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Baudrillard and Film-Philosophy

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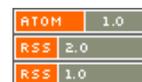
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Review: Francesco Casetti (2008) *Eye of the Century. Film, Experience, Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press. 269 pp.

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To understand what cinema can still be today, we have to look back to what cinema has been so far. This English translation of Francesco Casetti's latest book delves into the idea that cinema dominated human existence during the 20th century, and offers a vast and conclusive overview of the whole history of 'the medium of Modernity.' Modern metropolitan inhabitants have seen their own lives and their own needs through the eyes of film, a medium that '"rewrote" its epoch in order to answer the question of its time' (4). Cinema has carefully searched for balanced solutions to the natural attitude of spectators in seeking a Benjaminian *choc* and the need to understand and interiorize their sense of the experience. It has provided a specific form of compromise between tendencies to closeness, subjectivity, artificiality, strong emotions, immersion, and the risks that such tendencies imply. In this way it enables the spectators to develop skills that allow them to face the difficulties of their time. In this book Casetti's gaze is wide and deep in that it encompasses major film theorists and forgotten or even unknown Italian essayists (such as Enrico Thovez, Enrico Toddi, Giovanni Livoni and others), and in that it places silent films, Hollywood classical and post-classical production, and European auteur cinema side by side. With a clear and engaging writing style, he proposes five forms of gaze through which cinema has been able to negotiate and co-penetrate opposing tensions.

In the chapter titled 'Framing the world' Casetti recalls Béla Balázs's masterpieces *Visibile Man* (1924) and *The Spirit of Film* (1930) and the capability of cinema to provide a certain perspective of the world, a subjective point-of-view 'which inevitably emphasizes one piece and not another, one feature and not another, one phase and not another' (50). For instance, a film such as *Napoléon* (Abel Gance, 1927) proves that cinema can only illustrate mere fragments of existence and yet, nonetheless, it tends to reconstruct the whole by the enlargement of the screen and a series of linguistic solutions. In fact, while it is true that both the narrative and the visual are fragmented into small pieces, that is, respectively divided into single episodes drawn from a single life and simultaneously represented through the split screen, it is also true that 'in each fragment pulses the sense of the whole' (33) and the film reveals the ambition to restore its limits, 'capturing reality within a global vision' (33-34). Film techniques such as split screen, superimposition, rapid montage, and swish pan perfectly illustrate the tension between the part and the whole, and, at the same time, the attempt to resolve it. The *gestalt* ability of a single part to presume the whole is embodied in specific technological and linguistic solutions that negotiate between the inescapable limitation of point-of-view and the risk of fragmentation. Casetti gathers the same dynamic in the finale of *Young and Innocent* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1937), even though it seems to propose an opposite logic to *Napoléon*. By using a crane shot moving from the high full-shot of the hall to a close-up of the murderer, the camera progressively reveals only the necessary part of the scene, only the salient object. In this case, cinema obeys the rules of *attention* described by Hugo Münsterberg in *The Photoplay* (1916), guiding the spectator's gaze and embodying the process of attention itself. In addition to accumulation and focalization, i.e. emphasising and detailing, there is a third path that cinema follows in order to offer a total vision. Indeed, there are cases in which the image is limited, and the spectator can benefit from its limits. The murder not shown at the beginning of *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931) is based on the 'logic of litotes': the invisible is de-located into the visible. Cinema is more effective when it uses

its limitations to suggest, allude, evoke, imply invisible-but-present objects, stimulating fantasy and association, using off-screen technique (and also out-of-focus, dark lighting, silence, match cut) and hidden objects to refer to 'tangible' thoughts and emotions. Besides, the 'tradition' that connects limitations to artistic power has a long history even in film theory, beginning with Victor Freeburg and his fundamental *The Art of Photoplay Making* (1918).

In the 'Double vision' chapter, Casetti presents a second form of negotiation between cinematic gaze and social tensions, namely between subjectivity and objectivity. The cinematic gaze is subjective, whether it belongs to a character or to the camera. Is objectivity no longer possible in the cinematographic image? – wonders Casetti in the wake of Balázs. It certainly is, but it is an *impression* of objectivity: 'This sense of the determination of time and space gives the things represented a reality that goes beyond the image. […] What appears on the screen is also reality in and of itself' (55). Thus, objectivity and subjectivity operate side by side, and even interfere with each other. For René Allendy (*Le valeur psychologique de l'image*, 1926) the image appears objective if it comes from perception, and it appears subjective if it comes from the imagination. For Georg Lukács (*Thought on an Aesthetic for the Cinema*, 1911), filmic images appear both vividly real and extremely fictional, to the extent that the real and the virtual can go hand in hand. Evidence of this composite gaze can be found in *The Three-Sided Mirror* (*La glace à trois faces*, Jean Epstein, 1927), in which 'perception and interpretation, reality and possibility, readily blend' (58). *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947) blends the character's gaze and the camera's gaze (respectively, the *point-of-view shot* and the *nobody's shot*), but they remain easily distinguishable as such. Thus, cinema connects and superimposes subjective and objective dimensions, but at the same time 'it distinguishes the two planes through a series of markers that retrace their presence into a narrative problem' (66). The natural tendency of cinema to embody the cognitive activity also affects memory. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962), the flashback offers a mediation between

action and reflection – it is the *alter ego* of the camera embodied in the character's point-of-view. Cinema observes as a witness, and allows the spectator to re-view what the camera has already viewed, yet it can also invent; it creates a fictional story. It remedies the uncertainty and undecidability by providing concrete forms of distinction and recognition. Classic cinema does not leave its spectator alone, ever.

However, 'The cinematic eye is a symptom of the transformation of human existence into a great mechanism in which the artificial dimension erodes and even edges out the natural' (107). Casetti's reflections collected in the 'The glass eye' chapter are inspired by Luigi Pirandello's *The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio* (1915/25): a man so connected to the camera that he becomes a mere appendage of it. Casetti argues that it is also true that this eye is still able to relate to reality and record its presence. Even if nature and technique conflict with each other, the real and the artificial constitute a unique flow of coming and going. Films such as *The Cameraman* (Edward Sedgwick and Buster Keaton, 1928), *The Man with the Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Shodesack, 1933), and even *Passion* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1982), show us that cinema negotiates between its mechanical and its sensorial natures, between the machine and the man. On one level, it recaptures reality, on another it loses it. But 'Even the most artificial image […] is, in the end, crossed by the breath of things' (108): a glass eye with a human pupil.

Eye of the Century reaches its climax in the chapter titled 'Strong sensations', in which Casetti evokes Siegfried Kracauer's essays in *Cult of Distraction* (1926) on Berlin movie palaces as actual places of a superficial worship, places of immediate attraction and elegant surface splendour. The film spectator is an inhabitant of the rising, crowded metropolis and – as Georg Simmel states in his *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903) – is subject to an 'intensification of nervous stimulation'. Cinema sinks its roots in the connection between the modern life-condition and the intensification of sensory excitement. Especially in the 1930s, film theorists like Epstein, Balázs, Eisenstein and Pudovkin described the same tension in their works.

So on the one hand, there are outward appearances, an assault of impressions, the optical and acoustic kaleidoscope of the temples of entertainment. But on the other hand, there is disorder, confusion and the stimulation of mass society. Think of the race against time in *Intolerance* (David W. Griffith, 1916), of the excitement of mutation at play in some scenes of *Old and New* (Sergej M. Eisenstein, 1926), or of the increasing rhythm in the musical *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933). Cinema reflects these tensions with cross-cutting, suspense, and 'parades,' and embodies the thrill of movement, the thrill of change and the thrill of sensorial excitement. Many dangers are associated with these euphorias: the risk of losing one's way, the risk of not understanding the new forms, and the risk of losing the meaning of things. How does cinema negotiate between thrill and risk? In such a situation – Casetti writes – cinema 'puts into play an excited gaze that gathers stimuli and boosts them, yet it also gives this gaze adequate defences, which protect it from possible dangers' (135). It mediates between sensations and sense, sensoriality and meanings, conveying and organizing stimuli into a story, regulating, disciplining, and balancing the excitement. 'The cinema is exactly this: an experience that vacillates between the possibility of an excitement beyond measure, and an adherence to measures that avoid all risk. It is the space between, in which the comings and goings serve to recover a balanced turmoil in order to arrive at what modern man needs: good emotion' (140).

The fifth and last form of negotiation that Casetti analyses deals with 'The place of the observer'. Both Jean Epstein's *The Cinema Seen from Etna* (1926) and Hans Blumemberg's *Shipwreck with Spectator* (1979, inspired by Lucretius's *De rerum natura*) guide Casetti's reflections: the film spectators want to merge themselves into the spectacle, they seek contact and intimacy, to the extent that they finally risk losing their privileged position. What is the *good* position of the spectator with respect to the characters and the events on the screen? The spectator faces both the impossibility of participating in the spectacle, like the ingenuous Josh in *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edwin Porter, 1902), and the difficulties of merging into the social

environment, like the dreamer John Sims in *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928). Both Josh and John are deluded modern men. At the same time, both are also symptoms of the impossible challenge of cinema: to allow the spectator to take part in the experience represented on the screen. The film spectator seeks extreme nearness to the characters (achieved by the close-up), or seeks immersion in the surrounding world (the crane shot, the establishing/re-establishing shot). Yet, as these two films prove, both distance and closeness cause 'con-fusion'. Too far, too close: here Casetti proposes his last great leap from classic to modern cinema in order to show that the solution is, again, in the middle. We follow Thomas – the photographer in *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966) – watching the photos he took and which are now revealing a murder. He is placed in the centre of a network of gazes, and so the spectator is 'behind' him. In fact, the negotiation is carried out by the semi-subjective shot, a single shot that incorporates both the seen object and the seeing subject in the same field of vision. Thomas is *a subject who sees*, *a subject who shows* and, furthermore, *a seen subject*. Casetti prefers Jean-Paul Sartre (*Being and Nothingness*, 1943) to Marcel Merleau Ponty (and Vivian Sobchack) and argues that

> The observers in the modern consciousness finds the spectator of the cinema to be something more than its simple extension. He or she is, instead, the realization of the idea of the observer. Moreover, it is precisely in front of a screen that we best feel the observed observing, and we feel ourselves inside a gaze that is no longer ours alone, in communion with a world that carries us away. In front of the screen we experience the comings and goings of subject and object, possession and loss, vision and gaze. (162)

In the end, it comes full circle. Cinema incarnates the need of the spectator for a deep relationship between the subjects, the objects and the environment on the screen, and 'it does so by offering a fusion that is partly *imaginary* and temporally *delimited*' (165). It is imaginary since it is based on illusion, belief, a mechanism of projection/identification, and empathy. It is temporally limited since it is fully achieved only when the spectator detaches

from it – a re-distancing from the physical and psychical place of a 'diffused eroticism' and 'hypnosis,' as Roland Barthes (1975) states.

Con-fusion and re-distancing, closeness at a distance: this, in a single oxymoron, is the deep nature of film experience as described in *Eye of the Century*. Reconstruction of totality as negotiation between the *personal* gaze of cinema and the fragmentation of modern life; distinction as negotiation between the *composite* gaze and subjective/objective oscillation; naturalness as negotiation between the *mechanical* eye and the risk of artificiality; cushioning and ordering as negotiation between the *elicited* gaze and the risk of disorientation; and re-distancing as negotiation between the *immersive* gaze and the loss of the sense of position. Every cinematic gaze both represents and tries to solve both the risk and the tensions of society through its technological aesthetic. The revolutionary nature of cinema itself forms and disciplines its spectator, reflecting his/her desires and incorporating both the social and symbolic needs. Casetti's book is constructed upon a geometrical structure, one that is actually too perfect. Very often, it asks the reader to leap from one age of the history of cinema to another, melding classic film theory pieces with unknown or forgotten contributions from the 1910s to the 1990s, silent films with modern films, aesthetics with cultural critics. This anxiety to say everything risks failing by saying too little about too much. However, what Casetti is interested in is 'the possibility of gathering together a series of proofs in the cinema that are able to show its collective work, in particular the broad assumptions and consequences upon which such diverse works are based' (170). The method of 'glosses' (chapter 7), that is, the flux of social and artistic discourses embodied by both film theory and production, seems to be the most effective, though 'wild' and fragile, critical approach to such a complex phenomenon. In rediscovering film's and film theory's heritage, Casetti's book proves that cinema was the eye of the 20th century. Can it still be the eye of the 21st?

The paradigm of negotiation risks not solving the ambivalence of the poles that it puts in play, especially when one thinks of the 'extreme' aesthetics of contemporary cinema. Both the agenda the author proposes in

the 'decalogue' (183-185) and the challenge he launches in the final chapter, 'What remains of the day', invite new generations of film theorists to delve into so-called *Cinema 2.0* – new modes of producing and consuming films affected by convergence, ICT and the relocation of screens and audiovisual media in urban spaces. The legacy of classic cinema and film theory has to be evaluated 'as the night falls'.

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