

THE FIVE SENSES OF CINEMA

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One of the most evident effects of increasing activation of the senses in cinematic representation is a more solid and efficient realism of the portrayed world.

Today we can go back to Bazin and his thoughts on *total cinema*, while aiming in an entirely different direction. We can for instance, consider not only the realistic effects (or hyperreal effects) that multisensory stimulation has on representation, but also the realistic effects (or hyperreal effects) that this kind of stimulation induces in the spectator experience. What happens when the five senses of cinema are activated?

Examination of the audio-visual dimension can thus start from this framework. As such, sound comes under a different light in respect to the traditional focus on increasing realism in cinematic representation. The search for visual effects to complete the representation (3-D, Cinemascope, etc.) could in turn be subjected to a similar shift. In line with this perspective, the Conference will reserve space for a “closed” number of papers on the audio-visual dimension, in an attempt to broaden investigation to other levels of perception.

History of cinema has witnessed constant attempts to force screen boundaries, in order to transform its flat, bounded surface into a tangible, perceivable, practical, and potentially unbounded space. The belief that film alone is unable to render the specificity of early film screenings – which were built around the simultaneous presence of multiple arts and media and on multisensory stimulation of spectators – has by now been clearly established. Equally well-established are studies investigating the pathways and development of the original ideas of multimedia and multisensoriality. These ideas represented a strategic and recurring field of research for the avant-garde as well as for other movements that, through the years, have continually reopened the discourse and progressed in their intentions.

A central component in this field of studies and experimentation clearly consists in technology. Every step of the technological evolution has apparently been challenged by a sort of immanent idea of cinema, of synaesthetic and multisensory cinema, that has asserted itself in the imaginary when it was unable to do so in the industrial and technological sphere. Moreover, this idea has successfully challenged the assimilation time of the cultural community, often anticipating or accelerating it. Furthermore, the technological challenge has often represented a necessity, as seen in the attempts to hold back the diffusion of television through the *attraction* of well known systems, such as Cinerama, Cinemascope, and 3-D, as well as lesser known ones such as AromoRama and Smell-O-Vision.

Today, a crucial challenge lies in informatics; a sort of new electronic vanguard tests out (on grounds often common to video-art) sophisticated ways of involving and stimulating the spectator's senses.

Today, technology seems to create – with entirely new effectiveness – the conditions for interactive fruition (through a multisensory interface or physical environment), resulting in critical and active re-thinking and re-positioning of the agent-spectator. In addition to these new possibilities for a vocation that has belonged to many vanguard movements, the employment of technologies aims towards an immersion that is both ecstatic and static.

Bewilderment and critical stimulation of spectators coexist in the sphere of contemporary technology, but imply very different levels of involvement/distancing. And if the sensory involvement/distancing linked to sight and sound is a crucial matter – complicated but already widely discussed – the involvement of non-audiovisual senses in the experience of cinema fruition has yet to be questioned. The XI International Film Studies Conference is dedicated to the study of forms and technologies that activate the “other” senses of cinema – touch, taste, and smell.

Among the “other” senses of cinema, taste obviously represents a borderline case, a sort of uncharted frontier rather than a concretely conceived of or practiced possibility; nonetheless, we would like to consider it in order to achieve a full mapping of the issues that relate to involvement of spectator senses in the cinema.

Here are some possible topics:

- As is traditional for the Conference, special focus is placed on early cinema. Is it possible to record experiments, projects, and discourses around the idea of a cinema of touch, smell, and taste?

- A privileged field of research is that of utopia and dead ends. Is it possible to reflect on the history and course of a multisensory and synaesthetic cinema that has been left at the imaginary planning level, without ever becoming actual?

- Another field is the institutional and industrial sphere. Within this framework, what are the hypotheses and what the actualisations? What relationship is held with the utopian sphere? In vanguard and industrial experimentation, spectator positioning plays a strategic role. We can imagine that involvement of the spectator's “other” senses lies along a line that ranges from maximum interactivity and criticism to maximum absorption and annulment of critical distance. What other hypotheses of spectator positioning exist?

- The cinema's push to seek out a “surplus” realism in the spectator experience cannot neglect the role played by technological equipment. Starting with the use of technologies designed specially for movie theatres, and through the use of artificial perception organs, thanks to technologies capable of simulating the sensations directed towards consumers' sensory apparatus – the cinema has built synaesthetic relations of both a single media and a multimedia nature. How does the essence of the cinematographic work change in respect to this intent?

- Starting from pursuit of a hyperreal dimension in the cinematic experience, “other” fruition styles exist that have led the cinema to a system based on entertainment/amusement complexes, somehow recovering the original presence of the cinema within places devoted to attractions. Involvement of the “other” senses seems to constitute a tool through which the cinema is regaining possession of its high-

ly spectacular origins: from Odorama to the “dynamic cinema” experiences, spectators get involved with all their senses. Such forms of involvement seem to pave the way for a fruition of cinema bearing the characteristics of diversification that translate the shopping-centre model into the cultural field, stimulating integration of the film event with the consumption and merchandising of commodities. As a result, particular attention must be paid to the investigation of consumer rituals, with specific reference to the details of the environment, which constitutes a complex background that makes the choice, usage, and sharing of a product significant to the subject.

- In the theoretical field, we can suppose that activation of the “other” senses in the sensory apparatus has played an important role in the elaboration of “sensorial” definitions of the cinema and its spectator, indicating either touch, smell, or taste as specific and characteristic components of cinematic fruition. What possible definitions can be proposed in this sense?

Two sessions of the Conference have been set aside for reports on the achievements of the research projects conducted by the operative units in the Italian Universities Project on Technologies of Italian cinema.

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