

'Cineforum 2.0'. The Digitization of Movie Theatres: The Case of Lombardy's Sale della Comunità

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My research project investigates the process of digitization from the perspective of small Italian cinemas.

From its initiation in 1999, the transition to this new system of projection has been neither immediate nor particularly evident. In fact, one of the characteristics of this 'silent revolution' is the limited collective perception of change, since digital devices are configured as homologous to 35mm projectors. As such they do not provide a different kind of film experience, but the improvement — in terms of higher image definition on the screen — of an continued situation that was pre-defined. Thus, cinema changes in its substance, replacing traditional reels with hard drives, but not in its nature of experiential form. Following a decade of limited success, Hollywood major studios began to encourage the acquisition of digital projectors in view of renewed 3D technology, and the turn, announced in 2011, to adopt exclusively the digital format Digital Cinema Package (DCP) from 1 January 2014.² As of 2012, the state of Italian single-screen cinemas was critical: the big chains present in the country had already completed the conversion, while many small independent circuits struggled to support the expenses needed for the upgrade (around €60,000 just for the projector) before 2014.³

After a section on the stages of digitization of the cinematic medium, and its parallel theoretical debates, the third chapter of my thesis intends to address another key question. Screen conversion in fact contributes to a process of change that originated as early as the eighties: the loss of a central role for movie theatres in cinematic fruition. Threatened by new forms of home video and mobile devices (what Francesco Casetti has defined as *relocation*⁴ of film) on the one hand, and by the loss of the specificity of the medium within broader contexts of consumption on the other, movie theatres had to redefine their status

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² David Bordwell, *Pandora's Digital Box. Films, Files and the Future of Movies* (Madison: Irvington Way Institute Press, 2012).

³ *Rapporto 2013. Il Mercato e l'Industria del Cinema in Italia* (Rome: Fondazione Ente dello Spettacolo, 2013).

⁴ Francesco Casetti, 'L'esperienza filmica e la rilocalizzazione del cinema', *Fata Morgana*, 4 (2008), 23–40.

and reformulate their relationship with the audience. Could they still be places for sharing a common experience, in spite of the scattering that has affected cinema? It is not by chance that both digital projection (along with the end of film distribution) and the disappearance of traditional movie-going places have influenced the idea of the ‘death of cinema’.

I chose to investigate a uniquely Italian form of cinematic exhibition, the *Sala della Comunità*, i.e. the basic element of Catholic film theatre circuits. Here, screen conversion takes place not only as a technological process, but also as a cultural one. In fact, to study the digitization of Catholic circuits means to investigate the economic difficulties of an activity which cannot be classified as commercial, and moreover to question the relationship between this religious institution and the ‘seventh art’. Before analysing the process of transition, through interviews with selected operators, this thesis seeks to reconstruct the history of Italian Catholic cinematic exhibition. These sites were born as parish cinemas in the thirties, and by the sixties they accounted for around half of all Italian cinema screens.⁵ In the eighties, the push for a renewal of the ecclesiastical institution leads to a new approach to the secular world. Catholic theatres were redesigned according as cultural centres, with a deep transformation of their identity. This change included recurrent strategy planning within discussions on digital projection in two areas: *flexibility* and *multiprogramming*. The aim of the research is to verify whether the terminological homology could be a semantic one too: could digitization be a tool to achieve these goals, which are inscribed within *Sala della Comunità*’s project?

The selection of theatres comes from a single region — Lombardy, in Northern Italy — which has always played a leading role in comparison to other regions around the country. Lombardy was a pioneering region in the use of cinema as a tool for pedagogical and pastoral purposes, as evidenced especially in studies conducted by Edoardo Viganò,⁶ Raffaele De Berti⁷ and Tomaso Subini.⁸

As Alberto Bourlot and Mariagrazia Fanchi have argued in their extensive survey conducted in the early twenty-first century, the Catholic circuit is an heterogeneous landscape, split between local exhibitors — which release movies into peripheral districts and often constitute the only cinema available in those areas — and more competitive realities, which try to differentiate their offer according to different audiences’ needs.⁹ To give a preliminary indication of the

⁵ Gianfranco Bettetini, ‘Chiesa cattolica e cinema. Dal Sessantotto a oggi’, in *Attraverso lo schermo. Cinema e cultura cattolica in Italia*, ed. by Ruggero Eugeni and Dario Edoardo Viganò, 3 vols (Rome: Ente dello Spettacolo, 2006), iii, 71–102 (p. 80).

⁶ Dario Edoardo Viganò, *Un cinema ogni campanile. Chiesa e cinema nella diocesi di Milano* (Milan: Il Castoro, 1997).

⁷ *Un secolo di cinema a Milano*, ed. by Raffaele De Berti (Milan: Il Castoro, 1996).

⁸ Tomaso Subini, ‘Il caso de “La dolce vita”’, in *Attraverso lo schermo. Cinema e cultura cattolica in Italia*, pp. 239–55.

⁹ Alberto Bourlot, Mariagrazia Fanchi, *La Sala della Comunità. Proposta culturale e intervento sul territorio* (Cantalupa: Effatà Editrice, 2004).

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diversity of forms and functions that are present on the territory: the sample includes seven theatres set in Lombardy's regional capital, Milan, and three theatres placed in two towns with a population lesser than 200,000, Como and Pavia. Despite the differences between them, the qualitative approach of my research allows me to find recurrences among the testimonies gathered here. For example, this kind of exhibition intends to present itself as a form of *resistance*, not just to digital technology, but to what that symbolizes — namely, the imposition of a right way of 'being at the movies' based on the multiplex model. The experience of the *Sale della Comunità* develops around the ideas of *familiarity* and *informality*, such that the themes of spontaneous meeting and friendly atmosphere are used to mark the distance from the big chains of movie theatres. However, the operators' attention to additional content and to the advantages offered by digital technologies seems substantially lacking. Nevertheless, alternative content could constitute an important resource for these theatres, that might help to deal with the scarcity of cultural products in peripheral areas. Furthermore, the research demonstrates that the operators' perception of the transition to digital allows for the exploration of original forms of technological appropriation. And it demonstrates the persistence of an idea of filmic experience in which feeling part of an audience is central.