

review:

Francesco Casetti, *Theories of Cinema, 1945–1995*, trans. Francesca Chiostri and Elizabeth Gard Bartolini-Salimbeni, with Thomas Kelso, revised and updated by the author. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999, 378 pp.

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Numbers distance themselves from the single object by adding noughts on at the end. Theories distance themselves from individual works by adding metas on at the beginning. It is one thing to collect together an anthology of illustrations of theoretical approaches at work on films (Mast and Cohen, Bill Nichols), quite another to write a history of the activity of theorizing itself. The fear might be that Francesco Casetti's *Theories of Cinema 1945–1995* (translated and revised from the Italian original of 1993) could bear a meta load so great as to remove it from almost any contact with films themselves. It is an unjustified fear, because Casetti remains always so aware of exactly what he is doing, and why, that at no point does the book ever go off into outer space, the discussion of theory never for one moment forgets what the theorizing is about. But theorizing about cinema means theorizing about many things, and that is the value of Casetti's book.

Casetti and his book have been maturing in parallel for many years. A small first version came out in Italy twenty-odd years ago. The author's own career embraces the Milanese inheritance of the French filmology movement, years in the semiotics workshop of Gianfranco Bettetini, periods of research into the theory and methodology of the history of cinema, into spectatorship, into film analysis, into television studies, direct contacts with US theorizing.

and the first excellent monograph to be published on Bertolucci. There are no chips on his shoulder and no blinkers on his eyes. The locution most frequently encountered in the book is 'in other words', betraying his painstaking attempt to make accessible to the reader the theories that he is discussing (the only summaries that might remain slightly opaque to an undergraduate are those of Raymond Bellour and of Vivian Sobchack). In Italian he writes elegantly, and the translators have done him justice (the slips are too few and insignificant to worry about). It is an impressive and enlightening book. To describe what it sets out to achieve means standing at one meta-remove from Casetti himself.

Perhaps the best way to describe it is as a map. But it is a *history* of theorizing about cinema, and so the analogy with a map must be tweaked to give it a chronological dimension. Had Casetti merely given a chronological account of theories of cinema, the reader might have received no idea of the patterns that lie behind the *activity* of theorizing. The patterns are what interest Casetti. To bring the patterns into relief, he breaks down the *activity* of the theorists that he is discussing into three main categories, which are then subdivided. As he defines his three main categories his lines of thinking become clearer, and as he elaborates them a larger ambition becomes fulfilled: that his book 'offer a useful sociological reflection on culture'. This happens because, in order to trace the development over time of the activity of theorizing, Casetti has to pay enormous attention to the *institutions* that produce it. 'We will examine the *image of cinema* proposed by a group of scholars and the *styles of reflection* adopted by them . . . As we will try to show, what changes in the post-war age is not the characteristics attributed to cinema by the scholars, but the way in which scholars organise their research' (p. 3).

Casetti characterizes three 'generations' by three 'paradigms': *ontological* theory ('what is cinema?'), *methodological* theories ('from which standpoint should cinema be studied, and what does it look like from such a perspective?'), and *field* theories ('which problems does cinema give rise to, and how does it manage to both shed light on them and receive light from them?') (pp. 13–15).

He makes a distinction: 'The champions of ontological theories are those critics who are not satisfied with simply reviewing the film but intend to explore the nature of cinema itself, viewing this second task as the foundational and orienting moment of their activity. . . . This group's professionalisation relies more on its ability to intervene in the cinematographic debate than on a precise institutional role' (p. 17). 'Methodological theories usually have other champions, *scholars in precise disciplinary fields*, for whom cinema is one of many possible objects of interest and who apply to it *research tools that have already been well tested* . . . Professionalism here does not depend on the importance acquired by the debate on cinema. Rather,

it depends on an institutional role (the profession of the researcher)' (p. 18, italics mine) – but is this always true? It is being very generous to scholars of film or literature who have read exegeses of Lacan and Althusser – a lot would come tumbling to the ground if it ever transpired that infants between three and eight months did *not* experience a 'mirror phase'. Casetti's criterion is what he calls the 'productivity' of the theories discussed. Productive they certainly were, but it might have been enough to describe the methodological paradigm as simply the application to film of theories borrowed from other areas of investigation.

In the ontological paradigm, covering the 1940s and 1950s, he makes sense of a vast and varied field by dividing it into cinema's relation with 'reality' (the Neorealist debate, Bazin and Kracauer), 'the imaginary' (Surrealism and Morin) and finally 'language' (Della Volpe, Laffay and Mitry). In the methodological paradigm, covering the 1960s and 1970s, his task is easier, giving him the division into 'psychology of cinema', 'sociology of cinema', 'semiotics of cinema' and 'psychoanalysis' of cinema. In both paradigms, the main sectors are then divided into subcategories. In a review I cannot discuss everything, so I shall try to convey how the 'field theories' paradigm for the 1980s is organized by taking some examples.

In a chapter called 'Text, Mind, Society', he starts with the rubric 'the death and rebirth of representation', concentrating mainly on Aumont and Vernet, followed by 'image and sound' with reference to Chion. He prepares for his next three subcategories by explaining 'the first allies itself with semiotics and that field's interest in the text. The second uses cognitive psychology and its attention to the mechanisms used in the perception and comprehension of film. The third is aligned with pragmatics and its attempt to explore the relation of the text to social space' (p. 239). This gives him a section on 'the textual dimension' in which he discusses 'mechanisms of enunciation' (Simon, Bettetini, Casetti and Metz), and 'the dynamics of narration' (Gaudreault and Jost). A transitional section called 'between text and mind the generative models', discusses Carroll, Chateau, Moller and Colin, and questions of competence. This leads to 'the mental dimension: cognitive processes', which looks at Bordwell. Finally, 'the social dimension: pragmatics' discusses Dayan, and Odin's interest in modes and the institution.

The following chapter, 'Culture, Art, Thought' ranges very widely, and we can look a little closer at the way it is arranged. The basic issue is identified as 'the relevance of cinema', and is divided first into three provinces: 'One examines films on the basis of their cultural significance; another views films on the basis of their aesthetic value, and the last treats films as though they were *sui generis* philosophical thought' (p. 263). For brevity's sake, we shall look more closely at the first, 'Cinema and Culture', than at the

second and third 'Provinces' The questions confronted are summarized as: 'To what extent does cinema bring into play borrowed means of expression or, on the contrary, give rise to other valuable forms? To what degree does cinema inherit the functions of classic narrative or, on the contrary, forge new paths? To what degree does cinema illustrate social reality on the screen, if somewhat removed, or, on the contrary, impose its own images to the point that they are taken for real?' (p. 263) Here is where he deals first of all with genre theorists. Under the rubric 'stylistic choices, exchanges among the arts, revival of archetypes, and references to society', he discusses Braudy, Cohen, McConnell, Warshaw, Wood and Stam, and matters connected with myth, with a common theme: 'cinema is tied to the cultural dynamics that both pervade and nourish it: a film is itself to the extent that it leads to something else' (p. 267) Under the next rubric, after illustrating the theories of Elsaesser on melodrama, Grande on comedy, and Aumont on film and painting, he generalizes

When attention falls on a film's stylistic choices or on its expressive means shared with other media, at the centre of the analysis are *formal structures*. When instead one talks of film's capacity to bring new life to myth or to make itself witness to a way of thinking, then one questions above all *social functions*. Similarly, when one speaks of great choices of mythic roots, in some way one is *proceeding from history*. When one talks about stylistic procedures or symptoms or traces, then one is documenting *circumscribed and precise dynamics*. Therefore, *formal structures* and *social functions* can be paired with *universal constants* and *contingent elements*. Cinema carries on a dialogue with culture because it brings all these references into play (p. 270).

Under the rubric 'between archetypes and rituals' he warns: 'One is not limited to formal elements, as was the case for those who reduced genre to a collection of typical features, on the contrary, one must always try to keep genre's social functions in mind' (p. 271), and discusses Kaminsky, Cawelti, Wright and Altman, observing

We can have stable semantic content and changes at the syntactical level (this is the case with musicals, which renew themselves by appropriating melodramatic plots); we can also have stable syntax and changes in content (as in the case of the Western, set in different times and places but continuing to tell the same story). Altman adds that this mechanism allows a real negotiation between Hollywood and its public. (p. 274)

Under the rubric 'representation and identity' he discusses Cultural Studies, and how

on the one hand, cultural studies engages in the politics of representation; and on the other hand, it works for a re-conceptualisation of spectatorship. Cultural studies' influence on film studies is expressed in the analysis of the presence and circulation of cultural meanings, and thus in the effort to measure the authenticity of representations within film texts, and in addition, cultural studies has encouraged research into the processes of identity formation within the spectatorial situation with reference to the spectator's negotiation of textual meanings (pp 276–7)

He points out how reception studies encouraged 'the realisation that film history is not only and simply a history of films but also the history of cinema audiences' (p. 277), something which he will enlarge upon in the subsequent chapter on 'History, Histories, Historiography'. At this point he moves on to the other two provinces, first 'aesthetics', with a discussion of Andrew, Thompson and Tinazzi, and 'experiencing the work' with reference to Mast, Bruno and Sobchack, and then finally to 'philosophers before the silver screen' with a discussion of Cavell and, of course, Deleuze

This summary cannot give any sense of the wealth and clarity of the examples Casetti provides, but it may show how a 'map' that is at once convincing and helpful has been constructed. Students are unlikely to read it *instead* of reading the originals, because the enthusiasm with which the historian charts the territory and uncovers its wealth is more likely to inspire further exploration. However, because the book never talks over the head of the reader, the territory is accessible to the novice