

The Cinema and Objects of Daily Life Living without the Simplifying Gaze of Habit¹

by Carlo Grassi

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1. *The Social Value of Objects*

The main activity of consciousness is not to allow us to perceive the world, but to allow us to orient ourselves in it. Its work, in other words, allows each one to create a relationship with himself or herself only by directing it towards others and towards things: it ensures the presence of the self to itself only by relating it to what is different from it.

The fact that the conscious being overlaps and intersects the being in relation means that the body, far from being a tyrant that imposes his laws, grows and develops itself only by means of a symbiosis with social life: it manages to give an accomplished form to consciousness only by means of symbolic interactions.

This relationship between the human body and society manifests itself in the form of an ongoing struggle in which the stakes are the internal intersection points – in the heart itself of the cognitive problem – and the external ones – in the languages, in the objects, in all the social forms. It is around these ever-moving intersection points that the form of symbolic life and the specific spatial-temporal position of social groups and institutions are organized.

The intentionality of consciousness, therefore, should not be considered as merely what orients our actions, but also, in a circular way, as the product of the social acting itself. In this sense, together with reasons and objectives that are consciously chosen and accepted, human acting also implies the presence of hidden motives and covert goals, which are the partially unconscious outcome of its being inextricably interwoven with social practices.

Thanks to this close connection, the social practices of daily life generate a shared experience that deposits its meanings on the objects of daily life, so as to sediment a collective memory capable of directing the social body toward an already charted territory, toward a predicable horizon. Therefore, these objects are the pivotal elements of the entire social life. This occurs because their form, besides characterizing their specific identity, performs another symbolic action: by making the categories of collective knowledge visible and stable, it allows their identification and classification, in this way enabling the creation, the stabilization, and the preservation of social relationships over time and space.

Besides pursuing the goal at which it aims, each material and intellectual action constantly performs an indirect and additional task: it produces a form, an accomplished mode, a finished experience. That is to say, it constructs a typified way of accessing reality and making a breach in the surrounding world. By virtue of this behaviour, the outcome of actions, an object, a gesture, or a conversation, are endowed with a force of habit that gives them a specific significance within the social system to which they belong. A pair of shoes, a certain linguistic expression, or a way to say hello, are elaborated and produced within a social, political, economic, and cultural context that is altogether unique, and are inextricably connected to it to the point of being simultaneously its

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testimony, its token, and its representation. Since these objects represent in miniature the ensemble of the social relationships in use, the fact of owning a certain thing, of making a certain move, or of using a certain expression concur to define the specific position and place that each of us occupies in society.

Thanks to the regular use of daily objects, in short, people not only learn how to interpret the surrounding world as an intelligible reality, but also to confirm and consolidate that same intelligibility: they directly and indirectly acquire the culture of their social group, they understand how to orient themselves in the collective calendar and how to plan their personal agenda, how to master the special organization of public spaces and how to structure their own local space. They learn to keep at a certain distance – one fixed by convention – from others, to define the situations in which they find themselves, to manage interpersonal relationships, to ensure the predictability of mutual acting. In conclusion, they learn how to feel and be part and parcel of a restricted group and of society as a whole.

2. *The Representation of Objects in Art*

The *mise en scène* of social objects in artistic representations adds to their symbolic value. On the one hand, this further emphasizes their social significance and broadens the circulation of their comprehension. On the other hand, it makes their meaning more problematic and puts to the test their value so as to verify their suitability to carry out the task by society has assigned to them.

Thus, firstly, the figuration of objects of daily life by means of the arts makes the ensemble of the social relationships in use more intelligible, increasing their stability. Secondly, it is much more than a work of description, assessment, and cataloguing. Besides inducing people to reflect, it also induces them to act, to experiment the latent multiplicity of possibilities, the possible variability of repertoires, the virtual potentiality of alternatives.

The artistic elaboration of objects, therefore, does not merely attribute to the events related to them their proper significance, certifying and guaranteeing their register, but it also explores their weaknesses, in many cases arriving to the point of criticizing and contesting commonly accepted values and opinions, and of suggesting unpredicted and unprecedented meanings. It therefore tries to order the social world in which it operates, but it does so in an inventive way: it reshuffles the cards and brings disorder into play again. Even in the case in which, as it generally happens, it is reduced and re-absorbed in the current state of things, the new disposition alters the social relationships by introducing elements of novelty, difference, and deviation. Later, these elements can become broader and deeper to the point of growing into the embryo of a new order.

If on the one hand, then, it celebrates and consecrates a pre-established harmony, on the other hand, by restoring the movement of symbols, playing with their possibilities of form and movement, it also emphasizes the dissonant elements that do not conform to the ensemble of social relations in use. With this second step, the artistic representation of daily objects is a crucial field of activity, a vital proactive force: a decisive factor of social action that can refute the usual and traditional elements so as to bring to the surface new models capable of retroacting on social actors, by providing them with aspirations, incentives, objectives, justifications.

This activity of simultaneous recognition and refutation of the status quo is the main pivot upon which all societies are founded, because it is thanks to it that human communities manage to ensure that degree of flexibility which, despite changes and transformations, is able to give stability and durability to the relationships among single individuals and to the social groups to which they belong or to which they refer.

In pre-industrial societies, in which social changes are slow and imperceptible also because any innovation is suspect, the parallel work of confirmation of and fight with tradition appears to be unbalanced towards the celebrative and ceremonial side. The essential presence of patronage is part of a system of the arts in which the disputed action generally seems to be subordinated to the value of ascription: to the belonging to a group, to a class, to a caste.

The advent of modern industrial civilization, extremely differentiated and secularized, changes this situation by bringing about the rise of the metropolis, the place in which heterogeneity, dissimilar multitudes, and the undifferentiated crowd concentrate. As a matter of fact, due to their elitist vocation, traditional arts eventually lose their ability to make social knowledge more solid and comprehensible, and at the same time that to favour its transformation. As a consequence, the so-called popular arts flourish, and in the first place the cinema, their goal being to stage a representation of the social world that is adequate to contemporary civilization.

These new forms of social representation reverse the previous relationship and consistently privilege innovation over continuity. They therefore establish themselves by having at their basis the revolt against pre-established conditions and the rejection of tradition. They are characterized by scepticism about the cultural heritage, meant as diffidence towards a definite image of the good old times according to which, by means of a subsequent identification with what has been successful, the already happened is made to be unchangeable, and eventually the winner in the lead is always said to be right. On the contrary, they propose an open experience of history according to which collective symbols are derived from external experiences and the past manifests itself as charged with the time of the now, as a choice but also as an occasion: as a memory that is constantly erased and renewed, within which what is valued the most is the capacity to pursue freely chosen objectives, to reach independently established goals.

By privileging becoming over being and belonging, modern art asserts the prerogatives of difference, of variety, and of heterogeneity: the superiority of the present over the roots, of protean personalities over the consistency of identities, of difference over the familiar and the habitual.

3. The Place of Cinema with Respect to Traditional Arts

The rise of the industrial world, with its technical innovations, its new organization of labour, the acceleration of the transportation and communication time, not only favours the imbalance between the production of consensus and the force of protest in the social action of the artistic forms by privileging the second term. By allowing an infinite proliferation of goods, it also enables another event of paramount importance: it renders the collective knowledge that orients social acting and the different forms that fix its representation immensely more complex. Therefore, it causes the loss of meaning of the daily world: the transformation of social objects into commodities.

It is not their being tied to a process of capitalistic production that transforms objects into commodities, but simply the fact that, with the advent of the industrial system of production and distribution, they become infinitely exchangeable and they lose, as a consequence, their capacity to represent. Since they can represent and refer to anyone, regardless of their social, generational, or cultural origin, objects in fact no longer can stage the totality of the differences thanks to which people orient themselves in social life.

The world of objects, therefore, detaches itself from the net of relations that had kept it firmly fixed in the horizon of a rather rigid social structure, and manifests itself as indifferent or alien to the social actors. Quoting Georges Bataille, we can say that “the silence that emanates from it is similar to that of a ship run aground, of an empty ship, from which there emerges only the sacred horror of its presence, of a presence whose simplicity is that of the absence”.

Since objects have lost a stable and lasting meaning, people see their identity as disrupted: deprived of the security of a safe context in which to stay and find the solace of habit and predictability, they perceive the oscillatory and constantly changing character of objects with renewed violence.

The experience of being surrounded by objects deprived of a stable meaning produces what Sigmund Freud has called “civilization and its discontents”: a malaise suffered by subjects surrounded by bodies that testify at once to a quiet familiarity and to an irreducible extraneousness. Individuals to whom, as to Jérôme and Sylvie in *Things* by Georges Perec, no object, not even the

most magnificent, “gives them the impression of richness. They walk, amused or indifferent, but what they see remains alien, belongs to another world, does not concern them: they lack – perhaps in the most despicable sense of the word – tradition.”

In this condition, alone in the malaise of the shock produced by their being surrounded by objects that have become mute, in the grip of the disquiet provoked by a reality that has become brusquely hostile, individuals encounter new difficulties in taming the extraneousness of the external world. In a society that has suddenly become more rapid, the established precepts of tradition lose their value, and cannot always be replaced by other ones capable of responding to changed events: new forms and social norms unpredictably appear, disappear, only last for a fleeting moment, are rapidly replaced by other, more adequate ones.

The ensemble of social norms defines the given system of relations, the code that deciphers daily life, making it translatable and controllable. Since the validity time of such rules has become uncertain and aleatory, things appear as if they had been extracted from the case that enveloped and protected them: they are torn from the context to which they belonged. This is what is generally called reification, the transformation of the totality of the material and immaterial socio-symbolic production into commodity: the process by which a portion of reality is removed from the context that imparts a meaning to it and which, through it, fixes the stability of social relations. A commodity is only an object that symbolically belongs to nobody, and which can be appropriated by anyone who wants it.

To compensate for the sense of dispossession produced by the process of commodification, society has built ever more sophisticated devices, entrusting them with the task of coordinating multiple social speeds: the task of generating rhythms capable of giving to different variables a spatial-temporal counterpoint, of linking together and transmitting their meanings and finalities.

It is in this context that the cinema rises and evolves as an art of paramount social importance, because society finds in it an adequate response to cope with the new disorder and the new complexity.

In other terms, facing the anguish caused by metropolitan chaos and by a reality that suddenly appears as dangerous and inhospitable, people learn to govern the extraneousness of the external world by means of the flux of cinematographic images. Constantly confronting this flux, social actors manage to master the intrinsic phantasmagoria of the commodity world: they learn to live without the support of the simplifying gaze of habit.

4. The Objects in the Filmic Universe

Thanks to the cinema, people learn to make a world that persistently defies them more habitable: a world that, with its complexity, eludes their understanding and escapes their comprehension. They learn to do that by training to observe on the screen a universe in which objects not only disengage themselves from ordinary reality in order to embark on the space of the fictional, of the illusory, which is something that occurs in every form of representation; what is more important, they manage to remodulate this dimension placed midway between being and not being, between true and false, in order to transform it into a magic and enchanted realm, which causes them to lose their static quality of ordinary things and turns them into toys.

Placed in an interspace suspended between, on the one hand, the narrow bonds of reality and, on the other hand, pure imagination, toys are endowed with specific powers and exclusive prerogatives that make them different from everything else. In them, the functional or aesthetic attributes lose the greatest part of their weight in favour of invention, of surprise. The peculiar character of toys lies in the fact that they belong to the dimension of metamorphosis: in their capacity to give themselves up in any moment in order to become something else, to deny the supremacy of truth to invest the world with the charm of the verisimilar. In short, toys are bodies whose presence sets everything that surrounds them in motion, producing a fall into the event, into the picture, into the fable. It is a slipping by means of oblivion, whose movement does not aim to

construct a meaning, but rather the suspension of sense: an emotional intensity that frees things from the slavery of being useful. In these terms, toys are objects that, far from exhausting themselves in what they show, hide within them a myriad ingenious ideas, unexpected inspirations, fresh novelties: unforeseen solutions capable of producing a pleasant sense of bewilderment and bewitching puzzlement.

Transforming objects into toys, that is to say, transferring them into the realm of the metamorphic and the marvellous, the cinema alters and transfigures the stage decorations of its stories: it changes inanimate things into devices of wonder and unpredictability.

In other words,

1. In the first place, it favours to excess the development of a fantastic narration in which the handles of umbrellas express self-important judgments, mirrors sing or depict different things from what is in front of you, paintings become animated, shadows liven up, newspapers tell events that will take place only the day after, scarecrows walk, armchairs move feet and arms freely, beds fly in the clouds or sail in the depths of the sea, cars think and talk, and even toilets turn in adventurous waters chutes for last-minute flights.

2. In the second place, it multiplies technological science fiction-like exploits so as to explain in a more or less rational way the wonders whose actors are a variety of implements, that is to say, prostheses, magic fluids, typewriters, television screens, weapons, skates, skate boards, cars, trains, submarines, spaceships, time machines, robots, androids, hyper-sophisticated computers.

3. In the third place, with a movement that defines the entire filmic universe and therefore also includes the two previous cases, it introduces the new centrality of objects. It presents the visible in a direct, almost brutal, way, to the point of equating the human body with things: to the point of placing the image of the person on the same plane as the artefacts' that he or she produces.

To be more precise, the cinematographic representation frees objects from their isolation and makes them capable of mastering a situation, of imposing themselves in either an intimate or an extraneous context, able to dominate the other characters and their array of forms and colours. This is what happens in *Favourites of the Moon* (Iosseliani, 1984), where the underlying theme does not affect the people involved in the story, but the furniture of an aristocratic residence that goes through time and epochs, is purloined and then modified, transformed, altered: it enjoys a life of its own and produces intense repercussions on the people that, establishing a contact with it, appear as if they were caught in its vital vortex.

Once the chrysalis that separates them from their habitat has been burned, objects become autonomous subjects capable of interacting with all the other actors and objects on the scene in order to concur, together with them, to the definition of the meaning of what is happening. In *For a Few Dollars More* (Leone, 1965), Clint Eastwood starring as Monco, a bounty hunter who wanders thorough New Mexico, meets Colonel Douglas Mortimer, a bounty killer played by Lee Van Cleef. On the one hand, the two are hardened loners who consider themselves as infinitely superior to everybody else of their same kind. On the other hand, they are too disillusioned and hardened by life not to be totally impervious to the idea of forming a bond or even a feeble friendship. Despite this, due to the necessity of not being an impediment to each other in the pursuit of the same goal, they decide to enter into a temporary alliance. However, an even temporary truce implies the risk of being trustful. It implies the risk of betting not only on the other's loyalty, but above all on his reliability: on his capacity to be up to the mark of the situation and not become, later, a dead weight, a new burden.

In order to accept one another, each has to try out the other by making him pass a real initiation test so as to recognize the other's ability and, at the same time, show his own undisputed valour. The two, therefore, placed at a very close distance, almost clasped in a mutual grip, scan each other's face. Monco turns round Colonel Mortimer to look him up and down and then, with open aggressiveness, stamps on his foot. Mortimer does the same thing, pays him back in his own coin.

Monco, at that point, re-establishes a physical and symbolic distance between them, lends him a sudden left punch full in the face.

Mortimer falls on the ground. Then he gets up, touches his lip, brushes his jacket but, as he turns round to take up the hat that had fallen on the ground, Eastwood draws his handgun as quick as a flash and shoots him. He does not mean to strike him, but only to show his skills in frightening him: the bullet just grazes his hat, which rolls away on the yard. Van Cleef doesn't react, he gives him an incredulous glance, then he turns round and, all calmly, starts walking to take his hat. However, as he walks, Eastwood shoots the hat again, pushing it further away. Again, no reaction. Van Cleef goes on walking and for the third, and the fourth time, Eastwood shoots and pushes it further and further away. Colonel Mortimer remains unperturbed. He proceeds as if he didn't understand what the other one wants, why he is so bold and presumptuous: perhaps he hasn't realized who he is dealing with? At the fifth shot, however, the hat is too distant, and the shot fails. A sixth one: it falls flat again. At this point, as Monco shoots for the seventh time, Van Cleef picks up his hat, puts it slowly on his head and draws his gun from the holster with no haste. The weapon is slightly different from the other one for its barrel is longer and, consequently, it has a longer range. By now beyond the range of the other's gun, at his turn he shoots his hat, which flies away, and, still not satisfied, it shoots it again while it is still flying, making it bounce and preventing it from falling on the ground: one, two, three, four, five, six times.

The ritual has been celebrated and the initiation has been successful: since the symbolic exchange has been brought to a happy conclusion, the transubstantiation that turns strangers into mates has been realized. The two hats, perfectly intact, seem now almost regenerated and even newer than before: with no holes nor even the slightest scratch, despite the many shots they have received.

It is not an encounter between men, but an encounter between things: two hats, two folders, two guns, two pairs of boots, the dust, the revolving door, the miserable wooden sheds. All the cinema by Sergio Leone can be traced back to such disputations between objects as well as to the fateful dilemma between short and long fuses. In the uncut version of *A Fistful of Dynamite*. *Duck, You Sucker* (1971), James Coburn as John Mallory, an Irish terrorist and expert on dynamite who has fled to Mexico, asks his mate Rod Steiger, a Mexican bandit named Juan Miranda: "Short or long fuse?" And the other one replies: "Short! Very short!" Seizing his head and throwing him on the round, Coburn says: "*Duck, You Sucker!*" You must not talk, you must stay on the scene and follow the action guided by objects. It is useless to answer "short fuse": if you want a short fuse, you simply have to lower your head as soon as possible, because the fire can reach you too. Coburn also enjoys the privilege of a break between "*Duck, You*" and "*Sucker!*", because he has already bent down.

The moral of the story, the *epimythion*, is all a question of levels and strategies, of differential power and different measures: "When a man with a pistol encounters a man with a gun, the man with the pistol is a dead man" (*A Fistful of Dollars*, Leone, 1964). *Topos* against *topos*: short or long fuse, pistol or gun, short or long range, leather or suede boots, stock-car or motorcycle, armchair or small bed, short or long time, slow or fast becoming, the *carpe diem* of the present moment that has no past nor future or the inexorable activity of time loaded with itself and its past, up to dizziness. The Senator Bailey, the friend Max, James Wood, a pocket watch, a big armchair, an elegant parlour, an enormous wrought iron gate that opens on an imposing boundary wall. Noodles Robert De Niro, worn coat and felt hat, a small bed, a hookah, a smoky bar.

5. Conclusion

On the cinematographic screen, objects cease to present themselves as things that passively receive the attributions of sense negotiated in the interactions of social actors, in order to become themselves subjects that offer their own point of view on the reality of the world. For example, they seem to be able to warn the public that something important is going to happen. The small

picture on which are written the words “Home sweet home” that, in the eponymous film (Henry King, 1939), Jesse James, now retired, is hanging on the wall of his cottage’s staircase, clearly announces – not to the detriment, but precisely by virtue of its idyllic and country-side tone – that the end is near: that the bandit is going to be killed, that murder is not worthwhile, that there is no possible refuge for the criminal.

Very often objects are even more capable than the actors themselves to tell a story, a circumstance, a condition, an event. Thus, in order to explain the violent end that has befallen the doctor of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), Ejzenstejn does not frame his gestures, his face or his body. He does not concentrate on his person, nor on that of the sailors in revolt. It is the close-up on the glasses that hang from a cable of the ship to steal the scene from the protagonists. Similarly, Orson Wells (1941), in order to dramatically compress the apotheosis and fall of the citizen Kane, decides to resort to the simplicity of ordinary objects: on the one hand, the hundreds of unsold bundles of the *Chronicle*, the rival newspaper of the *New York Daily Inquirer* of which Kane is the owner and the director; on the other hand, a small sledge burning in a bonfire of objects that perish after their owner’s death, but which are more capable than him to manifest the presence of the end.

Also in *Strangers on a train* (Hitchcock, 1951), death does not declare itself through the subject that suffers it or the one that inflicts it: it is a pair of glasses that replaces and concentrates the outcome of the violence and the folly: while Bruno (Robert Walker) is trying to strangle Miriam (Laura Elliot), Guy’s wife (Farley Granger), the latter’s glasses fall on the floor and reflect the scene of the murder, allowing the public to observe it.

Things themselves are much more active than people, and instead of being merely docile instruments, they rather tend to determine the characters’ actions, by inducing them to do something they wouldn’t have necessarily done or wished to do. In *Rear Window* (1954), James Stewart as the photojournalist Jeff Jeffries is so obsessively attached to his camera that, although in need of rest since he has broken his leg and is bound to a wheelchair, he feels compelled to film everything that surrounds him: he thus ends up spying on his neighbours, indiscreetly photographing their habits and behaviour. In *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend* (Sturges, 1949), the mere possession of a pistol compels Betty Grable, a very attractive saloon entertainer, to constantly shoot a judge whenever she runs into him, even in the court where she is standing trial on that very charge.

In cinema, therefore, things are the main pivots of social life. In the majority of the most significant scenes, the real protagonists are the material objects themselves that, in the first place, work as real totems, in the sense that they are the characters’ guardian deities: defenders that govern their destiny (short or long fuse). In the second place, they act as avatars, in the sense that they often substitute them, and are frequently the veritable representatives of their actions (leather or suede boots, armchair or small bed).

To conclude, our analysis allows us to understand that, in filmic representation, objects cease to be the simple referents of the value that people, occasions, social pictures, or cultural spaces have inscribed upon them. On the contrary, by means of their constant and characterizing presence, they define, precise, and give concreteness to particular situations: they mark and charge with persuasive force specific contexts. Instead of being a mere trace of the subjects with which they are associated, of the circumstances in which they participate, or the milieu to which they belong, things on the screen are able to produce a range of further and more crucial meanings than those expressed by the presence and action of flesh-and-blood actors.

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