of this crisis, cinema, the tip of an evolving media iceberg, paradoxically proposes the retrieval of the possibility of experience: while watching a film, one perceives reality particularly intensely, finding profitable cues for his or her own understanding of it, as well as rules of conduct. Yet this proposal is still far from constituting a retrieval of the prior concept of experience, given that many of the causal elements of this crisis found their source there. Consider how filmic vision triggers that perception based on “shock” so typical of modernity, which renders the reconstruction of a lived experience difficult during the act of perception.⁸ This is due in part because this proposal in turn introduced “destructive” elements: consider how filmic vision heavily depends on a technology which not only mediates between the observer and the observed, but also presents itself as an essential condition in order for something to be seen and therefore contributes to further distancing of reality from our immediate horizon.⁹ What appears therefore as an antidote, reveals itself to be an aggravator, or rather something that demands a rethinking and redefinition of experience itself.

Technological Reproducibility: Third Version,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, (1938-40), p. 281 (Cambridge, Mass., London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁷ Cfr. the dialectic between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* in Benjamin, especially in the essays “Experience and Poverty,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 731 and ff., and “The Storyteller. Observations on the Works of Nicolaj Leskov,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 142-165.

⁸ Here I’d like to recall Walter Benjamin’s striking observation in the essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”: “Thus technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by the film. In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film.” *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968) p. 175.

⁹ Once again, Benjamin: “the vision of immediate reality [has become] the Blue Flower in the land of technology.” “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version”, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (1938-1940) p. 263. On this subject, see also Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema and Experience,” *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987) pp. 179-224.

The third reason pervades the moment in which we live. With the multiplication of means by which to enjoy a film and the end of the primacy of the theatrical screening, the filmic experience has widened its boundaries, on one hand, by assuming new forms and, on the other, by dissolving into a more generic media experience, losing its specificity.¹⁰ How does watching a film on a computer or on a cell phone still constitute a “filmic experience”? And to what extent is it a new experience, distinguished by its discontinuity with the past and its relation to other forms of seeing? And yet, even if this does constitute a new experience, through what means does it return to being a “filmic vision”? What once characterized a precise identity, today assumes more ambiguous contours, especially when manifested through new devices and in new settings. While film’s identity seems to be disappearing, it also seems to be renewing itself. Questioning the filmic experience can help us to dig deeper among the layers of contemporary transformations in the field of media (and also in the field of art) to better understand whether we have arrived at a historical end, or whether we have arrived at a new point in a lengthy journey. In short, to understand where we are and in which direction we are headed.¹¹

Based on these three reasons (and on others that could be put forth just as well), it seems to me that we may safely consider the filmic experience to be of great interest. In particular, I believe that we can legitimately ask ourselves the following questions: which are the elements and dynamics that characterize the filmic experience? how did it contribute to the redefinition of the modern experience? which diverse—and sometimes competing—forms did it assume? how did it evolve with time up to the present day? what space does it still occupy? how are the present-day changes to the experiential horizon reflected in mediatic experiences, and how are they fed by them?

¹⁰ Regarding media experience, it is helpful to return to the ideas of “mediated interaction” or “quasi-mediated interaction” developed by John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

¹¹ On this theme, some preliminary Italian considerations are outlined in Francesco Casetti, Mariagrazia Fanchi (eds.), *Terre incognite* (Rome: Carocci, 2006). See also Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex. Cinema, New Technologies and the Home* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2006).

2. The filmic experience and the film studies

Before addressing these questions, it is appropriate to better connect the above reflections on the filmic experience to the context of film studies.

First of all, there are several aspects of the filmic experience that are traditional objects of research. For example, I am thinking of the research in experimental psychology carried out in the context of filmology, which, by the way, was the first approach to lead to the emergence of the concept of “filmic experience.”¹² I am thinking also of semio-pragmatics and of its description of various institutional contexts in which the film can be placed.¹³ Ultimately, I am thinking of the many themes examined by research on spectatorship, from the role of the apparatus to the positioning of the spectator, from the forms of consumption to the new modes of vision that are related to modernity and post-modernity. Therefore, we are not here entering a completely new field. Nevertheless, research in filmic experience can also introduce a small bend in the road of an established tradition.

Firstly, to study the filmic experience means to examine the ways in which a spectator watches a film while considering, on the one hand, the whole situation of the viewer and, on the other hand, the lifestyles of a society. Therefore, what is at stake is not only the meaning of the text (not even in its ideological or social effects), nor only the behaviors of consumption (not even in the context of wider social practices), but the *conditions of intelligibility* of all the acts that converge and result in the consumption of a film. When can we say that we are watching a film? In what way do we prepare to watch a film? And what significance do we attribute to the fact that we are watching a film?

Naturally, it is not a matter of putting forth a unique answer. Like any cultural experience, even the filmic experience is subject to a series of historical and social determinations, which have not only changed its connotations, but have also prepared the emergence of different models that often even coexist.

¹² See the ample synthesis of this research provided by Romano, *L'esperienza cinematografica*.

¹³ Fundamental in this context is the work of Roger Odin. See in particular *Cinéma et production de sens* (Paris: A. Colin, 1990) and *De la fiction* (Bruxelles: De Boeck University, 2000).

To define the filmic experience also means to articulate it from a historical point of view—as well as with respect to gender, class, geography, etc.

Secondly, to study the filmic experience means to try to better weave together the empirical evidence and the textual data. In fact, its reconstruction can even use direct ethnographical observation; it cannot, however, ignore the existence of a series of discourses of various natures, connected in a kind of large “net” that wraps around the filmic experience and highlights its central characteristics. Among these discourses, two seem to occupy prominent positions: on one hand are the “biographies of the spectators”, which can be traced back both to the “life stories” found in diaries or narrations and to critical reviews and more subjective essays; and on the other hand are the movies which represent situations or modes of vision, and which therefore operate reflexively on the conditions of filmic reception (whether theirs or in general). Both biographies and movies provide accounts that show modes of realization and the meaning of the filmic experience, and therefore they lead to the emergence of intelligibility. In particular, these discourses appeal to the social and individual *recognition* of the filmic experience: they tell us that the filmic experience proves identifiable to the eyes of the person who carries it out or would like to carry it out, and also that it appears legitimate at the level of collective behaviors (to recognize means precisely to individualize and authorize).¹⁴ They tell us these things as testimonies to a series of operations completed purposefully by society, and as active parties to these processes (a discourse is always a representation but also an action). On this note, we can say with certainty that the filmic experience is not really a filmic experience if it is not “certified” at the level of discourse as well; it is this “certification” that leads to the emergence of that social and individual “consciousness” without which the filmic experience would not effectively exist. In other words, the filmic experience, like any other experience, would not be such if it did not find an echo in the network of the discourses that surround it. In making it recognizable, the

¹⁴ Recognition always implies both a knowledge and an acceptance.

discursive practices invested in the filmic experience (starting from the ones provided by the spectator and by cinema itself) also establish its effectiveness.

Hence, if on the one hand the discussion of filmic experience seems to distance us from the texts, on the other hand, it brings them closer to us; primarily, because we still talk about an experience of enjoying texts, but also because it is the texts (including the texts enjoyed, and thus the films) that offer us proof and ratification. And it is from this point on that it is possible to describe the filmic experience with its components and its dynamics.

3. The Filmic Experience: Characteristic Features

There are at least five traits which seem to characterize the filmic experience that comes to define what we can call the classical age of film:

- a. First of all, it is an experience made possible by a *device*, an *apparatus*. On one hand, I am referring specifically to the technology through which one places an image on the screen, which offers itself to the spectators' gaze (and the sound which offers itself to their ears), and on the other hand, more generally, to the equipment dispersed throughout the film theater (from the seats to the furnishings). That in which one is placed is, therefore, an artificial environment.
- b. Secondly, it is an experience that deals with *images* (and sounds). These images are representations that delineate a "possible world": that which is staged and narrated by a film. They, nevertheless, also refer to a "real world," both because they are a trace (insofar as they are photographic images which record that which has passed before the camera lens), and because they are a copy (insofar as they are mimetic images which re-propose the contours and features of things). This means that those images both "construct" a reality and "remember" and "repropose" it. They are "inventions," but also "traces" and "replicas" of reality (in terms of the Piercian trilogy, they can be considered symbols, as well as indices and icons).

The different statuses of filmic images find a correspondence in the different statuses of the *screen* on which they appear: the screen may be considered a “frame” delimitating a certain composition; a “window” open to the world; a “mirror” on which reality is reflected and recomposed; etc.¹⁵

- c. Thirdly, the filmic experience is one that revolves around the presence of an *observer*, and therefore, around a subject that is, above all, *scopic*. The filmic experience, in fact (aside from aural considerations) is one that mobilizes vision most of all, both in an accentuated form (vision in the theater is “acute”) and in a specialized form (vision in the theater must substitute other senses as well, for example that of touch, constructing in addition to optical effects, haptic ones).¹⁶
- d. Furthermore, it is a collective experience, based on a *social encounter*, in which a shapeless aggregate of individuals—a crowd—becomes an organic nucleus: a public. This constitution of a public is made possible by the fact that the behaviors and knowledge of the spectators are “shared”: each responds to the advances made by the screen in harmony with the others.
- e. Finally, it is an experience for which the spectator *pays*: At the cinema (not as the place of origin, but certainly departing from it in a definitive way) the idea that vision is linked to a monetary exchange triumphs (and therefore the logic of one is linked to the logic of the other).¹⁷ This means that at the movie theater a commodification of experience is realized which rests on the very meaning of that which experience is and can be.

¹⁵ There may be many more metaphors of the screen: the screen may be considered the “skin” of the flesh of the world, which offers itself to the gaze, for example. Metaphors of the screen are indicative of different approaches to the cinema: “window” refers to a realistic approach; “frame” to a formalist approach; “mirror” to a psychoanalytical approach; “skin” to a phenomenological approach; etc.

¹⁶ On the schism between touching and seeing in modernity, it may be useful to review Johnatan Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer*, particularly Chapter 1. On the re-composition of seeing and touching in the act of painting, I find the following observations of Aby Warburg to be helpful: “Between imaginary touching with the hand and conceptual contemplation one can place the analysis of the object, manipulating that which gives way to a plastic or pictorial mirroring which comes to be called the artistic act”. Aby Warburg, “Introduzione all’Atlante Mnemosyne” (1929), *Mnemosyne. L’Atlante della memoria di Aby Warburg*, in Italo Spinelli, Roberto Venuti (eds.), (Roma: Artemide, 1998), p. 23.

¹⁷ Georg Simmel, “Money in Modern Culture,” *Simmel on Culture* (London, New Delhi: Sage, 1997) pp. 243-254.

4. The Filmic Experience: Rituals, Visions, and the Re-figuration of the World

These five characteristics allow us to better understand how the filmic experience takes part in a deep conversation with modernity. They call into question issues such as naturalness, immediacy, subjectivity, social relations and gratuitousness—issues that cease to be taken for granted in the modern age. In this sense, the filmic experience has become a privileged point in which the idea of experience in general found the opportunity to be discussed and redefined.

These five traits allow us as well to begin to better define the filmic experience, at least during the age of classical cinema. It is an experience that, on one hand engages a vision centered on a *scopic* subject, and on the other hand engages a concourse of people, and, therefore, social subjects.

As far as the latter aspect, one needs only to remember how the cinema provides a space for real collective rites which have their origins in the movie theater.¹⁸ It is as a result of these rites—linked to the fact that spectators respond in a uniform way to the solicitations emanating from the screen, like the faithful at a religious or lay ceremony—that the crowd gathered in the theater is transformed into a collective, into a public. In the theater a spectator joins or re-joins a social group and becomes a member of a community thanks to a rite.

Two remarks are necessary here. First, being in a movie theater implies not only common actions (even if they are not necessarily uniform), but also shared knowledge and beliefs. A ritual requires both physical and mental participation. Second, being in a movie theater constitutes a moment in which something unique and singular occurs (one is there to watch “this” film and no other), but there are also references to a whole series of established behaviors.

¹⁸ When speaking of the filmic experience as a *rite*, it is necessary to take into account the opposing view of Benjamin, which distinguishes between the cult value and the exhibition value of cinema: Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” paragraphs 5 and 6.

The rite is something which causes the exceptional and the habitual to converge.¹⁹

With regard to vision, the film aims to “fill the eyes” of the spectator, to solicit him sensually: the filmic experience mobilizes a perceptive intensity that allows the spectator to “immerse” him or herself in that which he or she is watching. In this sense we can say that filmic images, more than objects to be seen, constitute a visual environment. But film seems to do other things, as well: it seems to want to “restitute” to the spectator that reality which on the screen is not present if not in its appearance; and it seems to want to do so through an illusion.

There is no doubt that on the screen we *re-view* the world: both the actual one in which we live, and the possible one in which we could live. This “restitution” takes place on a multitude of levels: the filmic images can be seen as a “trace” or a “imprint” of that which has passed before the camera lens; they can be seen as a “copy” or a “facsimile” of the world in which we live; or they can be seen as a “reconstruction” or a “hypothesis” of reality. It is this multitude of levels that unfolds a double-sided situation. On one hand, the world seems to “extend” itself into that which we see on the screen, and can therefore “meet” us, just as it does in daily experience. On the other hand, the world seems to find a “substitution” in a series of signs and discourses, that simulate it in the most perfect way possible—and in simulating it, they offer a “magnification”: a “new version,” or a “model” of the world. The two sides overlap: the world comes up to “meet” me, yet it is a substitute for the world; after all, that world which comes up to “meet” me could be a world other than the one in which I live—a reformulation, a hypothesis, a fantasy; and nevertheless, that world which comes up to “meet” me is exactly like the world in which I live when I experience it.

In this sense, we may say that filmic images sanction the eclipse of the real, while simultaneously proposing themselves as the remedy to this eclipse—even through illusion. Factual reality recedes from our perceptual horizon and

¹⁹ Naturally, on this theme one should see Benjamin’s reflections on the viewing of film as both shock and habit: “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

makes room for a different reality with (almost) all the characteristics of the former. In other words, factual reality withdraws, and what emerges is a representation that maintains a link with the represented reality (the image on the screen is its trace or its copy), while simultaneously highlighting its structure and its possibilities (the image on the screen emphasizes some aspects of effective reality, while also highlighting a hypothetical reality). At the movies, the world in which we live dissolves into thin air, only to reappear in its structural components and in its possible variations. The cinema unfolds the loss of reality and its recuperation in the form of a spectacle.

The technological device, the apparatus, underlines both aspects of this unfolding. On one hand it makes evident the unnatural nature of the situation in which the spectators are immersed; on the other hand it offers these spectators the possibility of reconnecting themselves to the world, thanks to its capacity to reinforce an “effect of reality.” It provokes a “segregation” from the external world just as it offers a series of images that break through our everyday horizon. The cinema allows us to live a particular “experience of reality,” in which we lose our contact with the world, and yet we reinforce our links with it.

Thanks to its apparatus, cinema “embodies” the real that it helps to suppress. This embodiment takes an illusory form: on the screen there appears the “quasi-real.” Yet, this quasi-real, in retracing and reconstructing factual reality, is able to unfold and emphasize some aspects of it. Moreover, this quasi-real, in reconstructing factual reality in a hypothetical form, is able to highlight its intrinsic possibilities, its potentialities, its extensions. Magnification of the factual and exaltation of the possible: cinema’s “restitution” of the real involves these two aspects. What this “restitution” returns to us is the world which had been taken from us, plus an attention and an imagination.²⁰ In this sense, we can say that film, in re-embodiment the real, also embodies the “phantasms” that pass through a society, i.e. its obsessions, its fixations, its desires—including that particular

²⁰ The film which perhaps best thematizes this form of restitution—accompanied by awareness and imagination—is Fritz Lang’s *Lady in the Window*, starting from the stupendous sequence in which the professor studies the portrait of a woman in a shop window: as he is doing so, the reflection of the woman appears on the window, as, behind him, the woman of the portrait appears in flesh and bone.

ghost that is the nostalgia for the reality that we are losing. Or, better yet, film embodies that which Morin calls our “imaginary”—that imaginary which skirts the real and which imbues it with a personal anxiety.²¹

It is exactly this aspect that allows us to understand that the illusory form in which the real is restituted to the viewer is not necessarily a deficit, nor is it a form of deceit. It can become an occasion for the spectator, in regaining the reality taken from him, to rearticulate it according to the forms of attention and the forms of imagination suggested to him by the film (or, if you will, according to the ways suggested to the spectator by the imaginary incarnated in the film). In other words, at the cinema, the illusory reality that appears on the screen can also allow the spectator to *refigure the world*. The desire for the real permits this *re-figuration* to operate more frequently and at a deeper level. When this happens the filmic experience, so to speak, becomes “full”: the spectator perceives again and anew, and then he or she re-elaborates a consciousness and a competence beyond that of common sense. When filmic vision refigures the world it is only then that we *re-cognize* things.²²

In this game of subtraction, restitution and re-figuration of the real, watching a film does not operate like a simple identification of the represented (like cognitive psychology seems to sometimes suggest); it activates an encounter between the observer and the observed that implies a mutual identification²³—along a path supported by a desire to re-experience the world. I would like to add that the forging of this path is inextricably linked to the culture of the time in which film was born. A sense of the loss and reacquisition of reality, its theatricalization, a recourse to illusion, etc., are all typical phenomena of the second half of the 19th century. However, in the filmic experience there is something more. By implicating images that *re-presents* reality through its traces, film combines a scientific aptitude (the reconstruction of the invisible) with a

²¹ Edgar Morin, *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); *Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire. Essai d'anthropologie sociologique*, Paris, Minuit, 1956.

²² Montani has brilliantly explored this moment in his *L'immaginazione narrativa*,

²³ The recuperation of the lesson of phenomenology is important in this sense. See Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: a Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

magic one (the return of the absent). By involving images that are able to refigure the world, film also has something of the ascetic, according to the exceptional intuition of Eisenstein,²⁴ and therefore it makes room for an experience that is in some way religious.

This synthetic description of the filmic experience is pertinent to the cinema in its first hundred years of life. Naturally, one must ask what is now changing in this experience, both because of the advent of digital images and because of the multiplication of the types of screens on which we now watch images in movement (only some of which fall under the definition of that which we are used to calling “film”). Does the digital image—especially where it veers toward an explicitly anti-realistic re-elaboration of the represented world—still have as its goal the recuperation and the representation of reality? And does the progressive expansion of images of a didactic or informative nature (I am thinking, for example, of the navigation systems in our cars, authentic heirs to the *travelogues*), as well as of the diffusion of images which aim at practices of surveillance (the web cam, for example, heir to the *vues lumieriennes*)—the presence of which now characterizes the cinema as well²⁵—introduce other dimensions to the traditional filmic experience? For example, do they shift the aforementioned game of subtraction from the level of awareness to that of control or power? Do they transform re-figuration into mapping? Do they now guarantee access as opposed to restitution?

5. The Filmic Experience: Defining the Situation

In order to understand the meaning of a filmic experience, it is necessary to take into account other factors. As I have already said, it is crucial to understand the awareness which acts at the social and individual levels. Subjects “live” an experience; and in living it, they also “define” it. This definition allows

²⁴This reference is to the reflection on the mechanism of pathos in S. M. Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature* (Cambridge, Mass., New York : Cambridge University Press, 1987).

²⁵ See, the excellent work by Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne, Peter Weibel (eds.), *Ctrl (space): Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother* (Karlsruhe, Cambridge, Mass.: ZKM Center for Art and Media, MIT Press, 2002) for a discussion of the way in which cinema (and contemporary art) recuperate surveillance practices.

them to recognize that they are living an experience and the type of experience they are living. One fundamental way of defining a filming experience is to recognize the spatial setting and the mental frame in which it occurs. This procedure is especially important in classical cinema.

The filmic experience requires a spatial definition: this is a matter of recognizing the environment in which one is moving and the way in which the different elements within it are distributed. What emerges is the *setting* for the act of viewing. There arise a few elements which cannot be ignored: the fact that the spectator finds him- or herself “before” the screened image; that the projecting device is situated behind him or her; that he or she is surrounded by technology; that the reality to which the image refers remains “outside” the field of vision; that “beyond the screen” there is a (new) diegetic world, etc. These elements define the physical situation in which the experience is developed, while simultaneously bounding the experience to a precise physical situation. To recognize the setting means to be able to answer the question “where is cinema?” not the question “what is cinema?”²⁶

Naturally, this “where” can change, as has happened recently. The development of cinema today seems, on one hand to correspond to the use of new spatial devices (for example, the transfer of filmic vision into the domestic environment, and the way in which this context changes the relationships between the different components), and on the other hand to correspond to the loss of a precise spatial fixity (consider the viewing of a film on a computer, and the way in which this modality of vision eliminates the sense of place).²⁷ Defining the filmic experience becomes more difficult.

²⁶ This line of research—which moves toward a strongly anti-essentialist approach to cinema cinema—has found excellent outcomes in Janet Harbord, *Film Cultures* (London, New Delhi: Sage, 2002). In particular, Harbord delineates a “genealogy” of current sites of film consumption, starting from the differences in early decades of the 20th Century between the nickelodeon, art galleries and specialized film clubs.

²⁷ In this perspective it could be useful to dedicate special attention to the presence of cinema in what Marc Augé calls *non-places*, in order to see if it re-elaborates semantically these spaces or not. Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Super Modernity* (London: New York: Verso, 1995).

Parallel to the spatial definition of filmic experience, there is also a “mental” one, which involves the ways in which subjects characterize globally that which they are experiencing. Here, more than an environment, this is a matter of recognizing the circumstances that one faces and the *frame* in which one finds oneself moving: in a word, the *frame* in which one operates and in which one consents to operate. A frame establishes a state of things, the behavior acceptable within it, and its possible evolution. To recognize the frame means to understand the kind of context one is in and, at the same time, to accept it as a reference.

The classic filmic experience—which took place in a movie theater—brought two frames into an overlapping association: the frame of social gathering, in which the spectator shared his experience with other spectators; and the frame of vision, in which, turning his or her attention toward the screen, the spectator experienced the film itself. The filmic experience was born of two matrixes melded together.²⁸ Today, this combination doesn’t seem necessary any longer. Together with the settings, the frames have also changed. Two opposing filmic experiences could be: watching an art film in an art gallery; and watching a film on a plane or bus. These different experiences determine a series of changes in the spectator’s attitude. Here, too, defining the filmic experience becomes more difficult.

There remains, in any case, the fact that the filmic experience lent itself for a long time to a recognition that began at its setting and the circumstances that brought it about. This recognition restitutes the most immediate “consciousness” of the experience—a “consciousness” which involves the “where” and the “how” of the experience: a setting and a frame. Contemporaneously, this recognition made the filmic experience appear *situated* and *enclosed*.

By *situated*, we mean that the spectator always sees the film in a particular place and within a particular frame of action. The spectator is a subject with a particular physical or mental collocation. It is in this “space” and in this

²⁸ For more on this idea, see Eric Feldmann, “Considérations sur la situation du Spectateur au Cinéma”, *Revue internationale de Filmologie* 26 (1956).

“time” of the filmic experience that the film “comes to meet” the spectator: sometimes as a gift, sometimes as an aggressive threat, sometimes as a puzzle, and so on. And it is in this “where” and in this “when” that the filmic vision manifests itself: sometimes halting at the “spectacle” staged on the screen; sometimes challenging the surrounding reality; sometimes shuttling between the two. A “geopolitical” analysis of the cinema must take this into account.²⁹

By *enclosed*, we mean an experience provided with boundaries, both physical and mental.³⁰ Film watching has its own unique places and circumstances. These places and circumstances are marked by precise thresholds. This characteristic doesn’t prevent the filmic experience from aggregating a series of other behaviors and actions: it is typical of fans, for example, to associate a series of activities that complement the experience of viewing a film. The filmic experience can also live beyond its defined boundaries. Sometimes its modalities are applied to other occurrences (“it was like being at the movies!”), thus assimilating these real-world occurrences to an actual filmic vision.

6. The Filmic Experience: The Role of Rules

In order to be individually and socially recognized—and it would not otherwise exist without this acknowledgement—the filmic experience must submit to a series of rules that shape it. And in shaping it, these rules allow the filmic experience to be identifiable and legitimized. Right from the beginning, these rules engage filmic vision on many levels: for example, rules govern the fact that the image assumes “acceptable content” or “balanced composition”; but also that the enjoyment of the film takes place in a “healthy environment” and according to a “standard protocol”, and that the spectators adopt “good social behavior”; etc. These rules delineate a real “discipline” in the Foucaultian

²⁹ It is necessary not only to compare and contrast the modes of representation elaborated by each culture with model of mainstream Hollywood cinema but also to understand what it meant to go to the movies within different cultures, outside of the Western model of the filmic experience.

³⁰ As far as concern framing the situation, see F. Casetti, “Communicative Situations: The Cinema and the Television Situation,” *Semiotica*, 1/2 (1996), and also *Communicative Negotiations in Cinema and Television* (Milan: VeP, 2002).

sense,³¹ in the range of which cinema also seems to enter. Undoubtedly, this discipline is aimed at “subjugating” the spectators and rendering them “functional” within social designs. Cinema inaugurates an experience that has something both “excessive” (it’s enough to think about the intensity of the spectator’s perception) and “liminal” (this is the “world apart” created in a theater) about it. From this is derived the necessity of keeping everything under control which is “too much” or which goes “beyond” customary limits. Nevertheless, the rules do not only serve to rein in the filmic vision within “proper” limits (making it become a “decent” vision). More importantly they are used to obtain social recognition—that is to render the vision itself an identifiable act (because it is based on precise rules) and is acceptable (precisely because it is not outside social norms). Thus, cinema must “discipline” its mode of being, not so much to create “docile” bodies and minds in sight of a productive finality, as much as to assume a recognizable and recognized order, which is only possible through regulation.

The “excessiveness” and “liminality” of the filmic experience never completely disappear, but continue to operate, without being restricted to the background. However, I would like to introduce a seemingly contrary idea, intertwined with the disciplinary process: the spectator engages in a series of tactics that allow him or her to “appropriate” elements at his or her disposal (“regulated” elements), in order to manufacture an experience which is effectively his or her own. Again, this “appropriation” works on many levels: from the performance of “deviant readings” to the enactment of “improper” behaviors. Especially on the level of reading, we often engage in “unauthorized” interpretations of the projected film, in which the fantasy of the spectator plays a huge role (be it to involve his or her obsessions, be it to find answers to his or her life’s dilemmas).³² Therefore, if it is true that the spectator confronts a discipline,

³¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

³² An alternate example between authorized and unauthorized interpretation is offered in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, which is a great metaphor of the filmic vision: detective Doyle (perfect representative of a “reading” regulated by the law of reason) restrains himself to that which is

it is also true that within the frame of the filmic experience, he or she willingly practices “poaching” (to use the beautiful concept put forth by de Certeau)³³.

7. Forms of the Filmic Experience: Some Thematic and Historical Cues

In the moment in which it comes to be defined, just as in the moment in which it comes to be regulated, the filmic experience assumes a precise form. And it is precisely in this form (or better still, in these forms, in the plural) that filmic experience comes to be recognized as such; that is, identified and instituted, both individually and socially.

The presence of a form is important. In one sense, in fact, it reminds us that cinema has been able to elaborate not only forms of representation, nor only forms of perception, but also those forms that we can call “forms of life.” In another sense, it opens up a precise field of study: the diverse forms of filmic experience tell us how cinema has been seen and lived in its different phases; and furthermore, which “consciousness” of its presence has gradually been acquired. Taking this last idea as a point of departure, I will try rather synthetically to recall some relevant passages.

- a. (*Modernity and Popularity*). Cinema, since its inception, has been characterized as a modern phenomenon, as well as a popular one. On one hand, in fact, the filmic experience seems to contain all the typical themes of its time³⁴: it confronts the need to be affordable with the pleasure of speed; the progressive mechanization of modern life with the ever increasing relevance of contingent and fleeting phenomena, and a mode of thought that assumes the forms of uncontrolled flux, etc. These themes are evidenced by the many scholarly contributions from the first two decades of the 20th

certain, while the reporter, Jeff (a journalist, and therefore fascinated by stories), pushes his interpretation beyond what is permissible. Needless to say, Jeff will be right...

³³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

³⁴ In this sense cinema offers an experience of modernity, from the moment in which, thanks to film, the new parameters typical of the time are expressed; but cinema is also an experience in modernity, from the moment in which its time allows for an adequate context in which to express its own potentiality.

century.³⁵ On the other hand, the filmic experience presents itself as a popular experience: it engages a wide cross-section of the population with a language accessible to all, and it proposes largely common values.³⁶ In this case as well, cinema responds to one of the demands of its time: that of a great “artistic democracy.”³⁷ It is important to underscore that modernity and popularity in cinema assume a particular guise, which is precisely that which they give to films; we are talking however about a guise that imposes itself with very wide diffusion, and which also for this reason tends to become canonical³⁸ (speed, mechanization, flux, etc., each become the very idea that is provided of them by cinema). This means that in cinema, modernity ends up finding its most popular face, so to speak; and parallel to this, popularity assumes the most modern face that film gives it—re-elaborated and put forward by a mass medium, it becomes, in fact, a “mass” and a “mediatic” popularity.

This orientation of filmic experience toward modernity and popularity functions such that, in the first two decades of the 20th century, the cinema is important above all for its capacity to offer a new gamut of sensations and to construct a new type of collectivity. That which filmic vision refigures are precisely these two aspects, which find their point of convergence in a spectator that rediscovers his or her body as a sensitive and social body.

An author such as Canudo should be reread precisely in this light. Although much of his writing is in the form of film reviews, he is above all attentive to the ways in which cinema activates new sensibilities and new social

³⁵ For Italy, it is enough to think of Giovanni Papini, “La filosofia del cinematografo,” *La Stampa*, Milan, XLI, 18 May 1907, and Enrico Thovez, “L’arte di celluloide,” *La Stampa*, Turin, XLII, 29 July 1908.

³⁶ See the important essay of Louis Delluc, “Le cinéma, art populaire” (1921), now in *Ecrits cinématographiques. Le cinéma au quotidien*, II/2 (Paris: Cinématèque Française, 1990) pp.279-288.

³⁷ This concept is advanced by, among others, Eugenio Giovanetti, *Il cinema e le arti meccaniche* (Palermo: Sandron, 1930).

³⁸ For this process, cf. the concept of “negotiated form” advanced by Francesco Casetti, *L’occhio del Novecento* (Milan: Bompiani, 2005).

gatherings.³⁹ What clearly emerges from his pages is how, during this first phase of the filmic experience, a spectator is such, not so much because he or she “sees a film,” as for that which he or she “feels” and “experiences” through the watching of a film, be it on the esthetical, psychological or social level.⁴⁰

b. (*Institutionalization*). From the end of World War I onwards, what emerges is a “regulation,” both of the forms of filmic representation and of the modes of spectatorial behavior. Cinema must respond to the needs of a moral, of an etiquette, of a hygienic ideal: only in this way can it create a “good” experience. This “regulation” accompanies and articulates a more general process: cinema “institutionalizes” itself, which is to say that it sets its own modes of being and of doing; and simultaneously, cinema becomes a “social institution,” i.e. recognizable and recognized.⁴¹

Two observations. Firstly, to grasp this process of institutionalization on an experiential level, it can be useful to follow the bitter feud between cinephiles and cinephobes (a revival of the old conflict between iconophiles and iconoclasts), which characterizes the debate on cinema, especially in the second decade of the century.⁴² Both fronts—though from two opposite perspectives—evoke a “model” of cinema—for the one, realized; for the other, betrayed—capable of legitimating cinema’s presence. The second observation regards the possible connections between the process of institutionalization and the emergence of two needs: that of storytelling (expressed, above all by the public, and which forms the basis of the progressive rise of the fiction feature film); and that of artistry (expressed by

³⁹ See, in particular, Ricciotto Canudo, “Lettere d’arte. Trionfo del cinematografo,” *Nuovo Giornale*, 25 November 1908, now in *Filmcritica* 28:278 (November 1977) pp. 296-302.

⁴⁰ A group of films, from *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (E. Porter, USA, 1902) to *Mabel’s Dramatic Career* (Sennet 1913) or *A Movie Star* (Sennet, 1913) illustrate with great clarity the central node of the filmic experience.

⁴¹ It is no coincidence that that which others refer to as classic cinema, or mainstream cinema, or cinema of diegetical absorption, Noel Burch the “institutional form of representation.”

⁴² A good indicator of this debate is the polemic that in France placed Pierre Souday against Émile Vuillermoz: cf. P. M. Heu, *Le Temps du cinéma. Émile Vuillermoz, père de la critique cinématographique* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003).

the intellectual class, and which is behind the progressive “sanctification” of the filmic work).

c. (*Attendance*) The institutionalization of cinema leads toward an aspect of the model of filmic experience that we could call “attendance.” This is characterized by the relevance that the object of vision has with respect to the environment in which vision occurs, or with respect to the background on which it carves itself a niche. The spectator seeks a relation with the film, more than with the public that is with him or her in the theater. The spectator strives toward an act of seeing, more than toward a generic act of “feeling”; and the spectator accompanies this seeing with a continual mental projection onto and identification with the represented world, as opposed to accompanying it with observable physical reactions (which, however, do not totally disappear).⁴³ Furthermore, a strong regulation of the modes of vision is at work: the body of the spectator is progressively limited in its physical reactions; and if the *scopic* activity is exalted, it also encounters an object in which visibility is normalized (the “discipline of the eye”: whether on the level of content—the Hays Code—, or on the level of compositional and narrative syntax—the elaboration of a “film grammar,” to which the theoretical writings of Pudovkin, Arnheim, Spottiswoode, etc. contribute⁴⁴). The filmic experience consists above all in an act of concentrating oneself on a film, and accompanying its development.⁴⁵ What it refigures, then, is above all, a world

⁴³ This is, as is noted, a double identification: on one hand with characters and the objects of vision, and on the other with the gaze, in the beam of which these characters and objects are found. Cf. Christian Metz, *Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

⁴⁴ Rudolf Arnheim, *Film* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933); Vsevolod I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique; Five Essays and Two Addresses* (London: G. Newnes, 1933); Raymond Spottiswoode, *A Grammar of the Film, An Analysis of Film Technique* (London: Faber & Faber, 1935).

⁴⁵ In attendance, we have the conversion of a pragmatic subject into a cognitive subject: the spectator passes from a vision through which he or she puts the world and his/herself “to the test” (cf. the notion of filmic vision as a *test* in Benjamin, in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”), to a vision in which the spectator retraces a world predisposed for him or her, deceiving him/herself with the notion of being a part of it. Therefore, the spectator passes also from fear to pleasure; from curiosity to stupor; from an attitude of conquest to a more contemplative attitude; an attitude which, for the represented world, also signifies a passing from a role of “threat to tame” or “dominate” to a role of a gift to be received. The passage from one

as gigantic spectacle. At the cinema, the reality that surrounds us, our dreams, our very body, reveal their seductive side precisely on account of their “to-be-looked-at-ness.”⁴⁶

- d. (*Crisis of attendance*). The attendance model enters into crisis in general terms even before in practical terms, beginning already with World War II. The growing consciousness of film as both a political act (relaunched by Italian Neo-Realism) and as the creative act of an author (reintroduced by Astuc’s “manifesto,” which describes the movie camera as a pen with which the director writes his work), created a situation in which the spectator is no longer asked simply to sit down and watch a film: he or she must “respond” to the film, and in so doing “correspond” to the film’s author. In the filmic experience two main things come into play: on one hand there are the perlocutionary effects of the film, that is, what the film “makes” or is able to “make” the spectator do; and on the other hand there is the possibility of a “dialogue” with the director, which creates an “exclusive” community, made up of the author and his or her spectators, even before the spectators and the totality of the citizenry.
- e. (*Toward performance*). Beginning in the 1980s, the change becomes even more explicit. There seem to be two drives behind this change. On one hand, there emerges the need for a *relationality* on the part of the social subjects: one’s identity depends upon one’s relationship with others. Cinema offers a representation of the world, but with fewer spaces of exchange (social meetings before and after the screening, a virtual dialogue with the author,

attitude to another is magnificently represented by Buster Keaton in *Sherlock Junior*: he passes from an initial disorientation—when, entering the screen, he finds himself in a world which continually surprises him—to a successive adjustment, when, remaining in the screen, he becomes a character of the story, and this “development” guides him.

⁴⁶ The expression comes from Laura Mulvey, *Visual and other pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). More generally, we may say that the theory of the “subject position” of the 1970s and ‘80s is—belatedly, insofar as this model has already gone into crisis—a theory of attendance

conversation among cinephiles, etc.). Other media respond better to this need; if the cinema would like to continue occupying a place of central importance, it must learn from—and catch up to—these other media.⁴⁷ On the other hand, there is the emergence of a need for an *expressiveness* on the part of the social subjects: one's identity depends upon how one presents oneself. The cinema offers a chance to attend a spectacle, but not to make oneself a protagonist of it, if not virtually. Other media seem to do this better; and cinema must update itself.⁴⁸

In this run-up to new demands, the cinema is working from its own traditional structure, developing some intrinsic possibilities: here I am thinking of cult consumption (movie clubs, specialized theaters) and the fan communities, which interact among themselves and with the screen, often replying to what they are watching. Another example is film consumption in small art theaters where one feels more “at home.” New forms of consumption are also activated: domestic consumption, by VHS followed by DVD; television channels dedicated to showing films, some organized by theme, etc. We are moving ever closer to a *personalized* experience, in the sense of an experience that responds to specific needs, rather than general ones, but also one that takes place in more and more private spaces, rather than public ones. Therefore, it is an experience which has seen the consumer reacquire a central position as subject (social, or perhaps trans-social).

Two notes. First of all, this personalized experience completely reinterprets the post-modern shift in popular culture. This is a culture that emphasizes participation in a network of interpersonal relationships, rather than belonging to an aggregate of individuals: and which privileges the projection of the self to the outside across various channels of communication, as opposed to the absorption within the self of representations offered by a few large

⁴⁷ Television, more than cinema, is capable of adapting itself to this emerging exigency: from the role of program dispensatory, *paleo-tv* became a means of contact with spectators during the 1980s, thanks to telephone call-ins, the inclusion of everyday people in programs, etc.: *neo-tv*.

⁴⁸ In this case, the medium that is quickest to respond to this expressive necessity is perhaps fashion: cinema limits itself to providing symbolic identification, i.e. purely mental garments.

communications agencies. Therefore, we are no longer dealing with a mass-media mass culture, but with a post-mass and hyper-media culture. Secondly, this personalized experience marks the end of the spectator who passively enjoys a spectacle, and the rise of the spectator who intervenes in that which he or she is about to enjoy: the spectator is called upon not just to see, but also to do (or to do something in order to be able to see).⁴⁹ For all these reasons, I would like to characterize this type of experience as *performance*.

The levels of performance to which the spectator is committed are numerous. There is, as I've indicated, a relational and expressive engagement: the filmic experience is by now punctuated by the construction of social networks and the manifestation of self. There is a cognitive engagement linked to the activation of different forms and courses of interpretation, of incorporation and of use of symbolic resources offered by films. Finally, there is a practical engagement linked to the behaviors put into action by the process of consumption, and which proceeds from the completion of determined spatial and temporal courses in order to arrive at the place of consumption, to the need to operate the visual technology in order to be able to activate the consumption and compose the "menu" of that which one wants to see.

- f. (*Windows*) Nevertheless, this totality of behaviors, which conceive of the spectator tendentially as an active agent, do not make sense if they are not brought within the new frames in which consumption is to occur. The cinema finds itself by now in a rather ample number of circumstances, in diverse and numerous environments, and across diverse and numerous media; and, I would like to add, in a wide array of products, diversified by device, by function, and by format. It is opportune in this sense to identify the various *windows*, which allow for the filmic experience, by characterizing them in spacio-temporal terms, in technological terms, in social terms, and

⁴⁹ Régis Debray, in speaking of the passage to the *videosphere*, speaks openly about the "end of the spectacle," associating it with a more general weakening of the role of vision: *Vie et mort de l'image. Une histoire du regard en Occident*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

typological terms. It is within this frame of thinking that one can then reconstruct the role and the path of the spectator. I will therefore conclude by defining the type of experience that the spectator encounters.

We can bring our little journey to an end by indicating a discontinuity. For a long time the filmic experience made itself recognizable thanks to a setting and a frame, that is, a spatial situation in which it occurred and a mental frame to which it could be related. Today it is necessary to define it also in relation to that which we have called a *window*. This involves at least three things: the weakening of spatial determinations (the filmic experience does not depend anymore primarily on a place); the introduction of a media determination (in the past the filmic experience was linked to the cinematic medium; today it may propose itself through diverse media); the reformulation of the frame (we are no longer dealing with the superimposition of a gathering, of a social meeting, and of a vision). Yet there is still a common element, and it is the intervention of disciplinary processes in continuous dialectic with the creativity of the subjects, with their anti-discipline (we have spoken already of “poaching”). This “regulation” of the windows serves to normalize both the spectatorial behaviors and the visual content, and to render recognizable and recognized the new modalities of vision. In this light, we may say that it will be negotiation between discipline and anti-discipline which will finally provide the definition of the new forms of filmic experience—just as it will provide the answer to the radical question of whether the filmic experience will survive in these altered conditions, or whether it will exhaust itself and become an archeological phenomenon.

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