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SCREEN

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It. *Schermo*; Fr. *Écran*; Germ. *Schirm*, *Bildschirm*; Span. *Pantalla*. The term comes from the Longobardic verb *skirmjan*, "to protect", and from the Old German *skirm*, meaning a "shield", and according to some commentators, a shield made of animal skin (one possible derivation connects it to the root of the Greek term *korion* and the Latin *corion*, meaning "leather" or "skin"). In its first meaning, "screen" indicates any object or device that could afford shelter from enemies or adverse influences, such as the weather or the heat from a fire. The sense of something which, by standing in between, acts as a filter or a protective membrane is still present in the current use of the verb "to screen" ("to take cover", "to put through a sieve"). Its military origin can still be found in the Italian and French word for the sport of fencing (*scherma*, *éscrime*), or the English word "skirmish" (It. *scaramuccia*, Dutch *schermutseling*). A screen also denotes an architectural partition used to hide something or divide a space, such as a room divider, a wall, or a curtain keeping out sunlight. By extension, the screen is a barrier used to conceal a portion of the visual field, and yet through this very same operation of concealment, it makes something *else* visible. The twofold character of the screen emerges in the device of the "screen lady" (*donna schermo*), described by Dante in the *Vita Nova* (1292-1293), which employs the screen as an optical metaphor. The screen lady is the woman who appears to be the object of the poet's desire and thereby allows him to hide the real identity of his beloved, which, according to the classical motif of courtly love, needs to remain secret. Although fire screens and similar pieces of furniture were often decorated with figures, it is only since the early 21st century that the word "screen" has been commonly associated with the display of images or the casting of shadows. Thus, the current meaning of screen as a surface onto which images are projected or exhibited derives from the usage connected with pre-cinematic devices such as the Magic Lantern and the Phantasmagoria.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

In recent decades, screens have progressively become the interfaces through which we encounter the world and others. By expanding human possibilities of knowledge and action, screens and digital devices have come to broaden the range of our apprehension of reality, but also to impose procedures and constraints on our private and public behaviour. The pervasive presence of these technologies, most recently fostered by the pandemic emergency, has been radically transforming cognitive and social practices, and ultimately, our embodied existence. Their impact on our lifeworld, on political and affective dimensions as well as on global power relations and labour conditions, is one of the central intellectual challenges of our time and has become a major source of philosophical enquiry.

In fact, the screen was already part of the aesthetic discourse in relation to the philosophy of film. But, in both continental and analytic approaches, the screen was primarily considered as the medium of cinema or, metonymically, as a substitute for the moving image and the experience of spectatorship. Although film philosophy investigated the perceptual encounter with the film as an aesthetic object and sought to show how films do not just raise questions but cinematically embed philosophical concepts, it failed to account for the screen as such. Thus, the digital revolution has brought to philosophical attention the need to think about the screen itself, rather than focusing on thinking on screen.

Furthermore, since electronic and later digital screens have become a ubiquitous part of domestic and public spaces, reshaping communication protocols, but also everyday practices and interactions, affecting the construction of identity as well as our intersubjective relationships, the account of screens could not remain limited to the study of the moving image. From these challenges emerged the domain of *screen studies* or "screenology" (Huhtamo 2010), aiming to elaborate a broader definition of the screen and to analyse its mediascape by bridging disciplinary theoretical and historical perspectives. This multifaceted field of investigation ranges from philosophy and aesthetics (Carbone, Dalmaso 2014; Bodini, Carbone, Dalmaso 2016) to history of technology, film and media studies (Chateau, Moure 2016; Monteiro 2017), psychology (Turkle 1995), neuroscience (Gallese, Guerra 2015), education (Vansieleghem, Vlieghe, Zahn 2020), design and architecture (McQuire, Martin, Niederer 2009; Verhoeff 2012).

In the early phase of the debate, the main concern was to discern whether digital displays marked a break with the history of cinema screens. Interdisciplinary enquiry was driven first by the need to single out the specific features of electronic and digital screens (such as mobility, interactivity, virtuality), including through a description of the linguistic (oral and textual), phonetic, and mimo-gestural specificities of screen-mediated conversations (Develotte, Kern 2018).

From a philosophical point of view, the question arose whether the dramatic changes in the screen media landscape were underpinned by an aesthetic as well as ontological mutation (Vial 2013; Carbone 2016). This investigation was deeply intertwined with the turn-of-the-20th-century debate on the posthuman, the definition of new media and new media art, and the debate about the ontology of analogue and digital images (Manovich 2001, Hansen 2004). As researchers, especially in the wake of phenomenological and enactivist accounts of aesthetic experience, started to put forward the relational structure of mediation, the previously established conception of the screen as a surface for the exhibition of visual and audio-

visual representations progressively gave way to an ecological understanding of the screen as an environmental medium. The notion of “apparatus” (*dispositif*), as developed by Michel Foucault, but also by Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben, is key here, since screens are considered not just as technological devices, but as implying an ensemble of discursive and non-discursive conducts, imaginaries, material and bodily practices, as well as institutional frameworks and architectural forms. Besides, while manifold contributions in aesthetics have delved into the question of the agency of images, recently brought into light by the pictorial turn, this line of research needed to be complemented by a survey of the specific powers of screens, in terms of their social and biopolitical implications, such as for instance their impact on the economy of attention, the mechanism of premediation (Grusin 2010), the role of artificial intelligence (Bodini, Carbone, Dalmasso 2020).

SCREEN GENEALOGIES AND ARCHAEOLOGIES

While the dominant discourse about digital media had been characterised by a tendency to focus mainly on the present state of media, the cross-disciplinary investigations carried out by screen studies have been marked by a methodological emphasis on archaeology and genealogy (Buckley, Casetti, Campe 2019; Mitchell 2015) and, more in general, by a transhistorical perspective that links contemporary mediality to past and even ancient forms of our engagement with visual representation. Researchers have engaged in exploring how social practices, imaginaries and discourses have given shape and meaning to the screen and how they have come to inform its function as image-bearing surface.

Drawing on this theoretical framework, philosophical research has been devoted, on the one hand, to accounting for the ontological and anthropological shift brought about by the digital revolution, of which screens are the most relevant index, and, on the other hand, to analysing the screen as an apparatus that points at an anti-metaphysical paradigm. In this respect, seminal insights have been found in the work of those authors who first addressed the philosophical meaning of the screen in cinema, such as Henri Bergson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-François Lyotard, and Gilles Deleuze. For instance, in a famous interview (1986), Deleuze maintains that the screen inaugurates an anti-metaphysical approach to the understanding of consciousness. He proposes to overthrow the Western philosophical tradition which interpreted the human mind as the light of the world (*lux intellectus*), to think of it *as a screen*, that is as a projection surface which only allows light to be revealed.

By uniting the gestures of showing and concealing, the twofold structure of the screen can be said to be anti-metaphysical, inasmuch as it does not postulate the existence of a reality behind or beyond the visible itself (Carbone 2016: 75). On the one hand, the bidimensional surface of the screen appears to be transparent, as it enables the appearance of fictional worlds (analogous to the model of vision of the window, characterised by a “seeing through”), but it is also an opaque barrier that literally screens the visual field, performing a protective function – of which the pandemic emergency has made us strikingly aware. The intrinsic ambiguity of the screen can be linked to the structure of appearance of the visible itself, since the light would not illuminate anything if there was nothing to screen it, or as Merleau-Ponty puts it “there is no vision without a screen” (1961: 150). In this respect, the different historical articulations

of human visual expression could be interpreted as many variations of the screen or “arche-screen” (Carbone 2016: 57-80), understood as the entire set of the conditions of possibility of “showing”.

The intent to describe the specific structure of screen experience and its ontology was accompanied by an account of continuities and discontinuities between screens and other optical devices that have played a crucial role throughout the history of art, aesthetics and visual culture, being underpinned by as many models of vision: the picture frame, the veil, the mirror, and, especially, the window, evoked by Alberti to describe the gridded frame of Renaissance perspective (Sobchack 1991, Wajcman 2004, Friedberg 2006, Elsaesser, Hagener 2009). In fact, if screens have long been understood according to these notions and metaphors of the image’s threshold (Pinotti 2021), they eventually became themselves metaphors, through which it is possible to interpret retrospectively their articulations in previous optical devices (Manovich 2001: 94-103). The visual contour outlined by the screen can be traced back up to the Roman *templum* (Carbone 2016: 63-66), which is the site for the sacred observation of the flight of birds, but even to palaeolithic cave paintings, which some have interpreted as a form of proto-cinema.

It is worth noting that, even though it was only in the early 19th century that the word screen was linked to the optical, screens still tend to be considered predominantly as visual devices. Until recent years, scant attention had been paid to the fact that the screen was not primarily a surface for the exhibition of bidimensional representations, but, as its etymology highlights, a physical, tangible element (Strauven 2021: 184; Grespi 2017), an aspect that has been brought to our attention even more by the diffusion of tactile and gesture-recognition interfaces.

The prevailing consensus on contemporary mediality suggests that our increasing interactions with the environment through screens would progressively lead to a dematerialisation and anaesthetisation of our perceptive, cognitive and relational functions and, ultimately, to the elimination of any living bodily presence. Such a premise cannot be assumed from a philosophical point of view since the body is what always enables us to perceive and live, insofar as it is the very condition of possibility of our experiences, even virtual ones. Therefore, a philosophical account of the screen also prompts us to redirect our attention to the body’s significance as the primary source of mediation (Hansen 2006; Lageira, Roman 2017) and even to understand the body itself as a screen (Dalmaso 2018), taking the cue from Merleau-Ponty’s stance on the body as the primary medium for our being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty 1945).

The multiple challenges raised by digital screens are being addressed not only in relation to the ongoing debate in mediology and media archaeology, but also at the intersection with the philosophy of technology, especially post-phenomenology, in the attempt to elaborate the diverse implications of the present state of techno-capitalism related to the coupling of bodies and technological prostheses, as well as to the complex ideology inherent in digital interfaces.

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