

Francesco Casetti

Screening Fears: On Protective Media

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A line is often drawn between what the publishing industry calls *instant books* and works that can be considered *classics*. The former are so closely tied to a specific occasion, to a shared social event, that they lose their brilliance and effectiveness in step with its waning topicality. Conversely, classics have a more complex temporality: they maintain connections to multiple events. For them, the present is just one of the *landmarks* to leverage, while they also delve analytically into objects of the past and extend imaginatively toward the future.

Francesco Casetti's *Screening Fears: On Protective Media* is closely tied to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it certainly belongs to the second of these two categories of books. This is thanks to the theoretical and methodological elements that structure the book: the idea of focusing on a tendency of the present—our progressive recourse to screen technologies as a way to protect ourselves from exposure to reality and its dangers—through a genealogical approach to technical devices from the last three centuries.

The underlying thesis of the book—structured in five chapters, with four *intermezzos* and an epilogue—takes shape through the study of three screen devices, their environments, and their forms of spectatorship. First, there is the Phantasmagoria, which emerged in the

late eighteenth century: a dark room where spectral images were projected onto a screen, accompanied by fade techniques and suggestive voices to create an atmosphere of fright and magic. Second, cinema: the main form of projection and shared enjoyment of moving images, whether fictional or documentary (at least until the second half of the twentieth century); always tied to an *outside*, a reality understood as a common fear and passion. Third, new media and particularly video conferencing platforms (Zoom, Teams, Meet, etc.): the tool through which, especially during the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, we simultaneously protected ourselves from and exposed ourselves to others, in both our professional and social lives. These are *bubble* systems that, well beyond pandemic-related needs, detach us from the surrounding environment in which we are physically located and engage us in the digital realm. From a methodological point of view, what determines the path through these devices is not a superficial analogy between them, nor is it the idea of a direct descent of one from the other. As Casetti repeatedly explains, working on media from an archaeological and genealogical perspective means adopting a rhizomatic approach, capable of identifying forms of repetition in difference. If Phantasmagoria, cinema, and some applications

of new media can be investigated together, it is in the name of the operations they perform on the spaces and subjects, as well as the operations they make possible for the latter.

At the core of *Screening Fears* lies the idea of complexifying Marshall McLuhan's suggestion that media primarily function as "extensions of man". Instead of constituting extensions of our brain and limbs, Casetti argues that media primarily constitute environments in which a "projection/protection complex" is in force: "echoing both its psychoanalytical and economic meanings, 'complex' stands for a set of interrelated processes and components here aimed at creating a 'protected' confrontation with the world and at the same time at 'projecting' individuals beyond the safe space in which they are located. The projection/protection complex plays hide-and-seek with reality" (14). On one hand, the screen serves to project us imaginatively towards elsewhere, towards an outside that is somehow an indispensable bond for the community of spectators. On the other hand, the screen takes on the role of shielding, protecting us from the dangers of the external world. (And it cannot be a coincidence that each device analysed in this book has a real historical trauma as its specific context: for phantasmagoria, revolutionary terror; for cinema, the shock created by the twentieth-century metropolis and World Wars; for digital bubbles, the pandemic). Rather than continuing to conceptualize technology based on analogies of the cognitive and locomotor systems, the book invites us to conceive of media in relation to the immune system, which modulates relationships between an inside and an outside—between what is external and what is internal to biological, psychological, or social bodies.

Casetti situates cinema and media at the core of the human sciences, engaging media theory with contemporary philosophy (most notably, Peter Sloterdijk and Roberto Esposito, in their respective investigations of the relationship between community and immunity, but also

Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida, and Donna Haraway). After engaging with these philosophical and theoretical issues, the author emphasizes the need to develop "an interpretation of media in terms of immunity" (155). Instead of applying concepts developed elsewhere to the media, *Screening Fears* contributes to a shift in perspective. Whether in the eighteenth century, the twentieth century, or as a part of more recent developments, screen devices have not simply assumed, on occasion, a protective function with respect to the dangers of reality. On the contrary, they structurally assume that very function. In this regard, although Casetti decides to gloss over this aspect, it might be possible to argue that much of the misunderstandings and blunders into which many analysts and commentators of the recent pandemic experience have stumbled are due to a failure to discern the links between *mediation* and *immunization*.

The last part of the book reckons with the evidence that a media theory is also necessarily a political theory. As already pointed out by the philosophers mentioned above, immunization practices are aimed at protecting the resilience of a community against a threat, but they are at the same time in danger of backfiring. As in the case of autoimmune diseases, excessive immunization attacks and damages the social body. Chapter 5 and the Epilogue of *Screening Fears* explicitly address the risk of overprotection. Along this line, beyond Phantasmagoria, cinema and digital platforms, the book seems to continue beyond the last page. It continues to write itself into everyday experience, in contact with the hopes and fears we inevitably harbor as we look to the near or coming future. To speak of a "projection/protection complex" means, after all, to come to terms with the securitarian tendencies of daily life as well as the ways geopolitical spaces are technologically controlled and managed to the detriment of those who dwell on the ground. These issues may seem futuristic but, to a large extent, they are already structuring our time.

As Gilles Deleuze wrote in *What is a Dispositif?*,

a critical inquiry is expected to combine an analytical attitude and a diagnostic one. In its capacity to tie the analysis of the past and the diagnosis of our time, *Screening Fears* has the air of being a contemporary classic.

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