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INTRODUCTION

**The Projection/Protection
Complex**

Delights and Fears

One of the most beautiful testimonies to the values attached to the classical cinematic experience is Antonello Gerbi's "Initiation to the Delights of Cinema." Gerbi's essay, published in 1926 in the authoritative Italian journal *Il Convegno* and only recently returned to the attention of film scholars, highlights the fascination exerted both by projected images and by the setting in which they are projected—a dual focus that fifty years later, Roland Barthes would reiterate in his famous contribution "Leaving the Movie Theater,"² with which Gerbi's essay can be associated for its orientation and sensitivity.³

Gerbi starts by describing not the spectators' exit, as Barthes would do, but their entrance into the theater. There is an economic transaction: "The delights of the cinema begin immediately after buying your ticket."⁴ And there is a physical transition: "They begin as soon as the usher, seeing you arrive across the lobby, opens the velvet curtain so that you can enter [the theater] without having to slow down, without a moment of pause or the smallest obstacle." Those who go to the cinema must cross a threshold, both real and symbolic. The boundary is less pronounced when the spectator enters before the beginning of the film. In this case, the "tangible and three-dimensional reality"⁵ is left behind through successive steps, which begin with the waiting for the film and end with the

gradual fading of the theater's architectural elements: "Absorbed by the darkness, first every shape, every outline, every structure disappears: farewell, plastic forms!"⁶ The boundary, on the other hand, appears much more marked when the spectator enters during the show. Here we have a "sudden leap"⁷ between two profoundly different universes, marked respectively by light and darkness and in open struggle with each other. Not by chance, the usher who stands at the door of the theater

opens the jaws of the shadows . . . just a little bit — I don't know if it's out of fear that the outside light would disturb or wound the sacred darkness or that the darkness collected in the room, having found some small opening, would spread out into the lobby, would hinder a careful checking of tickets, would pour out into the street and would shortly flood the entire city.⁸

If the light of the world threatens the room, the darkness of the room threatens the world. This is why we need a closed space, separated from the world. We need an antiworld, capable of "swallowing up the real, mundane world."⁹

Once in the theater, the spectator's gaze "springs to the security lights, grazes the luminous reflections that touch the rows of patrons' heads, and settles trustingly on the screen."¹⁰ The already settled spectators, "subdued by the darkness," appear "dull, wan, and weighty without light inside, lacking any space around them or a bright background behind them." They almost seem to escape the new audience member's gaze. In return, the latter is especially attracted by the cone of light that comes out of the projection booth. It is "a very sharp electric ray, which with a shock awakens the little images in their squared cells of celluloid, and one after another, in rapid succession, throws them out of the little window only to flatten themselves out — enlarged by terror — against the canvas."¹¹ This divine, essential light is "a sort of domestic Milky Way that contains in embryonic form billions of worlds."¹² These worlds blossom when they are projected onto the screen — "a large cut of canvas" that is "ready to take in all of the impressions, and

ready to forget them”¹³ and that in this game of conquest and abandonment reveals its masculine nature: “Impassable and untiring, the screen is the last incarnation of the spirit of Don Giovanni.”¹⁴

Devoid of images, the screen “is so stupid and useless that it is irritating. It doesn’t justify itself. It doesn’t explain itself.”¹⁵ But when the light from the projector hits it, the screen transforms: “What was a large bandage strewn with talcum powder is reborn as an altarpiece for the liturgies of the new times.”¹⁶ And like an altarpiece, the screen returns in all its richness the reality that spectators have left behind them, or even a reality they have never experienced. Indeed, the canvas, miraculously, “changes color, trembles, grows pale, flees into the background, approaches in close-ups right under the nose of the worshipper, passes through a number of hurried and temporary reincarnations, changes its face and soul a hundred times a minute.”¹⁷ What takes shape on the screen is the flowering of life.

Such a transformation of the screen is fully apparent at the beginning of the screening. While the title of the film and the names of the actors could still evoke literature and theater, with the first images, it starts a completely different experience: “The last, very thin veils are evaporating. . . . And, in a twilight of emblems, there appears the living divinity of Movement.”¹⁸ The theater is welcoming and relaxing: “Spectators make themselves comfortable in the deep of their chairs; their eye governs the focus of their gaze; their feet finally find the support they were looking for; their elbows marry the line of the armchairs.”¹⁹ It is in this restful and secure space that spectators witness, without “the light murmur of a prayer,” in “perfect adoration,” the appearance of a “new Epiphany.”²⁰ Gerbi wonders, “Are we buried in the deep or hovering among the stars? I don’t know anymore: certainly, we are very close to the heart of the cinema.”

Despite the delights, however, there is no shortage of reasons for concern. Waiting for the film to start, for example, creates anxiety; it is then when we experience “the unexpected sensation of finding ourselves suspended between two worlds — the fantastic one of

cinema and the real one.”²¹ A similar anxiety emerges when the projection is not well centered on the screen: “Everyone yells ‘Frame! Frame!’ with the same anguish of a person who sees a crazed horse coming from the end of a deserted street and yells ‘Stop! Stop!’”²² An even stronger anxiety takes shape when, for whatever reason, the pace of the projection slows down: “No patience could resist the slow, corroding, continuous dripping of images.”²³ The projection can even stop: “A yawn. Just one. But in that boundless yawn the entire Universe will be swallowed up. That is how I imagine the end of the world.”²⁴

This fear that the world on the screen may dissolve, giving way to nothing, has its counterpart in the terror that the world on the screen may instead become real and merge with the everyday world. Here, Gerbi’s imagination becomes apocalyptic: “The nighttime-reveling phantasms would come down from the screen and would attach themselves, deformed, contorted, grimacing, to the bodies of the spectators, to the bare walls, to the skin of the ladies, to the backs of the chairs, to people’s heads, to their collars, to the newspapers.”²⁵ A direct projection toward open space instead of a screen would produce similar anxiety.

A disturbing thought: If a projection took place without the screen—onto open space—where would it end up? Seemingly it would vanish into the air, it would dissolve into a vague, luminous nebulosity. But if it is true that nothing is lost in the Universe, how can characters who are so alive and so animated disappear like that? Their fate worries me. If you were to find them close to you, so thin and silent, one night when you’re returning home, there would quite a bit to be afraid of.²⁶

The materialization of images is frightening.

Confronting the World

Gerbi’s description, full of literary and religious echoes, hits the mark. Cinema is not just a movie; it is an optical-spatial dispositif that couples two fundamental elements—an enclosed space,

separated from the everyday world, and a screen whose moving images reestablish contact with the reality from which spectators have been severed or to which they never had access. Conveyed by a powerful beam of light and in sharp contrast with the darkness of the theater, images acquire unusual intensity and strength. Hence the idea of a miraculous epiphany: the world on the screen ends up being more detailed and more encompassing than what direct sight can capture.²⁷ The consequence is that what was lost is given back with interest.

This interpretation of cinema as an optical-spatial *dispositif* is at once revealing and challenging. Why this retreat from the world? And why this reconnection with reality through images? The fears that Gerbi discusses — more than the delights — offer a clear answer. Direct exposure to the world triggers discomfort, to which spectators attest when they flee from their everyday milieu, when the movie is slow to start, when troubles in projection break the enchantment of the spectacle, and when screened images are mistaken for actual people. Reality can be threatening; hence the need for a physical enclosure that works as a sort of shelter and for screened images that work as a sort of filter.²⁸ The world must be kept at a distance. At the same time, the situation in which spectators are put — the relaxation of bodies and the heightened attention to the screen — allows reality to reappear through images that look like epiphanies and that can even be taken as direct perceptions.²⁹ Contact with the world is reestablished, a contact that appears safe and that remedies or remediates the distance and deferrals previously created.

Once we look at cinema from this point of view, an entirely new perspective surfaces. Cinema is not primarily a medium that expands our senses, an “extension of man,” as Marshall McLuhan famously stated.³⁰ On the contrary, it is a *dispositif of protection* that spares individuals direct exposure to the world — or at least the world in which they usually live — without interrupting their interaction with reality. As such, cinema belongs to a lineage of modern

media that perform this task thanks to the association of screened images and sounds and physical or psychological enclosures, a lineage that emerges in the late eighteenth century with the projections in a dark theater of the Phantasmagoria³¹ and that finds its most recent example in the imaginary bubbles in which we find refuge from the immediate surroundings when we immerse ourselves in an online conversation or in a web navigation on our laptop or smartphone.³²

At first glance, it seems odd to include the bubble in the same lineage with the Phantasmagoria and the cinema; unlike the other two examples, the bubble has no physical walls, no communal audience, and no projector. Yet despite these significant differences, all three dispositifs share the same basic operations: they rely on an intentional severance from reality and on screened images and sounds that at once accentuate and compensate for such a severance. Individuals are disconnected from their physical milieu and safely reconnected with the world through other means; they switch from immediate encounters with things and events to a mediated immediacy.³³

This basic set of operations, which equally affects other modern media, including mid-twentieth century television³⁴ and the recently emerging virtual reality, unearths the presence of what I want to call the *projection/protection complex*—where, 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. While creating a retreat from the surroundings, ostensibly because of their potential disturbances, it provides a safe reconnection with the world thanks to new channels that allow it to reemerge. The distancing from the closest context acts as a premise and condition for a reappearance of reality in forms that are no less dense, but more manageable. Such a state of security

makes it possible to reintroduce the fears from which the spectators and users are safeguarded: images can be frightening, yet they are not threatening, unless they change their status and become physical entities, as Gerbi ironically remarks. While recalling traditional or even mythical places that merge enclosures and images, such as Plato's cave, religious rituals based on spatial deprivations and transcendental contacts, and forms of play that imply detachment and reconnections, including the Freudian *Fort-Da*,³⁵ the projection/protection complex is first and foremost a modern mechanism, a mechanism that responds to the challenges of a world that is perceived as increasingly difficult and taxing³⁶ with technologies that make available new forms of confrontation.

By tracking screens, the dedicated spaces where they are located, and the fears that accompany their presence, this book examines the projection/protection complex both in its general mode of working and in its most representative instantiations. It will bring to the fore the Phantasmagoria's ability to offer an escape from the pressures of a politically and socially turbulent age to make room for the exploration of a threefold universe, the natural, the spiritual, and the inner; the cinema's talent to compensate for the difficulties of spectators' existences with a comfortable setting and pleasurable images and sounds; and the electronic bubble's capacity to isolate individuals from their milieu and engage them in a face-to-face encounters at a distance. The complex does not cover the entire life of these three dispositifs (think of the origin of cinema as mere reproductive tool), and it often overturns situations in which separation from the world is considered dangerous (think of the suspicion of the film theater in the first years of its history). Yet the analysis of these three dispositifs in a specific stage of their existence will be able to detail the complex's mode of working and, more generally, the rationale underlying *protective media*. Their action not only combines spatial deprivation and sensorial excitation, persistent anxieties and forms of defense, and intentional retreats and bold explorations, but also prompts two possible

outcomes, the emergence of disciplinary systems that create a well-ordered world instead of the chaotic one where we live and the rise of immune procedures that provide a sort of “vaccine” against potential threats.³⁷ The book will discuss the influence of both the disciplinary and the immune paradigms on the complex. Remarks about the dangers of overprotection (does the idea of safeguarding imply as much violence as the threats that we want to avoid?) and about the need to balance safety and exposure (how can a severance become productive?) will complete the complex’s portrait. In this framework, the basic oppositions on which the complex relies — exterior and interior, reality and representation, individual and world, and even danger and safety — will progressively appear for what they are: not ontological constants, but rather parameters that depend on the complex’s mode of working and respond to contingent and conjunctural situations.³⁸ In this light, they are an effect of the complex as much as they are its premises.

Straddling the mechanical and the electronic, industrial and postindustrial societies and the rise and decline of mass culture, the projection/protection complex emerges as one of the key mechanisms in the history of modern media. While underscoring the spatial nature of our mediation with the world, it also reveals the intimate processes that characterize this mediation, from the need to create thresholds to the empowerment of our forms of communication at a distance and from the dynamics between fears and threats to the dialectics between protection and control. In a world that is rapidly changing and that prefigures its and our extinction, the projection/protection complex enables us to grasp what ultimately is at stake and to imagine alternate ways of confronting reality.

I spent a great part of my scholarly life investigating the cinematic experience, first in its connections with the spectatorial address, then in its cultural relevance, finally in its persistence in face of technological change. With this book, I expand my scope to

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modern screen-based media, and I investigate the experience they elicit against the backdrop of the processes of mediation. Only a genealogy of the screen as dispositif and an engagement of modern forms of mediation can cast light on questions first raised by cinema and now reshaped by the current media landscape.

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