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The Lumière Galaxy

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Book reviews

edited by Lavinia Brydon and Alena Strohmaier (NECS Publication Committee)

The Lumière Galaxy

At the outset of one of the more celebrated American novels of the second half of the 20th century, the main character and storyteller declares:

[t]he fact is I am quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie. Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship, as they say in books. I too once met a girl in Central Park, but it is not much to remember. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carabine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in *The Third Man*.

Many film scholars are certainly familiar with Binx Bolling, the alienated protagonist of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*.¹ Binx has problems holding onto reality, feeling attached to it, and accordingly producing a memory of past experiences; he prefers the movies, and this preference is the symptom of an estrangement. In the novel, media experience – no matter how joyful and rich – equals a problematic stance in the world, though this happened a long time ago. Cinema was meeting one of its cyclical crises – occasionally, Binx visits half-empty movie theatres – and movies were still believed to address and maintain some kind of relationship with a referential reality. However, what seemed back then a contradictory attitude to the world and humankind is nowadays a widespread, constitutive, pivotal mode of individual and social existence. Cinema caters to an overall mediated memory while its boundaries and existence grow less certain. Film scholars may rejoice to discover that their students *do* remember some film scenes from the past. Contemporary cinema's uncertain identity is the starting point of *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Keywords for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015) by Francesco Casetti. By telling two anecdotes, Casetti introduces the reader to basic but paramount questions, echoing André Bazin's pivotal query: what, when, and where is cinema today? Or, in a more encompassing way: *how* is

cinema today, as Casetti pays great attention to cinematic practices rather than essentialist surveys.

Casetti, Professor of Humanities and Film and Media Studies at Yale University, is in the most suitable position to scrutinise and discuss the state of cinema today. Partaking in the second wave of film semiotics and focusing on film text,² Casetti soon started to challenge the latter's boundaries, in terms of method and consistence, and open up the field to pragmatics – i.e. what kind of use and viewer does a text imply for itself.³ What was then at stake was further developing text-based semiotics, as the pioneering research of Christian Metz founded, in order to conceive communication frameworks fitting into spatially and historically embedded situations.⁴ Whereas film theory has always been at the heart of Casetti's research, as a quest to provide us with the words and concepts to define what we are looking at,⁵ pragmatics was the doorway to the main research field in the following decades; film experience, i.e. a question revolving around the modes of watching, living, and making meaning of cinema. Experience is rooted in history and located in space, undergoing technological and cultural transformations, as Casetti's twofold perspective always clearly outlined, by looking at the ways cinema belonged to and shaped modernity⁶ and painstakingly examining how film experience went through radical changes in the past decades.⁷ Therefore, he does not solely focus on how Binx Bolling went to the cinema but attends to a more demanding task and attempts at answering a less clear question: where does Binx go today, assuming that he goes anywhere?

Casetti takes the challenge of providing theoretical frameworks and keywords to conceive contemporary film experience with elegance: clear and vivid prose; a varied and colourful vocabulary; bright and convincing examples, embracing a wide range of uncertain cases evoking cinema (urban screens, exhibitions, mobile devices, grassroots practices, etc.); past and present theoretical discussions skilfully mastered. Accordingly, the book conflates an impressive variety of theories, tests them in contemporary circumstances, and tries to forecast what cinema will be in the next future. Somehow, *The Lumière Galaxy* picks up the baton *The Eye of the Century* passed, inasmuch as the impressive survey of theoretical accounts the latter examined to circumscribe cinema experience and its inherent modernity led Casetti to search for what is left of it today; how did pivotal questions resonating for decades, as well as a certain way to conceive, shape, and experience the medium, change? The attempt to encompass different times and contexts in order to let them come into relief is rooted in a theoretical reference point running along the whole project: Walter Benjamin. The key notion derived from the German philosopher is obviously 'dialectic image': '[i]t's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now [*Jetzt*] to form

a constellation.⁸ The book chooses seven keywords that might also be regarded as seven dialectic images: *relocation*, *relics/icons*, *assemblage*, *expansion*, *hypertopia*, *display*, and *performance*. These dialectic images provide us with bright concepts to shed light on our complex media scene, possibly forecasting what awaits in the next future.

A major issue lies at the core of *The Lumière Galaxy*: cinema's identity in contemporary media culture. The book attempts to define it, countering three different attitudes emerging in current scholarship facing recent media turns: a nostalgic stance, mourning the perennial disappearance of the medium; an inefable look at cinema's transformation, melting it into a more vague notion of moving image, or cinematic effect; an indifferent view, reducing major technological changes such as the digital turn to a variation the medium itself absorbs and moderates. Casetti confronts the contradictions without any hesitation:

[t]he idea of cinema to which we are attached ends up functioning above all as a medicine or an exorcism. It is the cure that is administered to the patient, whose case we hope is not terminal. It is the rite we celebrate in an attempt to ward off an impending disaster. In any case, it is something that at most prolongs survival. (p. 214)

Nevertheless, if a sense of mourning permeates cinema's contemporary state, Casetti also underlines a no less significant vitality; hybridisation, cross-fertilisation, expansion, and circulation are some among the processes bringing cinema, its products, and its experience beyond the usual borders, leading him to explore its contemporary existence and question its enduring, if not coherent identity. The wager might sound as idealistic: repeatedly Casetti speaks about an 'idea of cinema'. This idea is far from abstract or unique, as stated in one objection to his previous book.⁹ It is an understanding of cinema deeply embedded in its multifarious past and present existence, firmly related to its practices, and scrutinised from an impressive range of perspectives.

The seven keywords revolve around two axes: *medium* and *experience*. The first notion is neither entirely indebted to Marshall McLuhan (however, a clear reference, as the title overtly declares) nor to a technological determination sometimes overwhelming media archaeology; it owes much to Benjamin. By referring to a fragment from 1922,¹⁰ Casetti brings forth a specific notion of medium, both technological and cultural:

Benjamin does not use the word *medium* to refer to a technical dispositive (which he calls *Apparat* or *Apparatur*), but rather to the modalities with which a work, a language, or a technology actuates its mediation. In this sense, the term precisely indicates both the environment and the conditions of a perception – and therefore, if you will, the fabric of an experience. (p. 216)

This move enables him to trace cinema beyond a specific spatial or technolo-

gical determination and into a wider notion of experience. *A medium is a symbolic and cultural activity*, undergoing historical transformation and spatial conversions – anyone experiencing movie-going over the last four decades is already familiar with the issue. Thus, media experience underwent major transformations if compared to what early theoreticians such as Canudo, Balázs, or Delluc described: neither a record of life or the world, nor a collective scopic activity performed in the darkness, and maybe not even a technological, empathic, imaginary astonishment. Casetti addresses the many survival strategies a medium puts in place. Or, more specifically, he considers the permanence of cinema as a media memory (i.e. its persistence). If a medium is a technology, a set of practices, but also the cultural and symbolic values we attach to its experience, then the way it undergoes shifts and developments testifies to its identity while bearing witness to its past. Casetti looks at the ways cinema exists and expands within the media scene through the notion of *ofnegotiation*, considered as a mode to deal with an identity featuring contemporary and at times conflicting cultural forms.¹¹ Such a way to combine and merge forms does not relate exclusively to language but also permeates technology – in contemporary media practices, texts, viewing positions, and spaces themselves. Casetti explains this when discussing cinema's relocation, its assembled forms, and the work of bricolage and performance contemporary viewers (or users) attend to. Accordingly, he proposes an ever-changing notion of medium – a medium whose regimes of intensity might vary over time, from 'hot' to 'cold', to recall McLuhan's definition; also a medium articulating the social field according to the epoch, distributing the sensible, to refer to the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, another major source Casetti uses.

The author outlines some crucial turns in recent film experience to account for the variations affecting the intensity of the medium as much as its articulation of the social field. According to Casetti, cinema turned from a place of epiphany where the world presented itself to the viewer to an intersection for shifting contents, where a viewer performs, selects, assembles, and re-shapes audiovisual materials. In this fluid media scene a new condition arises: the *occasional subject*, becoming more of an operator rather than a viewer or a witness. Cinema is immersed in this unstable, fluctuating scene and contributes to shaping it. In Casetti's view, from this media ocean a new cinematic condition might emerge, as happened when early cinema emerged from the chaos of the many scientific and entertainment practices it was composed of, ultimately becoming an institution.

Cinema developed into an institution in the first two decades of the 20th century by compounding elements belonging to diverse cultural practices and settings. An incredibly rich and crowded media scene, along with major shifts in film experience today, offer a field whose boundaries are as blurred as a hundred years ago. Are we to see a second phase of cinema, a new cinematic institution

being born? Or, are we amidst a transition leading us to unprecedented and unforeseen media? If a critique might be directed at *The Lumière Galaxy* it would focus precisely on the comparison established between an epoch when cinema emerged as the dominant medium and the new era, in which we can speculate on the marginal role cinema is likely to have. Casetti does not offer simple answers to these fundamental questions, nor does he pretend not to notice the changes that are afoot. However, he places his faith in cinema's life and afterlife, and in his theoretical gamble a second, strategic bet is to be identified: after the deterritorialisation of cinema and related knowledge, is it possible to reterritorialise the medium and its field of study? By considering the medium's many contemporary lives and forms of resilience, Casetti persuades the reader to further engage with cinema. At the end of the day, Binx Bolling also believed it was worth engaging with the world.

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Notes

1. Percy 1961.
2. Casetti 1979.
3. Casetti 1981, 1983a, 1983b, 1984, 1986, 1989.
4. A contemporary approach to semio-pragmatics which also followed in the wake and updated the work of Metz is to be found in the scholarship of Roger Odin. See Odin 1983, 1994, 2000.
5. See Casetti 1978, 1993, 2007.
6. See Casetti 1996, 2005, 2009, 2011a, 2013a, and Casetti-Fanchi 2002.
7. See Casetti 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2011b, 2012, 2013b.
8. Benjamin 1999, p. 772.
9. Hake 2009.
10. Benjamin 1996. See also Somaini 2013.
11. Casetti explored the notion of negotiation derived from Stuart Hall's scholarship, as related to media processes, in Casetti 2002.