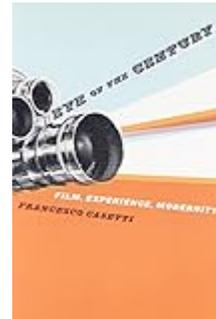




Francesco Casetti. *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity.* Translated by Erin Larkin with Jennifer Pranolo. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. viii + 269 pp. \$79.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13994-6; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-13995-3.



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The Filmic Gaze

How to define the gaze that film claimed for the twentieth century is the starting problem for *Eye of the Century*, the new book by Francesco Casetti. Casetti belongs to a diverse group of scholars, such as Tom Gunning, Jonathan Crary, and Guiliiana Bruno, who have mapped the history of vision from pre-film to its post-film technologies and practices and identified film as the central perspective of twentieth-century modernity. Translated from the Italian, the book combines Casetti's long-standing interest in the history of the gaze, which inspired *Inside the Gaze: The Fiction Film and Its Spectator* (1998), with the kind of readings of film theoretical texts found in *Theories of Cinema, 1945-1995* (1999). Describing what he calls a "synchrony" between film and the twentieth century, Casetti identifies three main characteristics of the film's gaze: "the ability to communicate, the power to shape or define, [and] the drive to negotiate" (p. 3). Especially its capacity to hold opposing positions makes film particularly suited to deal with the contradictions of modernity and produce what Casetti calls the "oxymoronic" gaze. Establishing a typology for the opposing

functions brought together in this ongoing negotiation, he distinguishes among the "partial," "composite," "penetrating," "excited," and "immersive" gaze. Tracing their functioning in select films, he shows how film manages to negotiate between fragment and totality, subjectivity and objectivity, man and machine, excitement and order, and so forth. In short, for Casetti, visibility and visuality become the channels through which the experience of modernity can be processed.

Eye of the Century uses the interface between filmic texts and theoretical texts to trace this negotiation through a series of symptomatic readings. Evidence of his remarkable erudition, Casetti's selection of texts, which he compares to glosses, covers the classics of early film theory, including Ricciotto Canudo, Sergei Eisenstein, Louis Delluc, Blaise Cendrars, Béla Balázs, Siegfried Kracauer, Hugo Münsterberg, and Victor Freeburg, but also extends to lesser-known Italian and French writers concerned with film spectatorship, visual pleasure, and mass suggestion. The selection of films follows the canon of silent and classical cinema and in-

cludes (in chronological order) Edwin Porter's *Uncle Josh at the Movie Theater* (1906), Sergei Eisenstein's *Old and New* (1926), Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927), Jean Epstein's *The Three-Sided Mirror* (1927), King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928), Dziga Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), Hugo Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's *King Kong* (1933), Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blowup* (1966).

The combinations of filmic and theoretical texts and the relationships of mutual illumination thus established between them allow Casetti to examine the filmic experience in great detail and with close attention to its complex perceptual, affective, and mental processes. Indebted to phenomenological and cognitive approaches, the study is an affirmation of the humanistic tradition of film philosophy (rather than film theory); but in ways that I do not find unproblematic, its view of the "eye of the century" does not extend to the categories of identity and subjectivity introduced by feminist film theory and is very little concerned about the ideological effects of spectatorship examined in the context of (post)structuralism. Casetti engages almost exclusively with the first half of the twentieth century but (with the exception of the afterword) does not consider in what ways modes of seeing had changed dramatically already at mid-century, with the ascendancy of television and, more recently, new dig-

ital media. Moreover, the self-referential nature of cinema may find ample confirmation in the classics of silent cinema but does not extend logically into the regimes of illusionism established by classical narrative cinema. Focusing on the individual experience of film, Casetti also leaves out the kind of social exchanges and experiences of community facilitated by the cinema and seen by most early film critics cited in the book as a major reason for its ascendancy. In the same way that his reconstruction of the cinema as the eye of the century leaves out the power of cinema as a public sphere, it also brackets entire aspects of visibility, most problematically its relation to gender and sexuality, in favor of a phenomenological model that reinstates the human being at the center of the apparatus. Consequently, even the technology (in the narrow sense of cameras and projectors) and the apparatus (in the broader sense of institutions and discourses) take a back seat to the intricacies of individual spectatorship. Casetti's writing is erudite, elegant, insightful, and with its repeated direct address to the reader, seductively dialogic and alluringly didactic. His careful readings produce great insights into the complexities and contradictions of the filmic experience, but the universalism that underlies his reflections also does not give the reader much space to consider alternative models for film as the eye of the century. For that reason, the book may also be described as a compelling example of new directions in film philosophy after the death of theory.

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