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***The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come*. Francesco Casetti. Columbia University Press, 2015 (293 pages). ISBN: 9780231172431.**

A Review by Niall Flynn, University of Lincoln

Film Studies has long consisted in the interpretation of a specific object (the technological medium of film) that is consumed in a specific location (the cinema or film theatre) without always fully appreciating its historical contingency. The film medium and the film theatre in their classical embodiments are the assumed coordinates of cinema. One line of argument suggests that focusing on the particular aesthetic qualities of filmic over digital embodiments of cinema is based on the privileging of one contingent object, and that this obscures the cultures and forms of experience that have built up around cinema as a medium and an art form. This focus is often offered as a means of privileging previously dominant modes of cinema over other technical and aesthetic possibilities of present and future iterations of cinema. It is cinema's iterability that is significant, however, rather than the particular form or period of cinematic production. Above any technical expression, it is what is particular to cinema—its basic condition and conditionality. This line of argument is developed in recent works including Dudley Andrew's *What Cinema Is! Bazin's Quest and its Charge*, Markos Hadjioannou's *From Light to Byte: Towards an Ethics of Digital Cinema*, and André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion's *The End of Cinema?: A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age*. These books suggest that privileging the film object is misguided, for it fails to appreciate or account for the contingency of technical processes and developments meaningfully. Cinema is a dynamic form; thus, the advent of digital production in the late twentieth century presents challenges to film scholars, leading, at times, to hostile responses to the new production possibilities. This leads to the aestheticist argument for celluloid film's special position as form of reproduction of reality, which is based on a repression of both its contingency and its iterability via other means.

Francesco Casetti rethinks these issues in his recent book *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come*. Having previously concerned himself with semiotic analysis, classical film theory and questions of modernity, and consistently offered vivid commentary on our experience of cinema, Casetti has more recently turned his attention to the question of cinema's contemporary transformations. Especially since the turn of the millennium, in books like *Communicative Negotiation in Cinema and Television* and *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity*, he has offered valuable perspectives on cinema's relevance to modern society. By focusing on one particular cultural form, Casetti does not lose sight of the broader cultural reality: what he writes has relevance outside its immediate, cinematic objects of study. Throughout this body of work, a dedication to probing cinema's relevance as a cultural form is evident. In his new book, Casetti continues this exploration by addressing contemporary questions of digital technology and changing modes of subjectivity.

The book is organised according to the seven keywords referenced in its title, which describe some of the processes affecting contemporary cinema: relocation, relics/icons, assemblage, expansion, hypertopia, display, and performance. Readers will recognise a number of these terms; some are Casetti's own designations that were introduced and rehearsed in earlier essays, and some are drawn from other sources. Casetti is clear that his aim is to articulate the theoretical implications of these processes (8), rather than to put forward a set of empirical observations, and he does not feel the need to bolster his discussion with endless filmic examples or case studies. Furthermore, there is no strict separation of theorisation and analysis, lending the text a highly readable quality. The distinction between keywords is slight at times, but this is because Casetti explores each with close attention to detail, and avoids any unnecessary repetition. The book's final chapter, then, considers how cinema persists and remains itself, in an ontological sense, despite its constant formal and technological transformations. Throughout, Casetti focuses more on cinema's survival than its death, and he stresses cinematic form as more than just technology or a specific medium: "There is a *persistence* of cinema, but it faces deep transformations at every step of the way" (4; emphasis original). He explains that cinema has moved outside its traditional and cloistered space—if we understand its classical figuration as a darkened theatre populated by an enraptured audience. But this figuration was always idealistic and hypothetical. Casetti is, accordingly, more generous in his definition of cinema, and his ongoing work on and particular approach to its contemporary transformations are further realised in this book.

The central point is that cinema is not defined by its various technological forms. On the one hand, changes in cinema can be explained by developments in technology. We are all familiar with cinema's shift from film to digital and with the rhetoric that accompanies this shift: film's intimate relationship with reality is lost in digital means of reproduction; cinema as we knew it for the best part of the twentieth century is, thus, finished. But Casetti calls this reading into question as too simplistic, and argues that the technological determinist perspective that generates it is adequate: a singular focus on technology's defining cultural role does not explain the whole picture. Casetti differentiates his approach from this perspective by positing experience, rather than technology, as central to cinema. His relationship with technological-determinist theorists, however, is more complex than he suggests in his initial acknowledging of and distancing from Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler (5). McLuhan is evoked at several important points in the book, as when Casetti makes the claim that "[t]he cinema owes much, if not everything, to the screen" (160). This kind of claim, which seems like a truly technological determinist notion, jars with Casetti's insistence on the centrality of subjective experience in cinema. But we know that, for Casetti, it is the ideas surrounding cinema that delineate it and separate it from other media. It is more than a technological medium; it is a cultural form that affects its milieu and its audiences, who imagine it in an abstract way and form ideas about how it affects them. These ideas are constitutive of cinema: "we are convinced that it is the permanence of this idea—the permanence of a form of experience—that guarantees the survival of cinema" (214). Ideas, while not fixed, are more robust than pieces of film stock. In this light, cinema is a more dynamic form than "death-of-cinema" discourses betray.

Enduring ideas of cinema, thus, are what enable us to comprehend its persistence across multiple forms. These ideas allow us to appreciate cinema's continuity. Thus, when enormous screens are installed in public spaces—in Milan's Piazza Duomo, for instance, as Casetti describes in Chapter Five—people passing by bring a range of cinema habits to bear on this new experience of urban space; for instance, the square's church steps allow the audience to appreciate the screen images in a familiar way. Cinema is adaptable and, as such,

is, to an extent, what we want it to be. Casetti describes new forms of spectatorship on mobile devices or screens in public places as "semi-cinematic" (139), and the presence of mobile devices and other external elements in the film theatre as evidence of cinema's "re-relocation" (196). Whether this description of cinema's persistence is too broad remains a subject of debate. Expanding the limits of cinema infinitely might not be the most useful critical move; it can be argued that situations like those in the Milan public square example exceed cinema and require other modes of academic engagement. But Casetti's is not a full-blown antiessentialism that would allow a boundless definition of cinema's limits. Cinema still "creates situations that are more difficult to decrypt and whose cinematicity is deeply questioned" (133). For example, our idea of cinema is challenged by the contemporary proliferation of display screens; Casetti's chapter on this shows how screens, which were previously the privilege of cinema, have now become the emblem of changes in the new media landscape, and do not necessarily need cinema to function. Beyond cinema, screens are now made of unfamiliar materials (161) and have become surfaces to interface with (162), leading to ever more novel experiences. Casetti describes these experiences in terms of monitors, blackboards and scrapbooks, focussing on their extracinematic features. These screens have roles not only in exchange or communication, traditional cinematic characteristics, but also in the circulation of data. Cinema does still have a place here, though, due to its unique arrangement of images, despite the ubiquity and proliferation of media more generally.

What is unique to cinema is at issue throughout the book. For Casetti, this consists in various kinds of experiences; his notion of the persistent and adaptable "idea of cinema" is mediated through experience. Indeed, the spectator's experience is at centre of this enquiry throughout—it is where cinema materialises. But, as Casetti is careful to acknowledge, experience is a complex term. Cinema involves, in this broader view, a range of experiences: it is an embodied mode of perception, an embedded reflection on what is perceived, and a grounded set of social practices (5). Casetti embraces the ambiguity of experience here, allowing a broader definition of cinema and understanding of how cultural forms change over time. The book's seven keywords are explored through this range of experiences. Due to the processes these keywords name, cinematic experience is no longer just a scopic activity: it now implies an active *doing* (191). Spectators thus expand their set of practices in film viewing, which extend beyond the film theatre as well. Cinema "unfolds an identity based not on the simple repetition of the same but on the acceptance of variations and differences" (8). Casetti also acknowledges the instability of experience, arguing that cinema's relocation and loss of its traditional stability mean that it is becoming a less fixed experience. It is now more akin to an "occurrence" (140). Terms like this show how Casetti's approach to film experience accepts the contingent and iterable character of cinema, but at points, this is an argument that could usefully be expanded. He argues that spectators try to reconstruct the cinematic experience from its various elements in what he calls a "strategy of repair" (70). I get the sense that Casetti here is assuming prior and ideal conditions of experience, despite his awareness of the dangers of such a totalising and uncritical position. He seems to lament the situation where spectators are always trying to recreate conditions of classical spectatorship. Cinema's relocation is not presented in a neutral way here; there is a sense of loss and nostalgia that marks many discussions of digital cinemas.

To give a better sense of Casetti's approach we can focus on one of the keywords. "Assemblage" is a borrowed term which refers to something that is made of pieces of other things: it is a very materialist concept. He understands it in the context of the theories of several French poststructuralist authors, rather than with reference to its arthistorical uses.

Casetti argues that assemblage offers an original and dynamic perspective at a time when we need a less rigid concept of cinema and cinematic experience, due to new conditions and changing modes of cinematic production, experience and theorisation. Older technologies are no longer adequate: technology is now understood as "diffuse" (69), and as a collection of heterogeneous elements that can be reshaped. Cinema is, thus, best understood as a flexible assemblage of parts that is configured differently at different times. The chapter sketches the cinema-assemblage in terms of the film, spectatorial practices, environment, symbolic instances, spectators and technology. The intention here is to show how cinema remains cinema despite constant changes at multiple levels. The assemblage concept allows for an understanding of this persistence, which is affected by constant and significant instability. Cinema has always pushed boundaries—this is not just a recent phenomenon. This point is clearer in the book's assemblage perspective than in arguments based on medium specificity. For Casetti, holding a plural, imperfect, and adaptable idea of technology and cinematic experience is the best way to approach the study of cinema today, and this is a convincing argument. This approach is open to technological, social and theoretical developments, and is able to respond to them. It opens the study of cinema up to other contemporary discourses by which it may be enriched. By acknowledging this point, we are better placed to understand cinema's broad and ongoing significance.

Casetti's contribution in this book is to move beyond the absolutist correlation of cinema (as transcendent cultural form) with film as privileged yet contingent object, and with the cinema as physical institution. He also moves beyond simplistic reactions to current transformations in media landscapes, and toward a redefinition of cinema on more historically and technically contingent grounds. Upon finishing the book, the question of whether our ideas of cinema have strong conceptual links to specific manifestations of cinema or persist in a more notional state remains. There is a strong sense throughout that cinema has the agency to affect its own course. All of this is not to suggest that, for Casetti, cinema as we know it would not have developed without these familiar technical and spatial conditions, or that they are unimportant: context is central to understanding artistic and cultural phenomena. Instead, Casetti's line of argument is about appreciating the contingency of these practices—in this case, the practice of cinema. This leads to conclusions on the uncertainty of human action and a lessening of human agency as the prime historical force. This kind of analysis and critique is necessary if we are to arrive at a satisfactory concept of the digital, and Casetti has successfully instigated it in this volume. It is this imperative that needs to be addressed if the study of cinema is to retain its validity as a critical area of enquiry and, I would suggest, its vitality.

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