

THE PLACE OF THE OBSERVER¹

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In the Heart of Things

“Sicily! The night was an eye full of gaze.” *Le Cinématographe vu de l’Etna* is one of the most fascinating essays by Jean Epstein.² It describes, in a sort of diptych, an ascent and a descent. The ascent is the one to the volcano, “the great actor that explodes his show two or three times a century” and of which Epstein came to film “the tragic fantasy.” On this journey, at a time physical and moral, the filmmaker finds himself overstepping a threshold: the carabinieri have set the road blocks, but the “coloured leaflet of the aspirins’ bottle” has on them “more effect than the genuine signature of the prefect of Catania,” and allows the troupe to penetrate the forbidden land. Hence in front of their eyes a grand and terrible scenery burst open “the fire had covered up everything in the same tintless colour, grey, opaque, livid. Every leaf on every tree, as far as the eye could see, went through all the shades and crackles of the autumn, and, in the end, twisted, burnt, fell to the breath of fire. And the tree, naked, black, stood up for an instant in its burning winter.” The effect is one of an authentic revelation: things show all at once a soul, indeed, they come to life, and they seem to talk to who is watching them. “The earth had a human and stubborn face. We felt in the presence of someone and awaiting for him.” Thus, Epstein is amidst a vivid landscape openly involving him; this situation, made of surprise, closeness and complicity, brings us back to the very core of cinema. Films also offer revelations: “to unexpectedly discover, as for the first time, all things in their aspect divine, with their symbolic profile and their greatest sense of analogy, with an air of individuality, this is the joy of cinema.” And also in films landscapes come to life: “one of cinema’s greatest powers is its animism.” Objects have their attitudes. Trees gesticulate. The mountains, as the Etna, signify. In the film theatre reality is literally born again. For us, for our eyes. Up to the point that we are captured, included in its world: “In the end, when man appears in its entirety, it is the first time that he is seen through an eye that neither is human.”

The descent, symmetric to the ascent, on the contrary takes place in an all closed space. “Two days before, in the morning, I was leaving the hotel for that expedition and the elevator was stuck since half past six between the third and fourth floors [...]. To go down I had to take the main staircase, still with no banisters, where some workmen were singing insults against Mussolini. That huge spiral of steps gave me vertigo. All the walls were covered in mirrors. I descended, surrounded by many myselfs, by reflections, by the images of my gestures, by the cinematographic projections.” It is thus a descent that is as terrible and revealing as the ascent. Epstein, step by step, ends up facing himself: “Those mirrors forced me to look at myself with their indifference,

with their truth.” And he finds himself naked, with no superfetation left: “I thought myself in a way and saw myself in another; that spectacle was destroying all the usual lies I had been building around myself.” Naked and manifold at once: “I moved my head and to the right I saw only a root of the gesture, while to the left that gesture was raised to the fourth power. Looking at one side and then the other, I started to have a different awareness of my prominence.” Manifold and ephemeral at once: “Each of these images lived but an instant, just the time to grasp it and it was gone out of sight, different already.” Naked, manifold, ephemeral, surrounded by its own reflection, and uncertain of himself. Obviously a sense of authentic bewilderment takes over: “I saw myself void of illusions, astonished, naked, eradicated, arid, veritable, net weight. I wanted to run away from that spiral movement in which I felt I was swirling down towards a terrible centre of my self. Such a lesson of egoism is merciless. An upbringing, an education, a religion, had patiently consoled me of the fact of existing. Now everything had to be started all over again.” In this initiation journey, what is emerging is drawing us to cinema: more than a play of reflecting mirrors, “The cinématographe provokes such unexpected encounters with oneself.” The camera lens is “an eye provided of non-human analytical abilities:” it displays the individuals in their bare truth, forces them to look at themselves with no excuses; reveals to each person that oneself that was never met before. From this, of course, comes a sense of unease: “The restlessness in front of one’s own cinematic image is utter and sudden”; moreover “the first reaction to the cinematic reproduction of ourselves is a sort of horror.” To the point that who is filmed, quite often does not recognize himself in his own portrait. What he sees is a stranger. One moment after finding himself, he literally has lost it.

Thus, an ascent and a descent. A going to the core of things, discovering them alive, and participating in their existence. But also, almost as a consequence of the first movement, to find oneself in the middle of the spectacle, to discover oneself as the object of one’s own gaze, to perceive oneself as itself and as other, and thus feeling a sense of bewilderment. In short, to plunge into what surrounds us, and to have it difficult to find ourselves back. Cinema repeats this double movement: it does it in its practice, and at the same time offers it to its spectator. The camera is indeed inevitably implicated in what it is filming; in chasing things, it somehow shares their destiny; in exchange, it cannot hide its presence; what is filmed shows itself for the very reason that something or someone is framing it, therefore the camera acts as a co-protagonist outside and into the scene; but its action, so laid bare by its object of interest, ends up by being so to speak expropriated. A similar articulation applies also to the spectator. Who is in front of the screen tends to adhere to what he is watching, he projects himself and at the same time identifies with the shown reality; he feels it as living and feels as living it; but in the very moment that he achieves this intimacy, hence he finds himself suspended between different worlds, the one from which he is watching and the one from which he is watched; the risk is to be uncertain of his position, indeed of his identity.

Such a situation refers straight to the new status that modernity seems to assign to the observer-observed relationships. Instead of an opposition between two poles, what emerges is a mutual interdependence: the observer partakes of the destiny of the observed; he moves on its same ground; but intertwining his existence with the object of his gaze, he also ends up losing his privileged position, up to the point of blurring with what he is facing, or what surrounds him. Hans Blumenberg, going over the

metaphor of the shipwreck, from Lucretius to Neurath, shows quite well how this new pattern is imposing itself.³

The starting point for this is a page from the *De rerum natura*, in which a person sees, from the shore, a ship in the storm, and is well pleased of being onto solid ground. But already with Pascal the situation changes: the ship took us on board somehow (“Vous êtes embarqué”), and we share its struggle. From here on, the superposition of spectator and spectacle goes further: there are no more safe places where to shelter, life itself is a big tempest; he who thinks he is watching the sea’s surging waves, does it from the midst of it. So we are wrecked, and we have always been. As much so that the only thing we can do is to build ourselves a raft with the debris from earlier shipwrecks.⁴

Away from the dry land: in the waves and winds, in the middle of the eruption. We are cast away: recovering beams and ropes, rebuilding our self from the fragments that a mirror or a screen are giving us back. At this point it is not difficult to seize a parallelism between Epstein’s metaphors and the one explored by Blumenberg. In both cases there is the idea that what modernity brings to light is an always closer intimacy with the surrounding universe, and at the same time the progressive loss of all certainty. All distance is wiped out. Indissoluble complicities are created, and at the same time the coordinates are lost. One enters an unstable world that makes him unstable as well. At this point such is the observer: “Inside” the observed world, but also with no precise place. Amidst things: in the sea, or on the mountain of fire. And at risk: exposed to winds and waves, exposed to the lava, exposed to himself.

So now the lesson of *Le Cinématographe vu de l’Etna* becomes clear: what Epstein finds out along the paths of a volcano and along the mirrored staircase of a hotel is a more general situation of which cinema can be an excellent witness, and to which, as we will see, it can also acutely reply. It is a condition marked by an overlapping of presences, instead of a strict division of roles, and by an interweaving of gazes, instead of the dominion of one amongst them. It is the condition of an observer with apparently no safety net, that finds him immersed in the landscape he observes, compelled to share his destiny with that of the object of his gaze, and to become at the same time, himself the object of a gaze. This is the condition we finally have to come to terms with: maybe with some embarrassment, but in the bare spirit of truth.

Immersion and Distance

Three films give us the chance to put this picture to the test. Three among many, but chosen for their ability to dig out the condition of the observer, and the spectators’ experience. *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (E. Porter, 1902) gives us an ironic illustration of the attraction a film exercises on the viewer, and, as a consequence of the sense of proximity and interaction that is established between who’s in the theatre and what’s on the screen; the world that is represented is at hand, it offers itself directly, and asks for participation; but the desire that lights up cannot find a full response. Uncle Josh approaches the screen, tries to take part in the scene he is watching: but the screen rips apart, and the projection comes to an end.

The Crowd (K. Vidor, 1928) draws attention to another axis, that of the relationship between the spectator and the audience around him. Also here it is a matter of creating a whole from two terms: the spectator is called upon to be part of his environment, set-

ting himself not only as a scopic subject, but also as a social subject. If this manoeuvre works out, it is also because it posits itself as a compensation for the missed unity with the fictive world: one plunges into the surrounding world also because one cannot plunge completely into the represented world. The desire for a bond and for participation with the represented world then becomes a desire for a relation and participation with the surrounding world: in the name of desire (and of the desire to desire) the subject-spectator becomes a member of a community.

Blow Up (M. Antonioni, 1966) finally, seems to close the circle: one can “blend” with the spectacle as much as with the environment, forasmuch as they are both territories crossed by a web of gazes. Within this net the spectator experiences the fact of being a subject, as well as the fact of becoming an object; he experiences the reification of his own gaze: in the very moment when it looks as though he is assuring to a role of absolute protagonist, hence he is lost on a ground of uncertain solidity. This closeness with the spectacle and the environment, as a matter of fact, gets him lost. The main character in the film, Thomas, a photographer, wants to immerse in the city he lives in and finds himself involved in a murder he eventually took pictures of; in the end he will not be able to distinguish effective from fictive reality, as well as he will not be able to understand what his role and position have come to be.

The three films here considered thus draw a sort of path, which follows the same pattern we have seen in Epstein: approach, implication, the putting at stake of oneself, sense of loss. Three stylistic devices that have to deal with these films, the close-up, the crane and the semi-subjective view can ideally mark this path. The close-up (not present in Uncle Josh, but evoked by the approaching of the spectator to the screen) conveys the sense and the need of proximity. The crane that closes *The Crowd* is symptomatic because of its ability to plunge the character into his environment. Finally the semi-subjective view that marks the most significant moment of *Blow Up*, when Thomas loses control over his own pictures, here we have a character that observes, but caught in the same frame with the objects observed by him, and therefore reduced to their same status, this character sees, but in his vision he also sees himself, and thus, reduced to object, he is maybe even deprived of his own gaze.

The complex situation that has come to emerge, and that precisely marks the experience of the spectator as well as the condition of the modern observer, leads us to some considerations. It is first of all evident how this condition corresponds to a farewell to that sort of “theatre of vision” that had long worked as a model for the scopic activity. Such a “theatre” was based on the presence of a seeing subject and of an object seen, one facing the other, well separated, with the first one catching and grasping the second, enclosing it so to speak into his own look, and the second one entrusting itself to the first, revealing all its aspects, in a direct and exclusive relationship. Blumenberg had, with the shipwreck metaphor, given us the basic elements for such a model, as well as the more general ways of its crises.

Also following Jonathan Crary, who has dedicated a meaningful study to the ways in which the idea of vision has evolved throughout the nineteenth century,⁵ we can here recall some other passages. For example among the factors that strongly undermine this model there is the awareness that things do not show themselves; reality becomes a perceived reality only thanks to a series of mental processes that make it possible for it to be grasped, but which inevitably also act as a filter. Crary goes through a reconsideration of the studies of the physiologists from the first half of the eighteenth century,

with the discovery of phenomena such as the afterimage or the perceptive adaptation; it is clear, though, that this orientation has its germinating moment in the Kantian revolution.⁶ Parallel to this, there is also the awareness of the fact that the observer does not operate innocently: he approaches reality with a burden at times heavy of mental assumptions, almost forced orientations. For this matter, it will here do to recall Marx and his notion of “ideology:” the complex of the social and productive relationships creates an “environment” where the social subject finds himself put in, and that deeply conditions its thought processes. We could go on and on: the fact remains that, from some point on, the relationship between the scopic subject and the object seen can no longer present itself as a direct and exclusive face to face. It is not direct: there are mediations that intervene on both sides. It is not exclusive: the context in which subject and object find themselves also plays a decisive role. Most of all it is not a fronting: it is a two-player game based on a common belonging, intertwined of mutual determinations, and therefore sustained by some strong complicity. Along this line, to conceive scopic activity as an action that leads to confrontation and immersion into what one sees as well as into one’s environment, becomes a necessary step.

Well then, cinema picks up this ongoing transformation and makes it its own. If, as we are reminded by Crary, what I have here called the “theatre of vision” had found its emblem in the 15th century’s Camera obscura, cinema, after the stereoscopic vision, can posit itself as the emblem of this new pattern of vision. Its offering itself as a field of cross-gazes that includes and embraces observer, observed and situation, is the seal to such a candidacy. Yet... if it is true that cinema can intercept and put into form the issues that agitate modernity, offering itself as an exemplar, it is also true that it does so negotiating between innovation and resistance. There is like a subtle wariness that goes together with its option for what is new: almost to allow what is old to leave a trace. And so it happens that cinema incarnates the need for a fusive relationship between subject, object and environment, but it does so offering a fusion that is partly imaginary, and a fusion that is temporally delimited.

An imaginary fusion. Uncle Josh already suggested how the relationship between spectator and spectacle is basically built on an illusion. He who watches a film is confronting not with reality itself, but with images that “look like” reality. This status undoubtedly depends on their photographic nature; but it strengthens itself thanks to the fact that the spectator re-elaborates and integrates perceptively the filmic stimuli,⁷ and at the same time he deliberately suspends his disbelief.⁸ We must add to this the mechanism of projection and identification activated by the spectator towards the represented world.⁹ If he who is watching a film partakes of the adventures taking place on the screen, it is because he puts himself in the place of the hero (and of who is watching him),¹⁰ and in this he finds himself living in first person what the character is living. In cinema, spectator and spectacle are tied together: but through a bond that is essentially mental.

A temporally limited fusion. When the lights in the theatre go on, the spectator interrupts its relationship with the spectacle; and when the public starts leaving the theatre, he interrupts his relationship with the audience. Sure, something remains sticking on him: the lightness of an experience that brought him out of his world, to another one; but also the viscosity of the closeness of the rest of the audience, the subtle thrill of having fully been part of some collective body. Roland Barthes, in his “En sortant du cinéma,”¹¹ has wonderfully described the moment of leaving the theatre and the screen: the

farewell to that darkness, that blackness, which is “the very matter of the reverie” and at the same time “the colour of a shed eroticism,” the farewell to “that dancing cone that cuts through darkness,” made of light, and whose “imperious jet borders our head, grazes, from the back, the side, some hair, some face;” the farewell to “the filmic image (including sound),” that seduced me, captured me and to which I am “attached” (and it is this attachment that grounds the naturalness – the pseudo nature – of the filmed scene). In a word, what the spectator is leaving is a representation and what surrounds it (the image and its contouring: “The property of the sound, the theatre, the blackness, the dark mass of the other bodies, the rays of light, the entrance, the exit”): both seduced him, yet precisely, he now leaves them. In a separation that takes over unity; in a discretion (possible site of protracted pleasure) that reassembled the indistinct.

The viewer plunges into the spectacle and the environment: but in a partial and momentary way. In this interplay the cinematic apparatus plays an important role: on one side it lays the conditions for a fusive unity between subject and object and between subject and environment, and, at the same time, it also lays the conditions for this fusion never to be accomplished in full once and forever. The fulfilment of the illusion of reality is aid by the peculiar condition of the spectator during the screening (there are representations that can be taken for direct perceptions of the world;¹² and there is a suspension of the flow of life that permits the activation of belief); in the meanwhile, due to the synchronism of reactions of the spectators to the film, a veritable community is created where each can feel part of.¹³ On the other hand, the structure of the theatre, as it is being shaped from the nickelodeon on, arranges for a double segregation: he who watches the film cannot physically touch the screen and what’s on it, neither can he share his intimacy with the other spectators, for there is at least some sort of separation between spectators. In this sense the setting partially undoes the work of the device. This ambiguity of the apparatus is not an innocent one: it is so done to keep a practice alive which, as shown with Uncle Josh, would otherwise be interrupted; it is but the preservation of an intangible boundary that permits the enjoyment of the show by the spectator in his singularity. But this non-innocence goes even further. As a matter of fact, in keeping this boundary, the apparatus allows the spectator to keep believing that he has some sort of control upon what he is facing and upon what surrounds him: we might say that this not only permits him to take part in the show and the environment, but moreover of “dominating” them. It is on this basis that someone has made the connection between cinema and Bentham’s panopticon:¹⁴ in both cases, we are dealing with a situation in which a subject “surveys” all that is happening around him from the centre of the scene. This observation has some interest: in fact, if the spectator was to be completely immersed in the represented and surrounding world, he would not be able of controlling anything at all; but even only the slightest distance from the rest (a single seat) is enough for him to look at things “from the outside,” and thus to seize and master them. In conclusion, the “centre” of the scene is the issue: if this means to be at the mercy of winds and waves, then the spectator would be a wrecked person, though a happy one (“And sweet to me is shipwreck in this sea:” Giacomo Leopardi, not Blumenberg...); but if this centre was to be connected to bridges and ways out he would be safe again; even more: he would go as far as to orchestrate the tempest...

Thus, cinema is exactly this: an occasion to “con-fuse” with the spectacle and the environment, but keeping some form of distance, at least a safety distance. Although... the

boundary is useful; indeed necessary. But the dream of its complete abolition remains alive, and it has always haunted cinema. From *Sherlock Jr.* (B. Keaton, 1924) to *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (W. Allen, 1985) the films that stage the dissolution of all boundaries and the perfect superposition of the time of the stage and the time of real life are well numerous. Precisely, so that the immersion be no less than absolute. Come hell or high water. Sweetness of the shipwreck.

- 1 This paper contains the opening and closing passages of a chapter in an ongoing work, *L'occhio del Novecento* (Milano: Bompiani, 2005), whose central topic is the way in which cinema has come to build a gaze that widely worked as a model for the gaze of the 20th century. In that text, the three films here mentioned in passing, are analyzed in detail, and are commented with a series of contemporary theoretical essays, in order to bring to the surface the issues they deal with.
- 2 Jean Epstein, *Le Cinématographe vue de l'Etna* (Paris: Les Ecrivains Réunis, 1926). For a recent study of the work of Jean Epstein, see Jacques Aumont (ed.), *Jean Epstein, cinéaste, poète, philosophe* (Paris: Cinémathèque Française, 1998). On this specific text, see Stuart Liebman, "Visiting of Awful Promise. The Cinema Seen from Etna," in Richard Allen, Malcolm Turvey (eds.), *Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida. Essays in Honor of Annette Michelson* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003).
- 3 Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997).
- 4 In this line of interpretation, see also the introduction by Bodey to Blumenberg
- 5 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge-London: MIT Press, 1996).
- 6 Max Milner, *La Phantasmagorie* (Paris: PUF, 1982).
- 7 On the ability of the spectator to filter and integrate filmic data, see the classical observations by Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York: D. Appleton & C., 1916).
- 8 On the intentional suspension of disbelief and the building of belief from the freudian denegation, based on a structure such as "Yes, I know it is not true, but still...", see at least Octave Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1969).
- 9 The mechanism of projection-identification, as a constituent of the spectator's participation is already analyzed by Münsterberg in *The Photoplay*. This will be the topic of many filmological studies in the 1950s, and finds its most effective analysis in Edgar Morin, *Le Cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire. Essai d'anthropologie sociologique* (Paris: Minuit, 1956). For a survey of filmological studies, see Francesco Casetti, *Theories of Cinema. 1945-1995* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).
- 10 For the difference between secondary identification, with the character portrayed, and primary identification, with the filmic gaze on the character, see Christian Metz, *Le Signifiant imaginaire* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1977).
- 11 Roland Barthes, "En sortant du cinéma," *Communications*, no. 23 (1975), pp. 104-107.
- 12 On this aspect of the device, see Jean-Louis Baudry, "Le Dispositif: approches métapsychologiques de l'impression de réalité," *Communications*, no. 23 (1975), pp. 56-72; Jean-Louis Baudry, "Cinéma: effets idéologiques produit par l'appareil de base," *Cinéthique*, no. 7-8 (1970). For a continuation of Baudry, see Ch. Metz, op. cit.

- 13 Regarding the relationship between cinema and the creation of communities, during the past years many contributions focused on the power of the cinematic medium to define and legitimate the social identities of subcultures or ethnical and political minorities. It is not possible in the present contribution to take them in the proper account; therefore, I would rather like to remember one of the first reflections about cinema socializing function: Emilie Altenloh, *Zur Soziologie des Kinos. Die Kino-Unternehmung und die sozialen Schichten ihrer Besucher* (Leipzig: Spamerschen Buchdruckerei, 1914); see also Emilie Altenloh, "A Sociology of the Cinema: the Audience," *Screen*, Vol. 42, no. 3 (Autumn 2001), pp. 249-293.
- 14 This idea has recently been put forward especially by Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1993).