PERFORMATIVE CINEMA

by Alfredo Cramerotti

Back home. Thoughts.

To go and watch a movie is not exactly horse riding. It's quite unlikely to perceive the cinematic setting as a performative act. Yet it is. The experience of cinema has been received – throughout its history – as curiosity, entertainment, documentation, and leisure; in short, the representation of a fictional story and/or a given reality. (We can open here a never-ending debate about whether and how it is possible to tell one from the other. We leave the burden to some postmodernist geeks.) What matters to us, is that rarely – if ever – these experiences has been perceived as performance, because of the dual nature of cinema setting.

In yesterday and today's film industry we have two distinct patterns. On one side, the making of a movie, that is, the process that leads to the film-product. Roughly: idea, subject, money (out), script, producers, director, cast, troupe, filming, editing, mastering, marketing, promoting, distribution, release. On the other side, the consuming of a movie: preview, critics, premiere, reviews, public, gadgets, home video, money (in), archive, and cinema dictionary.

How does the performative aspect come into the picture? Somewhere in-between the two areas, to break up the dialectical world of the film-product. Precisely, in the location of its screening. Watching a movie in the city centre of Berlin or Edmonton is not quite the same as watching it in the outskirts of Cairo or Mumbai. Granted. I am not arguing different criteria according to wealth distribution, life expectation, or commodity-density. It's not a matter of West/East, North/South, Bottom/Up contrapositions; it's simply everyone's experience that is different. To be in a certain location, daytime, and company. This is the terrain where the performative aspect of the cinema setting has to be sought, and possibly explored and revealed.

Over there: Displacement.

This article results from a trip to India a few weeks ago. It is the fruit of a disarticulation of my own standards (western, white, male – sorry) for "watching a movie".
Location: Lucknow, capital of Uttar Pradesh, an unbelievably hectic, busy, and polluted city that can be a paradigm for today's India: Fierce capitalism and off-the-wall enthusiasm; Environmental concerns and economical growth; Political mistrust and national pride. After a day in the traffic, I just wanted to jump on the first train leaving the city. But then I stayed.

Time: afternoon. I went to a screening of *Salaam-e-Ishq*, a musical with lots of love, adventure, criss-crossed couples and a drop of eroticism. Marvellous piece of art. I love it. I am not impartial, who cares. That's why I got to think of the performative aspect of cinema. I never expected to sit in an almost empty huge cinema from 6pm till 9.30pm, not understanding the language (the film was in Hindi with no subtitles), and still wonder at the end how the time went so quickly. I was a bit sorry when the movie ended. I wanted more.

Company: the youngsters in the hall, waiting with me the door opening, were sarcastically (I think) chitchatting at the thought of me watching a Hindi movie – a movie in Hindi. I was more doubtful than them. Once inside, I walked to the middle of the huge space and sat on an empty row. There were about 30 people in front of me – in two rows quite close to the screen, and the same number behind me, a couple of rows close to the entrance. The cinema could have contained maybe 1.000 people, maybe more. So I wondered if my ticket was numbered, since I could not understand the position of the other spectators.

The movie started. Great soundtrack, it made me feel like to jump up and belly dance. If only I could. A story developed; The characters were introduced in couples, the action set changed from Bombay to Delhi to London to Agra to Rishikesh. *Salaam-e-Ishq* is the story of six groups of people (a couple, their friends and/or colleagues) from different walks of life and unaware of each other's existence, which – by unexpected circumstances – were brought together by destiny, fate, love. The common, and bottom line of the movie could be "but things are going to change…" There was only an occasional word or two of English, mostly idioms such as "No way!", "Then what?" and so on, but instead of feeling out of place, I found myself enjoying the faces and the music. Then something happened.

The members of the audience started to respond to the movie at each scene, especially those that were romantic or spicy, with words, comments, laughs, whistles, clapping and dancing in the seats. I found myself in an organic environment were the film was participated in actively. Each movie character had fans and adversaries, in the venue. Men, women, young and old, showing with the full gamut of human expression their approval or disapproval of the characters as they appeared. I ended up joining in, after a while. I let myself go without being aware of it. I enjoyed the lines of my favourite character; disliked some others, and participated in the audience's bold statement about the story proposed. If I had to define the experience, I would say "being in the here and now".

At some point I noticed two ushers pointing in my direction, and eventually one of them

approached me asking for the ticket. I shown him, and got some Hindi words in reply. English, Hindi, English, English. He gave up. The narrative on the screen was at a critical juncture, and we certainly couldn't ruin it for a little misunderstanding about my position in the theatre. Besides, there was no seat number on my ticket.

I gradually slipped form the very conscious state of questioning "is it a good idea to buy the ticket?" when I was standing at the counter, to the totally caught-in-the-flow state of "come on, you fool, it's right in front of you!" and similar outbursts offered to the screen characters. No kidding. I witnessed the disarticulation of my own behaviour and belief. The performative feature of the cinema setting won over my entire mental structure and physical inhibitions. Being in Lucknow, with a bunch of 'turned on' people on a winter afternoon, simply displaced me.

Temporality. Think about it.

To assess cinema as a performative act we had better take a step back: You may recall Michel Foucault's concept of "other spaces"; The idea of having heterotopian spaces within a given reality. Put simply, it means that some spaces in our life 'offer' us an alternative reality, at certain times, locations, and situations. They are not utopian spaces (which cannot exist by definition), but a dimension available only under specific conditions. Think about fairs, theatres, madhouses, hospitals, graveyards. Or ships. I would add contemporary art spaces. And cinemas, of course. Can we say cinemas offer us a suspension from time and space? Maybe, to take another point if Foucault's thinking, they offer a compensation for what we don't have? Well, so does TV, for instance. But... but... there are some differences. Heterotopies imply, to my view, a co-temporality of elements. Space, time, and situation. Theatre is the paradigm of co-temporality: for its existence, it implies a place, a time, and a situation (an audience, an actor, a play) all at once. TV does not require them. TV can exist without co-temporality; rather, it exists thanks to its dis-temporality. And cinema?

Cinema provides a co-temporality of place (film set or screen venue), situation (cast or audience) but not of time. *Salaam-e-Ishq* has been released simultaneously in India, UK, Europe, USA, Canada, Dubai, Africa, South Africa, Mauritius, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Indonesia, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Sri Lanka and many other parts of the world. Yet, when they shot the film was a different time from when we watch what they shot and then edited. To me, cinema has another form of temporality. Not the simultaneous dimension, in which things happen at the same time for all the elements involved, but the dimension of performance, in which things

happen differently each time in each place for each element. A per-temporality. If you consider cinema in these terms, it is not another space, and not even a simulacrum of reality. Consider: It is a space in which all kind of errors can influence its life, and can influence its performance each time in a different way. Involuntarily effects by the film cast or staff while making it; Unexpected errors by the projectionist or the usher while showing it; Unforeseeable reactions by the viewer or the buyer while consuming it.

On top of this precarious cultural architecture, the situational varying of the setting changes on a continuous basis. The showing time. The location. The audio quality. The weather conditions, if outside. The media debate about it. The political climate. The social inhibitions, or transgressions (the audience participation rituals of the Rocky Horror Picture Show). The audience's age. The personal mood. The crowd mood: think about a projection for a classroom in which you happen to be part of; the authoritarian or opinion-molder, brain-washing screenings of past and present regimes (Nazi Germany and GDR state apparatus made extensively use of this form of cinematic propaganda); the boycott of a movie while it is 'in theatres', as the experience of 1970's anarchy taught us (and conversely, as the Christian movements did with a lot of 'apocryphal' films – one for all, the exhilarant 'Life of Brian'). What a variety of patterns. And I thought cinema was a pre-packaged cultural product. I thought cinema was part of the realm of things to which I can access but cannot change, only subdue. Maybe reflect. What an idiot. Cinema performs me. I perform it.

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