



The Social Function of Cinema during a Pandemic

La función social del cine en tiempos de pandemia

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a series of reflections on cinema and how it was reconfigured in Mexico during the Covid-19 pandemic. Cinema as an industry unites several spheres, the most important being production, distribution, and exhibition. For the latter, audiences play an important role. Since its first days, cinema has never ceased to astonish audiences with the different social functions it fulfils. However, with the arrival of the coronavirus and confinement, other functions

seemed to arise. Here, we will discuss some of them with the intention of examining cinema as a dynamic and vigorous communication phenomenon in the context of the pandemic and in the face of a “new normal.”

Keywords: Cinema, pandemic, industry, social function, platforms

RESUMEN

El presente trabajo propone una serie de reflexiones en torno al cine y cómo se reconfiguró durante la pandemia del Covid-19 en nuestro país. El cine, como industria convoca varios ámbitos, entre los más sobresalientes, la producción, la distribución y la exhibición. En este último, los públicos juegan un papel importante. Desde que el cine apareció no dejó de sorprender por las distintas funciones sociales que ha cumplido para los públicos. No obstante, con la llegada del coronavirus, durante el confinamiento, otras funciones parecieron revelarse, en este texto proponemos algunas

de ellas, con el interés de que ayuden a pensar el cine, como un fenómeno de la comunicación dinámico, vigoroso, en el contexto de la pandemia y de cara a la llamada nueva normalidad.

Palabras clave: Cine, pandemia, industria, función social, plataforma.

TRAILER

At the end of 2019, humanity began to glimpse the first great planetary crisis of the twenty-first century. This surprising and exceptional predicament was brought on by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which originated in China and unleashed a pandemic whose consequences are still felt today. Unfortunately, planetary crises are part of the history of mankind, but a public health crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic added a particular nuance to the history of these crises, especially at a time when scientific and technological advances seemed to have some control over the variables of nature and existence. The relative certainty about life that we mostly experience in our contemporary context gave way to unsuspected uncertainty. In other eras, great economic and political-cultural crises unleashed warlike conditions that, in one way or another, altered societies' way of life, and which, of course, left their mark on history. In his famous book *The age of extremes: The short twentieth century*, Eric Hobsbawm calls attention to the "short century" (1998, p. 30), which he suggests ran from 1914 to 1991. He uses this term to demarcate a space of time loaded with transcendent events that increasingly changed the history of man and, nat-

urally, the notions that were held about life, including awareness of events that societies shared. After 2019, the twenty-first century revealed that it also had an ace up its sleeve, and new scenarios appeared that would forever alter the history of the still nascent twenty-first century.¹

A WAR FILM

The impacts of Covid-19 on humanity are perhaps comparable, in their pertinent measures, with those experienced during war and post-war times, moments that are marked not only by lamentable human losses, but also by unemployment, the need for work, economic breakdowns, increased poverty, collapsed health care systems, and increased social and family violence. Uncertainty about the future flourished and

¹ While working on this text, another unexpected event jumped onto the stage of the twenty-first century, namely, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, perhaps not entirely unexpected, but sudden. It is a geopolitical fact that does not fail to revive a past that had taken a rest: The ghosts of the Cold War of the second half of the twentieth century. This recent event contributes even more to a time where the imprint of uncertainty seems constant.

was increased by the risk of dying at any moment, threatened by the enemy (the virus). As in the case of great war crises, we had to face all of this in hiding, confined to our homes; to this we can add the emotional problems derived from this reality.

The virus altered our lives in every way, from the micro level, inside the human body where it settled, to the macro level, the dynamics of daily life. Undoubtedly, the pandemic led us to rethink several human reference points, including the idea of our nature as social beings. Although the postulate is still valid, the pandemic forced us to experience it differently. Our contemporary social practices are varied and diverse, but here we specifically reflect on a particular area of socialization, that of human leisure and entertainment. We focus on cinema, a meeting point between art, science, industry, and the human imagination. The ideas in this article revolve around film during the Covid-19 pandemic in Mexico, and specifically the social function it played during these complicated years, where the dynamics of life created a rarified environment somewhat similar to that of a horror or war movie.

The proposition is part of a reflection on the film industry and the reconfiguration of its practices during the pandemic, with emphasis on the social function of cinema in an environment of collective confinement. Of course, when considering the film industry, what Georges Sadoul's reflections are spot on:

Producing, selling, renting, showing, and circulating films involves hundreds of thousands of professionals in the world who work in different trades. [...] "Making films", then, does not only mean being a famous star, but also exercising professions as different as those of a carpenter, chemist, publicist, electrician, acrobat, sound imitator, shorthand typist, decorator, writer, diver, journalist, extra, etc. The multitude of trades required by cinema suffices to prove its "universality" (1987, p.13). (1987, p.13).

It is a universal industry that cannot exclude one of the most important agents in this circuit, the be-

ginning and end of this world, namely, spectators and their relationship with this cultural construct. Reflection on film must naturally consider the role they play in human life.

SUITABLE FOR ALL AUDIENCES

Since the appearance of film, several authors have highlighted how the cultural practice it brought about has fulfilled various social functions in different spheres. Edgar Morin states that the emergence of cinema coincided with the invention of the airplane. Both inventions gave the world new points of view regarding time and space; airplanes took off and flew through the sky, while cinema stayed on the ground but offered similar experiences. Film in particular inaugurated a new form of human socialization (2001, p. 13).

For Mark Cousins, the car and the roller coaster, famous objects of the nineteenth century, allowed for new ways of looking at reality. But they also gave society new perceptions of things, breaking away from the routine of everyday life and highlighting the importance of surprise and amusement (2004, p. 21).

Román Gubern underlines the role of cinema as a social "factory of multiproduction" (2014, p. 15) and notes that cinema and its films are sites that fosters the knowledge of people, places, and ideas—one's own or those of others—, sometimes distant, with a series of archetypal and always eternal conflicts that touch on collective sensibilities.

Emilio García Riera points out how cinema has allowed spectators to recognize and imagine themselves on the screen through films (1974). Pierre Sorlin, without forgetting the ideological side that cinema can have, highlights the democratizing nature of cinema, which invites practically the entire public to immerse itself in stories and fosters a social encounter where different economic strata can share the same experience in the same space. He states that, "It is from this object [cinema] that other networks are created, new relationships are formed. Going to the cinema is, inseparably, to fulfill a social rite and become part of the group that witnesses a particular spectacle" (1977, p. 11).

Other researchers have emphasized the function of cinema as a large-scale collective gatherer, a sort of novel, a secular religion that binds a society of moviegoers. It has also been pointed out that, “The nation of course is not a desiring person but a fictive unity... Como medio por excelencia para contar historias, el cine estaba especialmente dotado para transmitir las narrativas de las naciones e imperios” (Shohat and Stam, 2002, p. 117). This is because cinema has been used as a strategy to implant a sense of nationhood and propose an identity.

Of course, cinema also helped society build a visual memory of history through films (Rosenstone, 1997). Pedagogically, cinema is a didactic resource that supports formal education (Almacellas, 2004). Furthermore, it is a force of informal education, a means for the emotional education of societies, as actions and attitudes on screen often “end up becoming institutionalized in everyday life” (Monsiváis, 2003, p. 261).

Some scholars have also pointed out the forms of social interaction that were installed when movie theaters burst onto the architectural and urban landscape; these “palaces” brought people together to dream (Alfaro and Ochoa, 1998) and gave rise to cinematic walkways or corridors (Tena, 2012), which later disappeared and were devoured by shopping malls. These social dynamics and functions brought on by cinema, along with other more implicit ones, were replicated, repeated, and, in some cases, nuanced throughout history, but were perhaps never so disrupted as they were with the arrival of Covid-19.

AND THEN CAME THE INTERMISSION

The coronavirus undoubtedly reconfigured the experience of consuming cinema and articulated other cultural practices associated with it. Initially, a contemporary dynamic built on nomadism was suddenly cloistered within the sedentary lifestyle of the home. Everyday activities were closed off and, of course, among them, the social rites associated with going to the movies, which Lauro Zavala (2000, p. 9) details. These rites range from choosing a film and where to watch it to the cultural phenomenon of reflection or commentary

after the film. During Covid, movie billboards lowered their curtains and the movie lover’s quest was abruptly interrupted, as were the associated symbolic-emotional transactions, whether individual or shared, of choosing a film and planning to see it. And with this, the social rites involved in this cinematographic activity broke down, which commonly includes stops before and after the cinematographic experience itself, the possibilities of which are presumably infinite, for example, a visit to the bookstore, a stop at a restaurant, making some purchase, or a simple stroll through public space, among others.

At each of these stops along the cinematic route, a series of social interactions tend to take place, which were interrupted by the pandemic. Going to the movies was put on pause. From the outside, it was merely the closing of a space intended for distraction and aesthetic experience, a place to socialize. However, it involved more than that, and went on to alter our encounter with film, freezing one of the great cultural industries, one of the most consumed worldwide according to UNESCO.² Film is a phenomenon installed as a nearly indispensable practice in contemporary societies, an alternative for enjoying leisure time, an approach to artistic manifestation that, of course, provides imaginary outlets to a sometimes overwhelming reality.

When the cinema arrived in Mexico in 1896, as Aurelio de los Reyes notes, it transformed several social phenomena within the then contemporary society. For example, there were a significant number of suicides amidst a sort of “Late romanticism and weariness of life due to a lack of job opportunities and insufficient public entertainment” (1992), which diminished with the arrival of cinematography. Of course, there was no shortage of arguments claiming that this decline was due to the appearance of cinema, which had provided society with outlets for recreation in the face of a life burdened by the routine dynamics of the late nineteenth century.

De los Reyes also notes that certain national newspapers of the time did not hesitate to point out that all social problems, such as alcoholism, delinquency, and violence, generated to a great extent by the poor classes, had diminished due to the implementation of recreational spaces, where cinema dominated. Still, he

² A fact that has led UNESCO to include cinema in its heritage preservation program “Memory of the World,” where certain artistic manifestations are recognized for their contribution to human culture. See: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000110379_spa

points out that such journalistic arguments lacked the rigor of statistical data to support such hypotheses and remarked that, “It is obvious that the writers did not even consider the distribution of wealth and the percentage of unemployed people in the city. They did not substantiate their categorical assertion...” (1984, p. 88). But the extraordinary growth of the movie-going public who had the option of investing their leisure time—the time that truly belonged to them as individuals—is undeniable. Of course, “faith in cinema” as a means to face and solve some of society’s ailments, a formula for daydreaming, and even a possible way out when reality reveals some of its most uncertain and disturbing facets, is still significant.

At its most intense moments, the Covid-19 pandemic led society through uncharted territory. The world was forced to stay home, in confinement, to protect itself from infection and prevent the spread of the virus. Undoubtedly, this was one of the most difficult periods of the pandemic because society’s dynamics were, up to then and to a large extent, organized around mobility and the scramble of transit. But our contemporary nomadism was abruptly interrupted. Sedentary life brought about unfamiliar social atmospheres, articulated different ways of passing the time, and reconfigured other habitual activities, such as the consumption of movies at home. One question remains unsettling: What would have become of our lives without cinema during the Covid-19 isolation period? Undoubtedly, as in other critical moments in history, cinema withstood and, even more, fulfilled new social functions.

EMERGENCY EXIT

It has often been said that cinema is a window into the world and that it poses realities that are parallel to real life. In his book *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud emphasizes that the crossroads that modern life has in store for man seem more and more pressing, but he also points out that, at the time of his research, “the intention that man should be ‘happy’ is not in the plan of ‘Creation’” (1997, p. 44). In the face of constant blunders on the path to happiness, where nature is constantly imposing challenges, some of which are presumed to be unsolvable, he distinguishes a series

of cultural acts with which man finds compensation in the face of a threatening universe. Specifically, he speaks of art, which, by extension, includes cinema.

During stay-at-home orders related to Covid-19, cinema was undoubtedly a window onto another world that had not come to a halt and helped compensate for the condemnation of confinement; but it also granted us the certainty that the world was still there. Looking out of one’s window, one ran the risk of finding rarefied landscapes, deserted and empty streets. But not in the movies. On the screen, the world looked normal because its moving images continued to touch on the themes and human concerns familiar up to then, including animation and science fiction narratives. That universe was still healthy, and thematically and formally unaltered; the mechanics of the device still worked. During confinement, cinema was a provision that continued to provide the imaginary capital needed to face uncertainty. The cinematic idea that catastrophes, including pandemics, end positively, are short-term, and are resolved within two hours, operated as an imaginary lifeline, or at least appeased uneasy spirits.

But a new relationship with the movies also emerged, namely, a new compulsion around film consumption. Those who could, watched movie after movie. In a rare phenomenon, demand accelerated the creation and emergence of platforms that offer movies online. While these platforms had begun to gain ground in recent years, no one imagined that a virus would play such an important role in altering the rhythm of a market moving within its own logic.

According to data recorded by Marketing News, “Streaming entertainment has positioned itself as the preferred activity in pandemic times, where watching series or movies at home is the most performed activity among 66% [of people]. So much so that one out of every two respondents have signed up for an on-demand content platform in recent months. Netflix (54%) and Amazon Prime Video (45%) are the platforms that have gained the most users in these months, followed by Disney+ and HBO (28% in both cases)” (2021).

Rosario Lara, research coordinator of IMCINE, reported that, in Mexico, the use of platforms increased overall by more than 38% by 2021 (2022).

Significant parts of society searched out entertainment to resist confinement via the consumption of movies and, at least in Mexico, the usual way of accessing them was reconfigured. In this regard, there are two points of access. First, the legal means, that is, buying a ticket to the movie theater or signing up for a streaming system. However, illegal access to movies through piracy is no secret. This phenomenon has been common for years in our country and is difficult to eradicate. However, the pandemic also impacted this form of film circulation. Street stands, fixed establishments in markets, or those on wheels could no longer distribute pirated movies. The pandemic managed to do what the law could not, shutting down illegal film distribution stands for a few years.

Of course, the public was affected, but in some cases, it experienced an epiphany related to this cultural industry. Paying for a platform's cheapest plan was more attractive and economical than buying 10 pirated movies, whose average cost is around 10 Mexican pesos. Supply and demand through streaming took new directions. Did this health crisis deal an important blow to the black-market circulation of films in our country? We do not know yet. What we do know is that a significant portion of society was unwilling to discontinue its film consumption, even during the pandemic.

The way online platforms present and classify the diversity of fiction films, documentaries, series, TV shows, and other options led audiences to investigate other perhaps unimagined genres, formats, and audiovisual modalities. Searching for films on platforms, more than a straightforward search for a film, led to surprising encounters, especially for those who explored these platforms for the first time during the pandemic. Naturally, transactions with cinema led to such discoveries.

As mentioned, cinema brings with it many social functions, including the didactic function of learning to read moving images. However, for certain audiences, dabbling in platforms also implied learning to navigate them to look for a film. For a large majority of audiences, it meant exercising a new way of approaching films because, during the pandemic, there was little marketing of films and few recommendations from the media. When recommendations did appear, they pro-

moted something uncommon, namely, the recommendation of platforms. Without an active billboard, the act of choosing a film implied an intimate, perhaps at best familiar, journey.

Establishing a social contract with movies during the Covid-19 pandemic was strange. Whether it was by means of DVD, platforms, YouTube, or others, the truth is that the public was forced to be its own programmer. Cinema consumption became agenda-free, or at least extremely flexible. "Time spent with the cinema" could happen very early, late at night, on the least expected day, or as a surprise, after the discovery of a film while surfing the Internet. It even invited practices uncommon to the usual dynamics of life, such as watching a movie in fragments until finishing it while working from home, thus interweaving real and imaginary life. The social function of cinema as a form of relaxation after an exhausting workday surprisingly arose. "Counteracting anguish by watching a movie" was a frequent occurrence in the most intense days of the Covid-19 pandemic.

THE CURTAINS CLOSED AND COVERED THE SCREEN

By bringing movie theaters to living spaces, the way films were watched during the pandemic was also reconfigured. Usual dynamics common to cinema were scarcely preserved, or they were practiced in very different ways, including conditions that the spectator experiences and establishes with films. Watching a film in the company of large audiences was impossible, choosing with whom to share the film experience was not always possible either. Watching a film in a dark environment, which associates the movie experience with day-dreaming, as Christian Metz (1977) previously suggested, was difficult.

Other environmental conditions included the framework for watching films. The curtain was suddenly drawn on the experience of being captivated by flashy images offered on movie theater screens. However, the social function of cinema as a provider of content for the imagination found other dissemination outlets, including computers, cell phones, and television screens. The

latter, which was undoubtedly one of the most widely used, regained the importance it had in the past, as well as its privileged place in the home. Its value was not only redefined, but also its use because, although television was a means for getting information and watching the different genres it offers, it was also an important means for watching movies, even those offered by platforms. The role of television as a device was reactivated, but in new ways, especially in terms of watching movies.

The search for movies during the Covid-19 pandemic was personalized, almost a la carte. But watching them at home imposed new interactions, with oneself or with others. This experience of compartmentalized cinema, that is, in one's home, introduced other ways of interacting with films. The darkness of movie theaters draws one's gaze toward the screen. However, the pandemic imposed new ways of watching films and the symbolic contract that is established with them, with a constantly moving gaze. While this gaze was still toward the screen, it also included an interaction of eye movements toward the object world of one's personal life or the space in which the movie experience was held during confinement. This became a sort of symbolic, intimate passage from paying attention to the film to shifting toward everyday life and the objects in the immediate environment, which are always absent in movie theaters. Watching movies during the pandemic supposed an atypical visual event, endowed with sequences of cinematographic imaginary in montage with the scenes of daily life and spectators' object world. A narrative articulated with the imaginary, reality, and an environment that was, at the time, overwhelming due to the uncertainty of the images that were thought to shape the future. Undoubtedly, this brings up an ample field of study for the anthropology of the gaze.

INVOLUNTARY PERMANENCE

When cinema first became a reality, toward the first half of the twentieth century, it demanded the creation of a new space for socialization—movie theaters—where various forms of coexistence took place. They included, as García Riera (1974) points out, going to the movies as a family; so much so that at one

point in the twentieth century, going to the movies was part of Mexico's basic market basket. In other words, it was considered part of family subsistence. Over time, cinema's social function of bringing families together around a spectacle began to blur for many reasons, according to José Felipe Coria:

Years ago, the concept of going to the movies implied a ceremony that some defined as secular, namely, having fun with the family, which was widely practiced until well into the twentieth century... But twentieth-century cinema fragmented its audience... By the 1960s, there was talk of family films, children's films, youth films, art films, works for film societies, and this segmentation changed the panorama and the way of conceiving of cinema. While previously film sought to attract the majority of family members, suddenly only a few were sought... and interests could be completely divergent (2006, pp. 17-18).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, families had to take refuge in their homes, and the dispersed family typical of contemporary life was forced to come together in its living space. The phenomenon of family cohabitation at home, increasingly infrequent and even unthinkable in our days, had many consequences across different dimensions. Some have already been documented, and reveal fortunate moments, but a series of very unfortunate events also emerged, including recurrent intra-family violence. But in the case of cinema's social function during the pandemic, the phenomenon was perhaps a fortunate one because, among the different practices that the experience of watching movies at home presented, it revived that forgotten custom of watching movies as a family and, in some cases, revived cinema as a place for family gathering.

Family socialization around movies facilitated various interactions, including family conversation after watching a movie, as a film is not over until it is discussed. There, the film completes one of its cycles. During “normal” times, the exchange of film commentary could go off in many directions, but it revolved around a collective experience that was shared at some point; but watching a film at home offered other, perhaps limited conversation partners, only those who in due course shared the film experience. Watching a film alone nullified commentary altogether or prompted an intrapersonal meditative practice. Perhaps most noteworthy, although perhaps unintentional, however, were the family gatherings that came with watching a movie at home. This revelation was quite interesting. Indeed, several university students were asked to watch a collection of films during the pandemic in the context of the Cinematographic Appreciation course that I teach at UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico); they confessed that they often watched the films with their families and that this pretext had produced forms of coexistence and conversation at home that had otherwise become a thing of past. It is safe to argue that this phenomenon among university students and their families could have been replicated in other family social spheres.

FROZEN IMAGINARY

Cinema is undoubtedly one of the main mediums in which imaginaries are recreated. It is the beginning and end of human nature, as Marc Ferro points out, “It is said of fiction films that they only deliver dreams, as if dreams were not part of reality, as if the imaginary were not one of the engines of human activity” (1980, pp. 66-67). Of course, real life is sometimes overwhelming, tragic, im-placable, with dead ends and exits that lead to thousands of crossroads. But space for imagination offers respite. For Edgar Morin, cinema is an open field for this, as it fulfills the need for “all that is imaginary, for all fantasies, for all magic, for all aesthetics, those which practical life cannot satisfy” (2001, p. 152).

Every society, in different times and places and with its own actors, has its own individual and collective

expectations and concerns, and that spirit of the time is usually represented in different mediums, among them, the moving images provided by cinema. Every era produces its “imaginary-projection” narratives (Imbert, 2010, p. 11). But, during the Covid-19 pandemic, film production was put on hold; some films were not released and many projects came to a halt. The role that film plays with the imaginary froze. For the time being, film as representative of the spirit of the time had been suspended, with imaginary answers yet to come, still tinged with uncertainty.

However, during the pandemic, the social function of film as a source of imaginary content helped keep afloat a society driven to despair by lockdown. Perhaps the imaginary world provided by film was then a source of encouragement, giving reassurance that life would continue as before. Its value lay in the conventional and the mainstream “because it’s business as usual around here.” Momentary deliverance came from consuming mainstream films with the content that the industry had offered up to that point, with features totally unlike what was present in the pandemic. This encounter was a necessary antidote to a threatening state of affairs. For, as Gérard Imbert makes clear, in cinema as a place for the imaginary, “I project myself—and I identify myself as a social subject: cinema has a function of recognition” (2010, p. 11). Using the imagination to reiterate and recognize that life remains unchanged acts as a kind of emotional salvation, because cinema confirms that unchanged state.

There were no new imaginaries. Society survived on imaginary content that had already been coined, perhaps with new findings, as could be assumed in the case of the options available on platforms whose production and visuals were completed before the pandemic. This was not entirely new. Julia Tuñón points out that, “Films summon magic, dreams, and imagination but at the same time, contradictorily, they show possible beings with which any spectator can identify” (1995, p. 51), with desires, obsessions, conflicts, and concerns that make us believe in the film’s imaginary content because it offers confirmation and is plausible within the fiction it presents. Sometimes that provides a sense of security because it is viewed in the midst of suffering.

“Édgar Morín says that the essence [of cinema] amazes, [not only] by presenting the unnatural, such a woman with a beard, but also by referencing that which is most common and ordinary... people marvel at seeing that which does not marvel them in reality because there, in lights and shadows, it takes on a particular tone” (Morín, quoted by Tuñón, 1995, p. 51).

During the pandemic, people lived with pre-established imaginary content, which turned out to be the salvation of a stunned society, shocked by an abnormal event. The collective filmic imaginary may have settled into already repeated narratives, but they were useful for summoning the return to pre-pandemic life. The filmic imaginaries that interpret this health crisis are sure to come. As Jorge Ayala Blanco points out, the great films that addressed topics that marked human history were always made several years after the given events. If so, the filmic imaginaries from the pandemic are yet to come (2021); perhaps then cinema’s destiny will be vindicated—the same faith that society often has in cinema as salvation.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of the coronavirus in 2019 transformed human life in virtually every way. The dynamics of social life were radically altered, especially with the confinement forced upon the population. Leisure and socialization practices were also affected,

among them, the habit of going to the movies, one of the most common leisure activities in modern life. Like many other industries, the film industry also suffered from the consequences of the pandemic, and the film circuit was affected. However, the inability to access movie theaters did not stop the cultural practice of watching films. Rather, new ways of watching them were found. This appearance of cinema revealed that it fulfills different social functions, which it continues to do to a greater or lesser extent to date. However, during the pandemic and due to confinement, film viewing re-configured other social functions exercised in society. These events reframed the way of “being with cinema.” The reflections presented here have attempted to account for the novel phenomena that resulted from the complex historical connection between cinema and the Covid-19 pandemic, fertile ground for reflection in the social sciences. \

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