The lumière galaxy: seven key words for the cinema to come

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Lumière galaxy: seven key words for the cinema to come, by Francesco Casetti, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015, 312 pp., £20.50 (paperback), ISBN 9780231172431

The title of Francesco Casetti's book is at the same time brilliant and deliberately misleading; indeed, though referring to McLuhan (1962), it differs from it on at least three relevant points.

First, McLuhan insists on the importance of the medium's technological and material basis in determining both the media experience and the perception of the medium itself; Casetti, by contrast, believes that media experiences and the very possibility of recognizing media specificities are relatively independent of their technological bases and their material conditions of viewing and listening, since they represent specific cultural forms:

> What constitutes the defining core of a medium is the way that it activates our senses, our reflexivity, and our practices. The way it does so is undoubtedly influenced by the technical complex, but it has also crystallized over time into a cultural form that is recognizable as such and which can also find different instantiations. [. . .] In this context, what identifies a medium is first and foremost a mode of seeing, feeling, reflecting, and reacting, no longer necessarily tied to a single 'machine' not even to the one with which it has been traditionally associated. (16)

Second, McLuhan (1962) argues that 'With [the] recognition of curved space in 1905 the Gutenberg galaxy was officially dissolved' (253). Casetti's central thesis about cinema in the digital era is exactly the opposite. According to the Italian scholar, the forms of cinema experience tend to survive after the end of cinema as a technological and factual apparatus (i.e. involving the analogical reproduction of moving images and sounds within an auditorium), and they tend to endure even in the very different circumstances of audiovisual consumption characterizing the present condition; indeed, cultural forms bend disparate technologies and settings to their own expectations and needs, thus producing experiential forms that, despite their differences from the past, can still be targeted as 'cinema'.

Moreover, according to Casetti, mismatches and negotiations between forms of experience and factual settings have always characterized the history of cinema. To demonstrate this longstanding effectiveness of cinema experience, Casetti recovers and assembles a great number of different sources and examples that would represent it: from Wenders', Tornatore's, Godard's or Egoyan's movies to Tacita Dean's, Jesse Jones', Tobias Putrih's installations, from grassroots productions like *Star Wars Uncut* to media façades in Milan; and

again: from officially recognized scholars such as Epstein, Vertov or Balázs up to almost obscure names of Italian writers like Antonello Gerbi or Giovanni Papini – not to mention the anonymous voices from the blog Allwomanstalk.com or the Mubi.com forum.

Finally, a third point of opposition between McLuhan and Casetti regards the structure of the book. Indeed, McLuhan (1962) designs his work as 'a mosaic pattern of perception and observation' (265), composed by a number of short chapters; on the contrary, Casetti arranges his discussion around seven chapters, each corresponding to a keyword: relocation, relics/icons, assemblage, expansion, hypertopia, display, performance. Beyond the paratactic succession of the seven issues, it is useful to introduce a distinction: while most of the chapters follow a descriptive-interpretative approach, two of them (assemblage and performance) adopt a more strictly theoretical orientation. We will set them apart in our presentation.

Chapter 1 (*Relocation*) introduces the general framework of Casetti's analysis. Relocation is defined as 'the process by which the experience of a medium is reactivated and reproposed elsewhere than the place in which it was formed, with alternate devices and in new environments' (40). On this basis, Casetti argues that we are witnessing today a multiple and multiform relocation of cinema experience, modifying but not dissolving the processes of medium recognition. The next chapter (*Relics/Icons*) specifies two paths of the relocation of cinema experience: 'At the center of the first path is the object: the film. Unable to re-create all the elements of the traditional theater experience, we secure the *what*, independently of the *how*' (60). It is what happens when watching a movie on a computer, on the iPad, during a flight, and so on. In this case 'a conveyance occurs, a *delivery*' (63), and 'the film that I watch functions as a *relic*: It is like a piece of the body of a saint or an object that belonged to one or that was near one, which, thanks to this ownership or proximity, prolongs the living existence of the saint' (75).

'The second path is exactly the opposite. The cinema experience is reactivated far from its canonical locations, not so much because of the availability of an object as because of the existence of a suitable environment' (61). We find here the situation of home theater experience, but also (I add) of some museum video installations or urban videowall attendance. In this case what occurs is not a delivery but 'a reorganization of the space, a *setting*' (63); and 'the viewing environment brings me back to the canonical cinematic experience through a resemblance as opposed to through contact. [. . .] In this light, setting processes follow the logic of the *icon* [in the theological meaning of the word] rather than that of the relic' (76).

We can directly link here chapters 6 (*Display*) and 5 (*Hypertopia*), since they both address the problem of the transformation of *screens*, respectively from the point of view of delivery and from that of setting relocation. In chapter 6, Casetti argues that cinema relocation compels scholars to replace the classic metaphors for the screen (the window, the frame and the mirror) with three new metaphors:

monitor (the screens of video surveillance, GPS devices, etc.), *board* (bulletin board or blackboard: the screens in shops, malls, airports, websites, videogames, etc.), and *scrapbook* or wall (the screens of social media). These three metaphors are summarized by the term *display*; in turn, this concept entails a deep transformation of media functions: indeed, media are no longer conceivable as means of mediation between different subjects and between the subjects and the world, since they have become means that intercept and send forth flows of information:

> A display does not involve its images in the dialectic between visible and invisible (like a window used to do), between surfaces and structure (like a frame), or between appropriation and dispossession (like a mirror). The display simply 'makes present' images. It places them in front of us, in case we may want to make use of them. It hands them to us, if you will. (180)

Also in the case of *Hypertopia* (Chapter 5), Casetti outlines the need to go beyond the classical model of the screen; this time however he brings his attention to big urban video walls, museum installations and more generally to sites of vision that are more stable and large in size. While in the past the setting of cinema was taken for granted and the screen allowed its breach toward 'other' imaginary spaces, today the big screens produce the space of cinema and 'make the cinema happen', with a movement that is opposed to the previous one:

> [In the] new environments of vision [. . .] there is no longer the opening of a 'here' toward an 'elsewhere' [in the wake of Michel Foucault's model of *heterotopic* spaces], but rather an 'elsewhere' that arrives 'here' and dissolves itself in it. I call this new spatial structure *hypertopia*, in order to underline the fact that rather than taking off toward an 'other' place, there are many 'other' places that land here, to the point of saturating my world. (157–158)

Finally, in the discussion of cinema *Expansion* (chapter 4), Casetti shifts the focus from the conditions of watching movies to their stylistic and expressive modes. He compares Gene Youngblood's idea of 'Expanded Cinema' with the contemporary phenomena of grassroots productions, transmedia storytelling, fandom creations and so on. The field of 'film' appears today far more varied and indeterminate than in the seventies, so that the medium specificity of cinema is severely compromised.

As mentioned above, chapter 3 and 7 shift from a descriptive-interpretative approach to a *theoretical* one; in particular, they focus the complex issue of the 'dispositive' as a conceptual tool suitable for understanding the present. According to Casetti (Chapter 3) scholars need to change the idea of dispositive, from the concept of *apparatus* (typical of 1970s theory) to that of *assemblage* (borrowed from Deleuze): 'The cinematic dispositive no longer appears to be a predetermined, closed, and binding structure, but rather an open and flexible set of elements; it is no longer an *apparatus*, but rather an *assemblage*' (82).

There are basically three differences between apparatus and assemblage. Firstly, while the apparatus is an ahistorical arrangement of rigidly determined elements, the assemblage is a flexible and adaptive ensemble subjected to

historical and cultural transformations. Secondly, the assemblage no longer determines a rigid position for the viewer. Finally, unlike the apparatus, the assemblage is not an 'object' or a set of objects, but rather a *cultural form of experience*: it is primarily part of the viewer's social and personal competences. Even though it tends to realize in concrete settings, it does not happen without adaptations, negotiations and strategies of repair. This last point, which concerns the epistemological status of Casetti's assemblage, is obviously at the base of the other two.

The author argues that the assemblage is composed by six elements: filmic discourses, practices of consumption, factual environments, a series of (individual, cultural, anthropological) symbolic needs, and above all technologies and spectators. These elements combine thanks to a mutual negotiation guided by a 'homeodynamic' logic: on the one hand, assemblages take on some recursions and several automatisms (a concept derived from Stanley Cavell); on the other one, they transform them. In this regard, two observations are particularly relevant. First, the assemblage's dynamic, while clearly emerging in the present situation, can nonetheless be found throughout the entire history of cinema: 'cinema has always been a very flexible "machine," open to innovation and attentive to its own equilibria' (109). Second, the main agents of transformation of assemblages are technologies and, above all, spectators:

> Located at the intersection of discourses, practices, places, and needs, spectators intervene in the equilibrium between elements: They revitalize it when everything is working as usual, they restore it when it faces a threat, and they shift it when the occasion presents itself. From this is born a continual movement: forward, backward, and, paradoxically, in place. (100)

More specifically, in chapter 7 Casetti outlines that the main transformations of the cinema assemblages are linked to a shift concerning two different models of spectatorship: from a 'witnessing' model, that Casetti calls *attendance*, to an active one called *performance*.

While the descriptive-interpretative chapters link Casetti's book to the debate on the survival of cinema in the digital era (Bellour, Dubois, Andrew, Rodowick, etc.), the theoretical chapters connect it to the current discussion on cinematic dispositives (Albera, Tortajada, Elsaesser, Kessler, Gaudreault, etc.). We will focus on the latter aspect in order to make some final observations.

As clearly emerging from Albera and Tortajada (2015), the concept of dispositive as assemblage is today widely accepted by the scholarly community. More uncertain and discussed are two other issues.

The first issue concerns the *epistemological status* of the dispositive: it is not clear whether the term refers to a set of specific objects (for example, the dispositives of the early cinema, or those imagined by fantastic literature); or to a heuristic construction made by the researchers ('The dispositive does not exist, [. . .] because, in an epistemology of viewing and listening dispositive is a schema, a dynamic play of relations which articulates discourses and practices with one another', as argued by Albera and Tortajada 2015, 44); or to a cultural

form that viewers possess and use in order to give a sense to their cinema experience, like in Casetti's view.

The second key issue concerns the relationship between dispositives and experiences. As Albera and Tortajada (2015) outline, Michel Foucault introduces two different concepts of dispositive. On the one hand, he intends it as a set of (factual, architectural, technological, cultural, etc.) conditions enabling and governing defined and identifiable experiences of viewing and listening – for example Bentham's Panopticon or cinema; we can talk of *experience dispositives*. On the other hand, in Foucault's theory dispositive (translated in English as 'apparatus') refers to the schemas of relations between heterogeneous elements whose function is to connect discourse networks and patterns of knowledge with processes of formation and maintenance of power: 'The apparatus is [...] always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge which issue from it but, to an equal degree, condition it. This is what the apparatus consists in: strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge' (Foucault 1980, 196); we can call them *strategy dispositives*. The question arises of how to analyze the relationships between experience and strategy dispositives. While Albera and Tortajada reabsorb experience dispositives inside the strategy ones, Casetti tends to keep separate the two areas (the topic of power is briefly recalled in the chapter on expanded cinema, in the wake of Jacques Rancière's reflections). However, in my opinion, it is more productive to admit both a distinction and some kind of relationship between the two types of dispositives. On this basis, indeed, it becomes relevant to analyze on the one hand how power strategies, in their connection with discourse networks, produce regulated forms of experience; and on the other hand (on the basis of Casetti's reflection), how actual reinventions of experiences bring forth new power and knowledge strategies.

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