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Antonioni on the iPhone

Noa Steimatsky

Caro Francesco,

many happy returns of the day!

On the occasion of your birthday I'd like to offer you, by way of a gift, a memory image – nicely wrapped, for this is part of a gift's meaning and its pleasure. It is a memory that punctuated my reading of your *Lumière Galaxy* (F. Casetti, 2015). Here is the book on my desk: Auguste and Louis in those 3D glasses command the space ahead of them, which is both our space and the space of a *Cinema to Come*. Thanks to your optimistic and embracing vision, it emerges as an elegant, well-lighted space. Your key words actually open more than just seven doors, revealing vistas of the cinema's evolving life. Your book helped me think through my memory image and make it productive. I now offer it with a view towards our continued conversation.

In fact I wrote down some notes on the original experience right away, on the scene, which took place quite a while back – especially when counting not just by years but also by the dissemination of media. The vision was striking, but I knew that it might dissolve with time or habit – might later escape me like a dream in the morning, or like a film scholar's hallucination. I'll flesh out the detail:

September 4, 2010. I'm on an un-crowded United flight from Rome to Chicago. A few rows back my children are watching a Jackie Chan movie on a portable DVD player. I have my own row to the side and can see, just a bit ahead of me, a man stretched across the middle section. I had noticed him earlier: wrapped in a dark turtleneck and blanket and a knit cap pulled down over his ears, he seemed ready to nap. After a while I notice, however, that he is holding up an iPhone. Since the back of his head is closer to me, I catch a view of his little screen. In a flash I recognize that he is watching *L'eclisse*.

This guy is watching Michelangelo Antonioni's film on his f***ing iPhone – this is how David Lynch would put it. But I don't think the maker of *L'eclisse* would be so stuck-up; he might even be pleased for there is something quite beautiful about the entire situation, something that stirs the imagination, as if this incarnation of the film was, in a sense, its

off-spring, its second life – or one of the many possible lives issued by the 1962 film.

The man is holding the phone up between left thumb and index finger; the earpiece wire is dangling on the right; there are no subtitles – he must be Italian. From my removed spectatorial position the film is, of course, silent, and only the constant drone of the airplane fills my ears. But within the surrounding darkness the image is very clear and sharp: I can see EUR's vast perspectives, its residential high-rises, glass partitions, the lawns and the big sky. The architectural environment is perfectly enframed: first by the film and, in turn, by the sleek new device. The play of scales is staggering: the vastness of EUR seems all contained within the tiny hand-held screen, itself wrapped by the darkness of the plane's interior and its subtle movements. Set against these images is also the weird intimacy of this communal bedroom immersed in the artificial night by which westbound long-haul flights mediate the tediously long day, stretching across the Atlantic Ocean. All of this revolves around the compact but still somehow intense and self-sufficient cinematic image. The situation as a whole is somewhat Antonionesque: a woman watching a man watching just such images on a state-of-the-art technological device, in just such a place (or non-place) whereby the play of scales and spaces, of inner and outer, intimate and public, is at once a perceptual condition and a state of mind. If I were alone it really could be the beginning of an Antonioni film – full of possibilities, compelling but uncertain. The experience is – as Barthes put it in his *Cher Antonioni* (R. Barthes, 1980) – at once personal and historical. Attuned to the responses and shifts (for better or worse) of bodies, sentiments, environments to time's unfolding, Antonioni's work has trained my imagination for this encounter. Was not some such future already scripted into his film?

At that time I did not even own a smartphone. But six years really is a long time when considering how much such devices and their manifold uses have evolved and permeated our experience. Thinking back I'm still amazed at how this particular case of 'in-flight entertainment' was even possible: Wi-Fi was not common for airline passengers; did the man start watching at the gate? Did he load the entire film, or is he carrying an external drive in his pocket? He must have planned for this (maybe he is a film scholar!).

What strikes me most is the particularity and the intricacy of the coordinates, which I wouldn't want to generalize to a symptomatic reading: that this is an airplane (not the spatio-temporal experience of a train, or a car, or a yacht); that we're heading from Rome to Chicago, from old to new world (likewise the film's locations, with EUR jutting out of Rome, projecting a dream of America's monumental modernisms – oh, maybe

this man is an architect!). What also informs the situation, inevitably, is that it is I who witness this: I who study cinema, films as they used to be, but in constant need of reduced formats and digital versions and new technologies; I who, after all, thought about Antonioni once or twice. Would other people on this flight recognize these extraordinary images and, recognizing them, marvel at the qualities and meanings of the new configuration they are witnessing? Here are, full-blown, the two conclusive factors which you formulate so brilliantly, Francesco: the «fainting of the medium» – the slackening of its *specificity*, or of its limits – and the «paradox of recognition», the cinema losing itself also so as to rediscover itself in the process.

On some level there is a specificity to this encounter that begs to be anchored in the film itself, in its achievement of consciousness, inseparable from its claim as art. With its unique binding of elusiveness and density, *L'eclisse* cannot be easily paraphrased, diffused or pared down. Can this modernist monument stand, interchangeably, for the medium-in-general? It is a film that demands commitment, even more so than the commitment already built into the traditional apparatus of cinema and its theatrical viewing conditions. This dazzling re-encounter with the film provides occasion to interrogate not only the «identity» of cinema, but also the quality of attention and the seriousness of engagement (medial and personal, or *human*) that it commands. Its complex articulations inform, of course, the contours of the spectator's confrontation with the film, both then and now, and even as its ways of addressing me, and my implication in it, have altered. Conditions change, the cinema mutates always. But to deserve its name we might ask that it sustain and cultivate a quality of attention, an ethic of the look, an awareness of consequence that the strongest films (and by no means just 'art films') were capable of teaching. Antonioni was a master in this regard: his work compels us to attend to things *radically* and, as Barthes put it, in ways that exceed society's control of the time of the look.

If it can be said that, in some sense, any strong film is generative, that it re-invents its medium, if *L'eclisse* has itself already pushed the possibilities of cinema, then we might see a second- (or third- or *n*-th) degree re-invention taking place here, in the situation I described. It accomplishes as much as some media installations in the rarified art-gallery setting. Who is the author/artist? Perhaps a viewer or a critic who *notices* – who looks radically – suffices. The re-encounter with *L'eclisse* (redux) suggests, finally, that the experience and memory of cinema beg to be studied by example: through specific, layered, qualitatively rich and nuanced description – *thick* description. As you suggest, Francesco, the more expanded and diffuse the cinema might become outside of the old movie theater, the less specific, less pure, the more *contami-*

nated it becomes (Bazin and Pasolini meet in my paraphrasing of your conclusion), the more fully it speaks of itself to us, but also the more demanding and more rigorous must become the critic's task. You affirm therefore that we stand to grasp something important about the cinema by such promiscuous breakdown of its classical definitions; when its earlier state of being, its earlier plenitude (actual or imagined), opens up to tensions and contradictions; when it puts itself on the line. But only the work (or the media-situation) that, at the same time, does not slacken attention or sanction indifference will truly merit the redemptive potential you grant it: to «become other in order to find itself better» (F. Casetti, 2015).

There is work to be done. I embrace therefore your promise of futurity, Francesco. For just as the historical strata of *L'eclisse* (ancient/sacred, bourgeois/capitalist, Fascist/modern/contemporary Rome) snap open, in the film's famous final shots, to project a premonition of things to come (cataclysmic? utopic?), so the cinematic past may well harbor, as you say, what we can only now read as prophecy. And so the old film never ended: it germinated the possibilities for this fantastical encounter, high up above the earth and the ocean, *and* for its memory image, that I now offer to you, *con affetto*.