LA GALASSIA CASETTI
LETTERE DI AMICIZIA, STIMA, PROVOCAZIONE
A cura di Ruggero Eugeni e Mariagrazia Fanchi
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I’ll be your screen: A letter to Francesco

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Dear Francesco,

in recent months we’ve had the occasion spend the fall with you in New Haven to join you to discuss the nature of screens. This includes the silver screen, a surface that shows us images projected on it by an apparatus, to be sure, but equally and as important a much wider field of screens as well as screening techniques that lay outside of the realm of the visual as well as beyond the realm of cinema. In an age of digital and mobile media, when pervasive networks and digital microprocessors multiply screens in every imaginable space, cinema can no longer claim hegemony over our concept of the screen. As screens dissolve and multiply, and change their locations, as they become moving devices on their own right, the cinematic screen remains merely one screen among others. Some less imaginative scholars have identified this transition with the end or even death of cinema. But we came to New Haven to follow up on your hunch that it might instead mark the beginning of a new era of ‘screen studies’.

The result of these investigations has been a pluralization of the screen; not a toppling of the silver screen but rather a multiplication of operations and objects that, it turns out, have been there all along. This topic bears just as much on our broader conversations about the endurance of something called ‘cinema’ even in an age of postcinematic media. Amidst the proliferation of mobile media that divorce the flickering image from theater, ‘screening’ proves an enduring presence. Celluloid wanes but screens multiply. Thus our search for underlying operations has begun to assemble a counter-history of the screen that allows us to see the screen – and in a way, ourselves – anew. A partial inventory of our findings is in order.

In our studies we find Kracauer telling us that the screen can act like a mirror; it confronts us with what would otherwise not have been visible to us and thus lost to history. Here we find a new object for identity with the screen, the mirror, as well as an operation, showing or confronting. For Cavell, the screen has a double function of at once showing, but also screening, or shielding us from what we see. The screen is what screens
us from the world», from the flows of light, bodies, distractions and attention structured around a set of culturally standardized operations. Here the object is the screen itself, as a kind of shelter or shield, and the operations including screening as a process of shielding or protecting. In Deleuze we encounter the screen as a kind of selection. Related to Bergson’s idea of perception that functions somewhat like a process of screening or selection, the brain itself becomes a screen. Fans before the fire provided us with an object of the screens as filters, and «smoke screens» present to us the misty stuff of heat and light as a screen that affords camouflage.

Binding these varied instances together is an understanding of screening as a relationality, or a difference by which other differences appear. The screen puts things into relation, brings them together, separates, reveals and hides, shelters and exposes. The screen is a machine of relationality.

On the occasion of your seventieth birthday, the example of your thought and life compels us to think of another screen that may be added to the inventory: The colleague. As you have shown us by means of your own practice, it is by means of the colleague that isolated ideas begin to circulate and differentiate. The presence of the colleague provides an occasion for flickers of an idea to begin to take shape. Consider a few of the objects we have enumerated: the colleague provides a mirror by which our thoughts return to us, giving us more perspective on our thought and ourselves than our own eye allowed. The colleague also serves as a shelter, granting harbor to fragile and incipient ideas that demand the patience of protection of another before they can disclose their full potential. And of course, the best of colleagues provide moments of filtering, selection and even ‘smoke screening’ – not simply taking up what we have said, but purposefully taking up some ideas while letting others evanesce. A bit of subtle camouflage may be necessary for this particular operation to succeed. In this way, too, the colleague acts as a screen that hides and protects that a particular representation may, in due time, come into its own.

Thus, our expanded inventory of the screen and its functions turns us not only to unexpected objects and operations; it also turns us back to you, and the role you have played in our thought. We are inclined to think for a moment of the exhibition on screen installations that we endeavored to visit at the Whitney this past fall. Though that particular trip didn’t come to fruition, we still feel as if we were part of a multiple screen installation regardless: the one that you keep around yourself, that of a multiplicity of colleagues, friends, and interlocutors. We feel deeply honored that we could be part of one of your multiple screen installations this fall and hopefully in the future.
In this vision of screening you have shown us, ‘screen studies’ comes to designate not only the pictures and pixels, but also a partnership and sociality that, it may be, is essential to being a lover of the screen, a screenephile. Your role as colleague has imparted to us a world of screens that is more lively than we had imagined, populated by devices, artifacts, and characters of the greatest diversity, all conspiring to give birth to worlds by acts of screening.

Thank you for being our colleague and teaching us what it means ‘to screen’ and to be a screenephile.