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Can We Still Talk about Cinema? Screens, Movie Theaters, and Streaming Platforms

> la caverna-donna-sogno si è esalata in una cometa che sfasciandosi è ripiovuta sul vasto mondo.
> Ne sono nate le mille sale, buie nel buio delle notti, ma dall'occhio rutilante,
> sotto venti e piogge, in agglomerati urbani o in mezzo ai campi.
> Andrea Zanzotto, *Ipotesi intorno a «La città delle donne» di F. Fellini*

Abstract

Cinema has transformed its role with the rise of personal devices and digital platforms. While the v cinematic experience—defined by immersive moving images and the collective environment of the movie theatre—once played a central role in shaping social and cultural imaginaries, the proliferation and fragmentation of screens have significantly diminished its cultural authority. By examining this turning point, this study aims to investigate the limitations of contemporary cinematic experience and to consider whether alternative forms of immersion and new cinematic environments, such as virtual reality, may assume a comparable cultural and social function.

Keywords

Cinematic experience, Aesthetic community, Platform, Device, Virtual reality.

Cinema has created shared imagery, myths, and celebrities by which different generations have identified and forged their identities. Consider the phenomenon of Hollywood *stars*, where certain actors have always been mythologized and revered by crowds of people. Cinema has thus created cultural references, beliefs, and shared emotions. Pertinent examples of this are seen in the impact of films such as *Harry Potter* (2001-2011), *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), and the *Star Wars series* (1977-2019), to name some of the most famous examples. Here, we can already notice the importance of films in the construction of fantasies or idols across several generations[1]. Cinema

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[1] T. Brabazon, *We'll always have Tatooine?: Star Wars and writing a popular memory*, in

has thus established itself as an opportunity, not only for entertainment or cultural enrichment, but also for sharing, meeting, and interacting with other human beings in a specific place – the movie theatre – thereby creating an occasion for identifying with experiences and stories different from our own. In this *suspension* that cinema allows us to achieve, fostered by the darkness of the theatre, we are thus immersed in situations different from our daily lives, allowing us to experience new situations and stories.

From the advent of home cinema and television, as well as various media such as VHS and DVDs, which have been superseded by today's platforms (including Netflix, Disney+, and Prime Video) and reformulated display screens, the cinematic experience has undergone a radical transformation beyond the traditional theatre experience. This aspect is not only verifiable in the use of different techniques of filmmaking, which the diversification of screens has produced, but the film industry also has to deal with different production requirements and different interlocutors. However, most importantly, the *film experience* itself for the viewer, in front of the screen, has fundamentally changed. Viewers can now watch the same films outside of the cinema, at home, on planes, on public transport, etc., all because of the various portable devices. This *change of venue* has consequences not only in terms of viewing quality and the varying abilities to *immerse* oneself in the film, but also in the fact that cinema has lost its ability to create *shared places* – movie theatres – which shape not only our experience of the film, but also our way of conceiving the *other* with whom we relate while in front of the screen. There is a need, then, to consider an urgent and deeply contemporary problem: the loss of a shared space and a sense of *belonging* to a community, in which the cinema experience has become almost exclusively reserved for an *elite* or avid cinephiles, rather than a community or culture[2].

Based on these observations, the question I want to focus on is: can cinema still act as a "social glue", as a dispositive of social cohesion, if it no longer constitutes a shared experience within the common space created for that purpose, the movie theatre? Considering that cinema nowadays is dispersed across multiple devices and settings, does this require a new form of experience and attention, implying an accompaniment with new technologies (VR, AR, new devices, etc.) and new spaces (such as

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"Australian Journal of Communication", n. 26, 1999, pp. 1-10; G. Patsiaouras, *The intergenerational art branding of the Star Wars saga: may the myth be with you!*, in "Arts and the Market", n. 12 (1), 2022, pp. 84-101.

[2] Let us mention, for example, the famous film *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988), in which the cinema occupies a special place in the life of the town, serving as a gathering point where people cry and laugh together, and where – to quote the film – "misfortunes and miseries are forgotten." Through the magic of cinema, a community is created, thus becoming fully integrated into the public space.

new kinds of theatre and virtual environments)? Further, with the changing conditions of cinema viewing, is the experience of *suspension*, the immersion in scenarios or in situations different from our daily lives, still possible? If cinema once had the power to bring people together, creating an identification with different characters and circumstances, what has changed now that the cinematic experience is no longer confined to a single place or a single device with multiple viewers?

The attempt to find tools, if not to resolve these issues, then at least to orient ourselves within them, seems to be the most urgent, since what is at stake is our ability to live out formerly available paths toward shared experiences. There is a loss of feeling the same sensations and emotions, and to confront the situations presented on screen together, as a community. Rather than *being projected*, the audiovisual content is now *played*, taking on a form that is not only fragmented but also subject to our control, allowing us to navigate back and forth through the frames of the film. Watching a movie or a video alone thus reinforces the absence of bonds that characterizes our current community life. Thus, due to this problem, research into a new type of filmic and aesthetic experience is required. I argue that this change in the communal mode of viewing creates different imaginaries, rendering obsolete the power of the 'seventh art' to bring people together, to cancel out (or at least set aside) certain divisions between individuals.

1. The Community Experience and the Movie Theatre: Rethinking a Paradigm

After all, people usually go to see movies together. The crisis in cinema is not only the consequence of the introduction of devices that allow solitary viewing, or of economic reasons, such as the cost of tickets, but also the result of the impoverishment of forms of socialization that characterize our era and corrode that fundamental adverb, *together*, which we never dwell on enough. This is why watching a film using means of reproduction that encourage solitary viewing – such as TV, old videotapes, DVDs, Blu-rays, files downloaded from Netflix and *streamed* on tablets, and all the other methods that technology offers us and will offer us in the future – not only entails different sensory qualities, depending on the size of the screen, the fidelity of the colors, the sharpness, the definition, the audio, and so on, but is also *hermeneutically* different.[3]

[3] A. Tagliapietra, *Filosofia dei cartoni animati: una mitologia contemporanea*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2019, pp. 22-23. The translation is mine.

In this passage, Andrea Tagliapietra highlights several points that are particularly relevant to my analysis: the introduction of new technologies, the economic factor, and above all, the *impoverishment* of the forms of socialization that afflict our contemporary world. Cinema is no longer a place and an event useful for building our community life, where the roles we usually play in our daily lives disappear, due to the fusion that takes place between us and the images. This suspension takes place *collectively*, as we become part of a community participating in the same event. Further, because we are moved by the images themselves, our emotions are therefore not only shared with others but also are generated and amplified by the person laughing or crying beside us. I do not claim to deny that this emotive response can also occur through solitary viewing devices, but I maintain that such sharing is fundamentally different from the viewing experience of a group of individuals gathered in the same space.

The "*aesthetic community*"[4], as conceived by Mikel Dufrenne, is described as a group of individuals with different experiences and emotional backgrounds who participate in the same event. What I am indicating is that the *aesthetic community* is disappearing or, at the very least, undergoing a profound reconsideration. The centrality of the "physical" community, which participates in an event in the same room, is supplemented now by online communities and social media, which serve as places for discussion and for sharing comments on films. Let us consider, for instance, platforms such as Mubi, which provide a space for users to comment on and rate films. Such platforms may create spaces for the exchange of opinions and criticism, yet they lack the "sense of belonging" that defines the cinematic experience – where we laugh, cry, and become emotionally charged *together*. The experience we have is not only different in terms of the quality of the screen, the sound, or the intensity of our attention, but also because in this community of viewers, we share the same emotions and encounter them together. Viewers participate in the film in person, perceiving their own movements and reactions to what appears on screen. These aspects *influence* the entire cinematic experience. The introduction of television and individual devices thus divides "the crowd of strangers that once sat in the dark side by side into a multitude of one". As a result, "watching a film began to resemble a traditionally individual experience such as silent reading. […] Knowing that someone else is probably watching the same show is not enough to cancel out the enormous difference between these

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[4] M. Dufrenne, *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique*, PUF, Paris 1953; eng. trans. by E. S. Casey, A. A. Anderson, W. Domingo, L. Jacobson *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL 1973, p. 68. Italics are mine.

two experiences."[5] The *projector-film-theatre*[6] complex disappears, resolving itself into different dialectics. Referencing, for example, to a film about the Holocaust, Julian Hanich tells us: "Needless to say, had I watched the film alone these thoughts and emotions would have been highly attenuated, even inexistent. It was the collective constellation of the movie-theatre that conjured up this complex mixture of cognitions and emotions."[7] The relationship between the viewer, the film, and the entire audience is reconfigured by the fact that the relationships are attenuated, made weaker.

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?[8]

When we have the experience of a theatre, we have a place where people, citizens, share and take part in common experiences. Nowadays, access to films is different: more direct, simpler, more immediate. All one has to do is directly search for a film on a platform, thus eliminating the dimension of waiting and anticipation associated with a film. In this environment, the viewer inhabits a space and participates in a collective ritual, responding to the images presented to them. Cinema finds new spaces, a new audience. The techniques used for cinema, for example the shots, are also changing. As Francesco Casetti points out, it is the cinematic experience itself that is being modified, favoring isolation, non-sharing, and univocal reliance on our tastes and what is proposed to us by the algorithm of these platforms based on them.

In this sense, Hanich talks about a "*we-intention*"[9], where viewers share opinions, thoughts, and emotions that are then modified by the group of viewers themselves. It is an *aesthetic community* that focuses and relates – thanks to the use of a particular frame – on the same object. Viewers can negatively or positively influence my vision, and the film presents itself as a *social space* where bonds are created, where we are together, and where my experience is continuously modified by the context, the number of viewers, whether I know them, and how they respond to certain stimuli. A *common feeling* is emerging, a way of feeling and experiencing the same event, and, upon leaving the cinema, a physi-

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[5] G. Pedullà, *In Broad Daylight. Movies and Spectators After the Cinema*, Verson, London-New York 2012, p. 66.
[6] F. Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy. Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come*, Columbia University Press, New York 2015.
[7] J. Hanich, *The Audience Effect: On the Collective cinema experience*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2018, p. 6.
[8] F. Casetti, *Filmic experience*, in "Screen", n. 50 (1), 2009, p. 58.
[9] J. Hanich, *The audience effect*, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

cal space for exchange and criticism of the film is created, made possible by the dialogue between viewers and their reactions.

2. What Transformations Have Occurred, and What Are Their Implications for the Democratic Space?

2.1 The Space and the Time of the Cinematic Experience

With the viewing of audiovisual products on different displays, "the time and space of enjoyment become personal and subjective, no longer collective and shared as they are with television and cinema."[10] Cinema, especially in the post-pandemic world, can assume an important role as a meeting place, as it is a place where a shared experience is lived[11]. It creates an opportunity for a social and emotional experience that has, among other things, significant psychological benefits[12]. A different kind of empathy is cultivated, a shared sense of community, joy, laughter, and tears experienced collectively by a group of individuals. "At the cinema, in fact, provided that it is a good cinema (capable of producing a true aesthetic experience), none of us is ever simply a 'spectator' of the event. We all become, in the proper sense of the term, '*part*' of the very *same* experience."[13]. Cinema, therefore, forces me to accept the game that consists of watching the moving images while being part of the spectacle they create, putting aside the divisions that exist between individuals. The audience that gathers in front of the screen is not, in this way, an undefined set of different relationships, but a "*We*" that is preparing to perform the same act, that of watching and being captivated by the screen. The cinematographic work creates social bonds, a unity in which conflicts and disagreements are set aside for the duration of the viewing. In the time and space of cinema, a participation is cre-

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[10] M. Masullo, *Nuove modalità di fruizione della generazione Z: il cinema tra piattaforme e frammenti*, in "Futuri", n. 22, 2024, p. 182. The translation is mine.
[11] Cfr. M. Harrod, S. Leonard, D. Negra, *Introduction: Romance and social bonding in contemporary culture - before and after COVID-19*, in M. Harrod, S. Leonard, D. Negra (ed. by), *Imagining "We" in the Age of "I": Romance and Social Bonding in Contemporary Culture,* Routledge, Oxfordshire 2021, pp. 1-28.
[12] "Specifically, oxytocin, a hormone correlated with social bonding and trust, has been found to increase during joint movie-watching experiences", in J. Hutson, *Shared cinema experience and emerging technologies: Integrating mixed-rality components for the future of cinema*", in "Arts & Communication", Vol. 1/2, 2023, p. 2.
[13] M. Donà, *Abitare la soglia: cinema e filosofia*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2010, p. 20. The translation is mine.

ated in which the group is united in front of the object, experiencing a *common perception*.

The keyword here I would like to emphasize is *performance*, which I believe is essential for understanding the contemporary problem of individualized cinematic experience. According to Casetti, when cinema is transferred to new devices, the images become more inconsistent and unstable. This changes the narrative part of the experience and the *shock* it can provoke, as well as the profile of the viewer. We observe that the viewer's attention span is shortening; we are losing concentration and cannot immerse ourselves totally in the film, remaining on the surface instead. Rather than being *immersed* in a space, we *interact* with the flow of images using different platforms, reshaping them according to our preferences and ways of viewing. Even when we interact with films, the frames are less substantial; they are no longer confined to a shared public space and are losing their consistency. We can play and pause the images according to our preference, fragmenting the film-watching experience. If, from a certain point of view, the viewer is more active, as in contemporary art, the film becomes a performance, where he or she mobilizes a different kind of attention in front of the images, involving a different space and environment[14]. "An image may make itself available to a crowd or to an individual, in a public space or in private [...]: if each of these cases, an image acquires different valences, both experiential and political"[15].

The instability of the bond proposed by the cinematic experience is not applied to collective action, common *praxis*, or a project, yet despite this lack of *praxis*, it constitutes us and has constituted itself as a place of encounter, of critical thinking, where everyone can be welcomed as part of the audience. Upon entering the theatre, we implicitly accept the other members of the audience, fostering an understated sense of reciprocity and solidarity among the individuals. This creates a form of social group based on a shared viewing of the cinematic work in a defined time and space. However, with the "relocation" of the cinema, from movie theatres to smartphones and computers, these communal works of audiences and theatre are divided into individual pieces. The creation of a social group is therefore impossible, as there is no physical space or time in which bonds between individuals can be formed.

2.2 Attention and Immersion in New Visual Modalities

The changes in cinema viewing involve both the shared space and our viewing of the film. Thus, not only *where* and *with whom* we

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[14] Cfr. F. Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-13.
[15] Ivi, p. 13.

watch a film, but also *how* we watch it. If, as already mentioned in the previous paragraphs, watching a film in a theatre involves a beginning in the darkness, the exchange of having paid for a ticket, and the other seemingly "ritualized" behaviors proposed by the cinema, all these individual acts together solicit a greater level of attention for the cinema goer. But what can we say about the act itself of viewing films on any type of screen, outside of these intentional cinema activities?

"At the cinema, we *are* rather 'in' the story, and that is why we really feel and act."[16] But when watching a film on a smartphones screen, can we say that we are involved in the story presented by the images? When watching a film on a computer and holding a phone in our hands (the so-called *dual-screen phenomenon*), does the same phenomenon of immersion occur, given that viewers are placed in an environment surrounded by different stimuli? "Cinema also holds its power in being able to make us feel 'other than what we are, while still being what we are,'"[17] in that "our body comes from cinema, from the experience we have as spectators, at the cinema, radically transfigured and made to coincide with the darkness of the theatre, which the bodies illuminated on the screen never cease to wound"[18]. The link between the darkness, the screen, and the specific bodily position is thus broken, as our gaze and attention are involved in a set of noises, solicitations, and different visual and auditory stimuli. The darkness, the silence of the theatre, and the presence of a single large screen prove to be other central components, conducive to directing our gaze and facilitating the contemplation of the images that are thus created through the screen.

"Television episodes are designed with the understanding that viewers may not be fully focused, leading to redundant and easily followed storytelling."[19] Cinema, on the other hand, demands a different kind of attention and effort from us, especially from an emotional point of view. We experience cinema and the spectacle it presents to us, immersing ourselves in the aesthetic experience that is created between our attention and the art presented. We experience infinite lives, infinite situations, *infinite* paths. In the cinema, we have the opportunity to experience ever-new existences, given that, in the darkness of the theatre, the viewers *entrust* themselves to the movement presented on the screen. Through the fragmentation of the cinematic experience into the solitary portable screen viewing, we risk no longer being absorbed by the film but only

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[16] M. Donà, *Cinematocrazia*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2021, p. 13. The translation is mine.
[17] Ivi, p. 16.
[18] Ivi, p. 47.
[19] J. Hutson, *Shared cinematic experience and emerging technologies*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

enjoying its quick, superficial distraction, rather than the participatory aesthetic experience of cinema.

3. Conclusions: The Future of Cinema and New Visual Spaces

The guidelines we want to establish for this debate on cinema and its role in society reflect the problems presented by the cinematic experience today, which is no longer confined to movie theatres alone. With the advent of personalized home viewing, not only has the type of immersion that occurs with the work and identification with its characters changed, but the communal experience that takes place in the theatre has been, if not eliminated, radically altered. We no longer experience emotions *together*, but at home, following a personalized viewing experience, according to our tastes and rhythms. The question I want to leave open in this article is the following: given that cinema has changed and no longer serves – or in a diminished role – the purpose of bringing people together and exposing them to otherness, is it possible to consider other types of viewing experiences, such as those offered by virtual reality, as a successor to this lost or diminished aspect of cinema regarding civic education and community building?

I would therefore like to conclude our reflection with a question about the other forms of creation that new media present us with. I refer, for example, to Gonzáles Iñárritu's work *Carne y Arena. Virtually Present, Physically Invisible* (2017)[20], in which the spectator is allowed to take part in the crossing of some Mexican migrants to the United States of America, trying to avoid the American border police. In this work, "'the feeling of 'presence', of 'being there', is very intense"[21]: we are participants, we do not just see this event, we feel it, we are involved in it – we take part in it deeply. We are thus fully immersed in a story that we can now seemingly experience *firsthand* rather than merely observe as *viewers*. This art installation not only maintains its role as an event, encouraging participatory debate and the emergence of critical discussion, but also serves as a profoundly immersive space. *Carne y Arena* is experienced with a group of spectators who, having left their smartphones and other electronic devices at the entrance, immerse themselves 360 degrees within the experience presented. It is an *empathic-machine*[22] that allows us to deeply and

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[20] Cfr. https://phi.ca/en/carne-y-arena/ (last visit: 29.08.25).
[21] A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine: da Narciso alla realtà virtuale*, Einaudi, Torino 2021, p. 174. The translation is mine.
[22] The expression "empathy machine," used by the critic Roger Ebert to describe film, was used by the filmmaker Chris Milk in a 2015 TED Talk in reference to VR. See *Chris Milk: The Birth of Virtual Reality as an Art Form*, https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_the_birth_of_virtual_reality_as_an_art_form (last visit: 29.08.25).

personally experience what, in this case, a migrant feels when leaving their country.

   With our attention captured in a 360-degree spectrum, neither directed towards a frame nor dispersed among a multitude of distractions, if the frame somehow prevents the work from being canceled out/dissipated by a confrontation with the world, in *Carne y Arena*, the work becomes the world[23]. We thus live a powerful, impactful experience together. "As spectators, we 'throw ourselves' into the scene because we want to become 'subjects' at all costs."[24] The installation is physical. The spectator is actually and fully present in the story, creating a deep, emotional connection with the narrative being presented. There is an encounter with otherness, a shock is made, to which the spectator cannot help but respond actively.

   Beginning with *Carne y Arena*, which presented a new film experience that goes beyond the fragmented, individualized, and perhaps more superficial way of enjoying films that seems to be more prevalent today, it seems that we can also find other alternative ways of watching films that may help to avoid this degradation – at least partially. We briefly touched on the role of virtual reality through Iñárritu's work, but other avenues of research could be opened by analyzing other viewing devices, such as the *Google Glass* or *Apple Vision Pro* – with its 180-degree, 3D and Spatial Audio experience – as well as the new spaces in which the filmic and, more generally, the entertainment experience now takes place. For example, consider *The Sphere* in Las Vegas[25], which presents a new type of "immersive show". This theatre, which was specially designed to maximize the immersive experience and feature the world's largest exterior screen, has encountered significant challenges. The 17,000 spectators sitting inside this sphere can enjoy an ultra-high-resolution show with perfect focus on a curved display, which immerses you in a deep visual experience. This screen, combined with the 4D effects possible in this space (e.g., wind, changing air conditioning temperature, fog, etc.), the best possible sound (including infrasound that you can feel, but not hear, simulating ultra-sensory effects), and different types of lighting, can create an unimaginable variety of shows. This new music and entertainment arena offers an experience that cannot be compared to that of traditional theatres.

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[23] Cfr. A. G. Iñárritu, *Carne y Arena. Quaderno della Fondazione Prada #12*, Fondazione Prada Publisher, Milano 2017.

[24] L. Acquarelli, *Lo Spettacolo del* re-enactment *e il tempo critico della testimonianze in* Carne y Arena *di* Inarritu, in "EC Rivista Italiana di Studi Semiotici" XIV, n. 30, 2020, p. 234. The translation is mine.

[25] Cfr. https://www.thesphere.com (last visit: 21.10.25).

In my view, the advance of the *Sphere* and other viewing technologies makes us question the role of cinema theatres: should we rethink them and propose a new type of communal experience that we cannot currently have at home? Even though a place such as *The Sphere* fails to play the same role in a community as a classic cinema theatre – due to its high price and huge dimensions – where can we find a communal place that offers a deeply immersive experience and allows us to build shared myths and stories?

In addition, I would like to raise a further question and suggest a possible solution to this issue by mentioning another film experience that has already changed our perception of film. In Netflix's *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*[26], the viewer can interact with and influence the plot presented on the screen. As we specified in the first part of our paper, with this kind of movie, the content is not only projected, but played, and the spectator can interact with the plot and decide its progression, fragmenting and controlling all filmic experience. Further, even from an institutional point of view, the role of immersive play regarding the viewing experience is seen when the place, format, and means change once again in considering *immersive* experiences at festivals such as Tribeca in New York or Cannes, where there is a dedicated section to virtual reality. The increasing awareness of virtual reality and new media, which is also evident at an institutional level, demonstrates that their importance is steadily increasing.

Following our interrogation about this new kind of media, I ask myself, at the end of our reflection, whether this experience of shock that cinema has always sought to convey can be experienced at home, during a distracted viewing of a film, often interspersed with other noises or daily chores, or whether it must find other forms of expression, such as augmented or virtual reality, which albeit profoundly different from the form of cinema, may contain the immersion we seek. If cinema becomes a multiple, delocalized, fragmented practice, in which there is no longer a collective experience of the image, it is therefore necessary to redefine the very notion of the cinematic event and ask whether it is still relevant for contemporary practices of social cohesion. Partial answers to these issues can be found in new augmented or virtual reality media, despite their differences from the cinematic experience. While virtual reality viewings offer an increase in immersion, do they attempt to recreate shared spaces and the experience of radical immersion in otherness presented by a

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[26] *Black Mirror Bandersnatch* (David Slade, 2018). Cfr. G. Santaera, "Black Mirror – Bandersnatch and/as Intermedial Performativity through TV Series, Cinema and Digital Transcodification", in M. Fusillo, D. Legge, M. Lino, M. Petricola, G. Rossini (ed. by), *New Approaches to Transcodification: Literature, Arts, and Media*, De Gruyter Brill, Berlino 2025, pp. 227-236.

screen or a viewer? From the analysis of how new ways of experiencing cinema have changed our perception of the *other*, presented on screen, and the *other*, as another viewer sitting next to me, I want to leave the question open as to whether the *empathetic role*[27] that cinema has played should now be entrusted to other types of experience, such as virtual or augmented reality. If cinema has created shared spaces that are useful for the formation of democratic communities, stimulating dialogue and promoting shared experiences where differences between individuals seem to be set aside, can it still play this role, given the contemporary problems I have highlighted, or is it now necessary to turn to other, more immersive practices?

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[27] Cfr. V. Gallese, M. Guerra, *Lo schermo empatico: Cinema e neuroscienze*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2015.