

Screens

From Materiality to
Spectatorship – A Historical
and Theoretical
Reassessment

Edited by

Dominique Chateau
and José Moure

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Introduction: Screen, a Concept in Progress

Dominique Chateau and José Moure

Obviously, there is no need to invent the reasons why “screens” is a relevant topic. It is almost impossible to imagine a country where screens are not used on a daily basis. There has been a significant inflation of papers and books dealing with this topic. One could easily run the risk of dwelling on the same old ideas, if it were not for the continual proliferation of the kinds of screens we use and of the various modes of screening we encounter. Throughout the 20th century, the theater screen was considered the primary and elite screen – the cinema experience, with its big screen, was synonymous with crowds attending great shows – but it was soon challenged by the smaller screen of television and the more intimate mode of screening it implied. Even smaller screens are now ubiquitous. Watching and reading mobile screens are such widespread practices that an individual who does without them is considered the odd man or woman out.

It does not mean that the old theater screen is now confined to media museums. We have to consider that the development of screens consists more of the accumulation and coexistence of old and new forms than a systematic switch from one to the other. We live in a multi-screen world. This means that from the cell phone to the IMAX screen and all the types in-between – “regular” theater, television, computer, tablet, smartphone – there is now the possibility to transform video content into a number of different formats, to use one type of screen in a wide range of situations or just to waste time going from one kind of screen to another. In general, living in a multi-screen world implies the growth of material and new ways of screening. It is not surprising, therefore, that this phenomenon has recently been reflected at the academic level too, both in terms of the increasing number of papers and books dealing with the screen and the topic of screening, and in the rise in new theoretical hypotheses and new historical insights.

It was only in the last quarter of the 13th century that the word *screen* was attested. Its etymology, traced back to medieval Europe, seems to derive from Old French *escren*, *escrein*, *escran* (modern French: *écran*); from Old Dutch *scerm*, *skirm* (modern Dutch: *scherm*); from Proto-Germanic *skirmiz* (modern German:

Schirm); and from Middle English *scren*, *screne*. These origins illustrate the beginnings of the word *screen* as a noun¹ referring to an object of protection and, notably, to a panel that protects against the fire's heat (fire screen). This everyday, commonplace object, whose function is to shelter or to safeguard the user from the heat of the hearth, contains the ideas of protection, divider, barrier, interposition, interceptor, filter, moderation, mask, or surface that one inevitably encounters in attempting to define the word *screen* through its multitude of synonyms.

From this first definition, to its numerous modern definitions and applications, the word *screen*, through the evolution of its usages and the diversification of its connotations, has evolved into a complicated term, the history of which is hard to trace. For nearly five centuries, it referred to various objects acting as a barrier or protection from fire, light, or wind. It was only in the 19th century that the term *screen* began to take on, by analogy – in the language of the physicist, the illusionist, and eventually the cineast – the meaning of a white or opaque reflective surface onto which images are projected, displayed, or attached. Even though some translations of ancient texts use the term retrospectively and anachronistically, the surface that receives the projection, be it a wall, a canvas, or a white paper sheet, could not properly be referenced as *screen* before the mid-19th century, when the optic sciences became increasingly popular. In the third edition of his *Dictionnaire universel des Sciences et des Lettres*, published in 1857, the Frenchman Marie Nicolas Bouillet defines the screen as “a small piece of furniture intended to protect oneself from the heat of the fireplace.” It, he adds, “[i]s also called *screen* [...] in optics, every white board onto which the image of an object is made to be projected.”²

On December 28, 1895, two events occurred that were to play a major role in the growing complexity of the notion of *screen* and the enrichment of its semantic field: the first public showing of the Lumière Cinematograph at the Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris and the discovery of X-rays by Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen in Würzburg, Germany.³ With the Lumière Cinematograph, the screen became the essential element of the cinematographic apparatus and of the filmic experience: the spectator is positioned within a theater, in a darkened room, the eyes watching the screen with the projection of the film coming from behind the spectator's head. Within a few years, the word *screen* was being used as a metonymy to represent and refer to the cinema, as the art of the screen, as opposed to the theater as the art of the stage. With the barium platinocyanide screen on which Röntgen viewed the first radiographic image, his own flickering ghostly skeleton, the screen became a data display apparatus, providing an opportunity to visualize not only the basic signs of life (the simple movements of everyday life collected and reproduced by the Cinematograph), but also invisible signals displayed on a monitor, where it can be viewed and interpreted.

From the screen as an object used to protect, obscure, or conceal, to the screen as an architectural and sculptural apparatus used to separate or divide space in a process of exclusion or delimitation, to the screen as a surface or a receptacle on which images are projected or displayed, to the screen as a metaphorical term⁴ or a site of mediation involving a relationship between what is shown and what remains under cover; from the late 19th century the word “screen” offered a wide range of meanings and usages that would only increase throughout the 20th century.

Today, an online search for “screen” reveals numerous entries where the meaning of the word is identical to that of *Dickens on Screen*, a book examining the many film adaptations of Dickens’s works.⁵ Not only is “screen” found among those words that have a series of other meanings, but, thanks to the flexibility of the English language, the same word can be used alternatively as a noun, an adjective, or a verb. “Screen” can be associated with a plethora of terms. Compounding it forms various combinations where it is either used as a prefix (screen shot, screen name) or a suffix (touchscreen, flat-screen). Furthermore, a derivative like “screening” can denote both the appearance of a movie or a tool of preventive medicine, for instance, genetic screening. This flexibility opens an indefinitely expanded semantic field.

In a related matter, it is worth noticing that screen always has both a broad sense and a narrow sense. It denotes a specific thing or a part of it – a computer screen – or the cinema, when, for example, we say that a book is adapted for the screen or that a star of the screen is born. The sense may also waver between the two poles; for example, when we say that a plane vanished from the radar screen it means both the very precise signal on the screen (a green signal on a black screen) and its reference, the plane. There appears to be a similar duality in other languages between the screen that hides – a veil, a screen of trees, a smoke screen – and the screen that shows – the flat surface on which films appear.

Among the adjectives derived from screen, i.e., “screenable,” “screenless,” or “screenlike,” one might ask whether the word “screenic” is worthy of consideration. Not only is it a quirky new word, but it has a special status, that of a coinage found in a theoretical context. Screenic is the translation of the French *écranique*, a term introduced by a group of researchers brought together by the Filmology project led by Étienne Souriau, as described in the book *L’univers filmique*.⁶ The most substantial contribution of this book is the belief that we need a new vocabulary with which we can fully account for the various levels according to which the filmic universe can be defined; that is to say, the different aspects of reality that constitute a film in its relation with the outside world as much as in relation to itself. The best known terms coined by Souriau and his team are “profilmic” (the outside of the film as it is or as it can be shot) and “diegetic” (the characters, space, and time that constitute the special world of a given film).⁷ It may be emphasized that, while initially defined separately, these terms are now system-

atically re-defined in relation to each other; for example, the actors are “profilmic,” while the characters are “diegetic.”

In the same way, after being defined as all that appears positively on the screen, screenic is now differentiated from “filmographic,” i.e., all that appears on the celluloid, and is associated with “filmophanic,” i.e., all that occurs during the showing of the film.⁸ This distinction draws our attention to the transformation of the filmic raw material during its processing by projection and, in addition and equally important, to the fact that what occurs on the screen is part of a more general phenomenon involving theater space and spectatorship. Along these lines, Souriau’s analysis as well as that of his collaborators, among them Jean-Jacques Riniéri,⁹ can be helpful in intensifying the conceptual density of the term *screenic* and subsequently of *screen*. As Edward Lowry points out: “Riniéri asserts that it is the viewer’s appreciation of [...] reality which lends a sense of belief to what Souriau defined as the ‘second degree screenic phenomena, that level which determines the plane of immediate signification, where the first apprehension of the filmic object consciousness takes place.’”¹⁰

Besides the broad sense according to which screen denotes the movie and its practice using synecdoche (the part for the whole), we may consider that, on the one hand, this word in its strictest sense means the material screen as a rectangular plane surface on which a ray of light distributes plastic elements (forms and colors) dynamically; on the other hand, it means the place where these elements come to be perceived and interpreted as more or less anthropomorphic or dynamic, analogical representations. The difference between these two points is an issue that has been discussed extensively since the 1960s, not only within the field of film studies but also in relation to the general topic of visual communication, including the whole range of visual arts. Can we consider visual representation from the viewpoint of the neutral first level of raw material, or must we agree on the idea of there being a gap that enables us to see beyond the raw material to the second level in order to grasp the special logic of a system of representation? There have been two ways of tackling this problem: some scholars have discussed whether the psycho-physiological bases and processes of image perception are different from those of natural perception, while others discussed whether the perspectivist system governing the visual representation as well as our perception has an ideological influence.

As a proof that times and atmospheres have changed, today these ways of dealing with screen seem to be less relevant than new studies on the subject, which are rapidly multiplying. Among these significant contributions are: Raphaël Lellouche’s theory of screen (1997); Erkki Huhtamo’s so-called screenology (2004); Lucas D. Introna and Fernando M. Ilharco’s phenomenology of “screenness” (2006); Anne Friedberg’s visual arts perspective (2006); and Valérie Charolles’s philosophy of screen (2013).¹¹ These texts not only stand as testimony to the fact that the question raised by Francesco Casetti in 2013, “What is

a screen nowadays?”¹² remains relevant, but it also exemplifies the need to diversify theoretical viewpoints. Moreover, while this broad question may lead to new answers and new intellectual viewpoints induced by new ways of questioning, it can also be challenged by emerging questions that deal with the new forms of screen. Given this situation, this book seeks to offer the reader a series of propositions that, from various perspectives, provide new insights into screenness and its various aspects: the screen could be considered to be material, mental or, more generally, a link between matter and mind. Our aim is also to preserve space for diverse approaches: historical, theoretical, or mixed.

The goal of the first part of the book is to offer a deeper understanding of the current multifarious forms and practices of screening, but it does not mean we necessarily concentrate on the present in order to lead to a kind of *tabula rasa* of the past. Indeed, the new ways of dealing with the screen that are referred to here include the historical approach and, as it is currently described, the archaeological approach. Archaeology in this sense is both the recovery of the past and a new way of considering and thinking about the past (inspired by Michel Foucault). Thus, the book begins with an early text by Emmanuele Toddi, a pseudonym of Pietro Silvio Rivetta (1886-1952), a journalist and illustrator, who, two years before venturing into filmmaking, wrote an essay entitled “Rectangle-Film [25x19]” (“Rettangolo-Film [25x19]”), which may grab our attention for two reasons. Published on August 25, 1918, in the third issue of the magazine *Penombra*, it appears to be one of, if not the first texts that deals with the possible shapes of the screen in movies. Moreover, emphasizing the large gap between the human eye and the “cinematographic eye,” Toddi wonders whether the established rectangle shape of the 35mm photogram is a rational choice. Rejecting this hypothesis, he offers to change the shape and the size of the screen according to the psychological and dramatic needs of the viewer.

Opening with Toddi’s text, the first part of the book presents a series of contributions to the history and archaeology of the cinema and the media. In Giorgio Avezzi’s “Intersections between Showing and Concealment in the History of the Concept of Screen” and José Moure’s “Archaic Paradigms of the Screen and Its Images,” the main purpose is the construction of the concept of screen through its literary genealogy, from Plato to the beginning of movies. Avezzi’s investigation revolves around the subdivision between “monstration” and “protection,” which, as can be seen in the whole book, is a fundamental contribution to the definition of the concept of screen. Avezzi shows that the subdivision is less a contradiction than a complementary couple, a point he clarifies when exploring the issue in detail from an archaeological viewpoint. Also drawing on Plato, José Moure focuses on the various paradigms of the concept of screen as it existed before the word itself was even invented and before the emergence of the cinematograph. From the mythological screens to the screens of science fiction, he illustrates how the literary history of the screen is inseparable from the history of

image transportation, i.e., the artifice devices that show things as a shadow or a reflection outside of their place of origin.

As indicated by its title, "Thematizing the 'Arche-Screen' through Its Variations," Mauro Carbone's essay presents a meta-concept implementing the showing and hiding duality of the concept of screen, which he calls "arche-screen." Acting as its mythical origin, Plato's *teikhōn* performs this double function, which can be found throughout most of the history of screens, from rupes-trian walls to computer screens, including veils and cinematographic ones. Over-determining the space of projection and reception, the "arche-screen" presents more than it shows, soliciting not only our perception but also our imagination and desire, as it is an efficient way to manage the sacred relationships. Part one concludes with Ian Christie's "The Stuff of Screens," in which he considers the point from which the screen moved to its definite status, focusing on its materiality as a condition of relationships between spectators and movies and the way filmic imagery works. Christie emphasizes the fact that adopting a unique kind of screen – for example, the translucent screen used temporarily in phantasmagoric spectacles – was both a technological choice and a cultural determination. It concerns not only the screen itself, but also the "framing" of the screen: the curtain; the loudspeakers; and the organization of space that CinemaScope and 3D require.

Part two focuses on recent technological changes affecting both the definition of screen and the different aspects of media practices. Ariel Rogers's essay entitled "Scaling Down: Cinerama on Blu-ray," examines the consequences of "the release on DVD and Blu-ray of the 1950s Cinerama films," a transfer that initially seemed impossible, but, despite the need for a special exhibition device, has become a realistic option. By examining this case, Rogers not only describes a significant part of recent media history but also draws our attention to the relationship between the movies and the screen; the interaction between the original format of the former and the kind of screen toward which they migrate. We stay close to this issue with the discussion of the 3D screen in Simon Lefebvre's "The Disappearance of the Surface." Lefebvre shows that this form of motion-picture screening involves more than the out-of-screen visual effects. Beyond the screen, 3D movies take over the space from which we are normally separated in 2D projection: the theater space. Because screenic framing and flatness disappear, spectatorial immersion causes a new kind of relationship to movies, all the more so given that the viewer wears glasses, a device that reinforces the impression of not just being face-to-face with the movie, but being part of it.

This kind of physical extension is also examined by Richard Bégin in "GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images." Bégin considers this kind of embodied experience to be an effect that is not only observable on the screen but at the very source, produced by the special device of Go-Pro Cameras whose function is to

record the filmer's presence. In this case, the camera is more than a prosthetic device of the body, it involves the body in filming and, more precisely, the movements of the body, so that Bégin speaks of "mobilography" to qualify a filmmaker's practice in which "the recording of mobility" participates. Go-Pro Cameras are not innovative per se, insofar as we find the ideal of "mobilography" in experimental and documentary movies, in Alain Cavalier's films, even in ones by the Lumières, but it increases the effect so much that it is as if the scenes on the screen were not only represented, but "literally embodied."

Just as microscopes and telescopes are different, the evolving screenic technology explosion is characterized by the co-existence of small as well as huge devices with the remaining median form and the measuring instrument of the old theater screen. At the smaller end of the scale is the wrist-mounted screen, which, according to Erkki Huhtamo in "The Four Practices? Challenges for an Archaeology of the Screen," is one of the most recent prosthesis that appears to have changed screen practice. Based on his concept of "screenology," a branch he proposes to add to the tree of media studies, his essay attempts to analyze some aspects of screen practices that can be considered new, insofar as the subject matter is viewed through the lens of archaeology. This way of thinking, as he shows, provides an opportunity to be both retrospective and future-oriented when considering the screen properties. Among screen practices, the interactive touching as well as the "mobile practice" – i.e., screen practices where the user is moving through either an immobile environment or a mobile one – are keen topics of discussion. In "Screens in the City," Nanna Verhoeff examines the case of "Urban Screens," which she defines as "mobile media architecture," and examines the interaction between urban spaces and urban screens. As part of the former, urban screens imply some significant changes in the urban *dispositif*. They introduce mobility; in fact, a new kind of mobility that dynamically changes the relationship with urban design and structure as it was previously established at the level of mobility and connectivity. On this basis, Nanna Verhoeff develops three key concepts – infrastructure, interface, and intervention – and analyzes some symptomatic examples in order to explain the way screens appear in the city.

The third part of this book is entitled "theory." This does not mean that the preceding texts were deprived of theoretical concerns. The essays in this section share the same specific knowledge as the previous contributions, but are more explicitly aimed at image theory. In "The Screenic Image: Between Verticality and Horizontality, Viewing and Touching, Displaying and Playing," Wanda Strauven studies the practice of touching, which has been made possible by the introduction of interactive smartphones and computer screens. As her title announces, she studies the relation between the tactile use and the visual contact of the screen; the way screenic touching interacts with screenic seeing. Strauven explores what she calls "table installations," i.e., screens placed horizontally that

spectators watch vertically – for example, Thomas Hirschhorn's *TOUCHING REALITY* or Camille Henrot's *GROSSE FATIGUE*. But the perspective is not limited to a descriptive task, insofar as Strauven also offers to rethink the concept of image in our present context. The question is to ascertain the extent to which touching creates a new kind of object, more or less changing the image definition; or whether the use of images changes in a context where children are familiarized with the tactile relationship to screens. Following up on what Strauven argues, Vivan Sobchack's "From Screen-Scape to Screen-Sphere: A Meditation in *Medias Res*" discusses screens in the context of 21st-century daily life. She claims that, nowadays, we live through screens, instead of with them, so that we are affected by them both knowingly and ontologically. While screens have developed the characteristics of ubiquity, interconnection, and mobility, they create a new environmental conditioning, "a 'virtual' spacetime," changing our life and causing some disorder. Sobchack considers this situation from two perspectives. The first one deals with the relationship between screens and the anthropocentric position in relation to them, including degrees of awareness – what she calls the "screen-sphere"; the second one is a systemic point of view, as an answer to the phenomenological and historical approach, leading to the question whether the screen is by itself an autonomous system, or whether interactivity becomes a property of this system, instead of upholding the man-machine relationship.

Roger Odin, in "The Concept of the Mental Screen: The Internalized Screen, the Dream Screen, and the Constructed Screen," defines the seminal concept of "mental screen" based upon the phenomenon of internalizing screen; for example, as it is defined in the physical communication space of the theater. When we think of the "cinema," we think of this kind of screen, as there may be a conflict between this mental screen when we migrate to another kind of screen. That is why the *dispositifs* are supplemented by devices, called discursive and pragmatic introducers, and also why experiencing cinema is determined by different kinds of relationships, called connectors, which are more or less rigid, inclusive, flexible, and open. Moreover, the process of internalization is reversible: we can imagine a mental screen that is more or less different from the standard one – for example, a screen we can hold in the palm of our hand and manipulate with the other hand – a dream that has been fulfilled thanks to the cell phone! In "Between Fascination and Denial: The Power of the Screen," Dominique Chateau focuses on fascination, a (modified) state of mind independent of the screen but considerably increased by the relationship with screens, regardless of differences in shape. He suggests ways in which to better grasp this phenomenon strongly linked to screenness, adopting a twofold viewpoint: a psychological one, insofar as fascination is a way of being affected by the world that causes a modified state of mind; and a cultural one, insofar as this phenomenon occurs thanks to an apparatus during different social practices. Considering the ambiva-

lent physicality of the screen as a medium aimed at transmitting energy – that is, light – the phenomenon of fascination can be studied as an iconic effect (in Peirce's sense) and, correlatively, as a denial of representation, which favors the realistic ideology.

Intermediality is a key concept introduced by historians having realized that traces of other media are to be found in movies. It is also reversible: traces of movies are to be found in other media. The challenge is now to consider the screen in literature. Part four opens with Salvador Rubio Marco's "Screens after Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* Trilogy: Current Answers for the Eyeminded Public," which explores two theoretical lines of reasoning: a genealogical one that leads to the debatable hypothesis of the abolition of the screen, and an intermedial one that suggests reviewing Dos Passos's visual-like narrative using a complex concept of screen. This way of questioning introduces an aesthetic viewpoint combined with a political one. As Rubio Marco puts it, "Dos Passos's approach of 'eyeminded people' may be useful in order to reconsider the "logocentrism" referred to by Screen Theory theorists." Considering plastic arts, such as painting, sculpture, or diverse assemblages, the confluence with cinema can be based upon two opposite ideas, depending on whether these media share some visual properties or not. El Lissitzky criticized the cinema because it reduces 3D to 2D, but, involving the intertwining of arts in his artistic work, including not only painting, print, and sculpture but also drama, architecture, and the cinema, he conceived a special exhibition room, called *Screening Room* or *Demonstration Room*, in 1926 and 1927 at Dresden and Hannover. In "El Lissitzky's *Screening Rooms*," Olivia Crough studies this very interesting case of intermediality that constitutes neither a picture of something inspired by movies, nor an introduction to screens and film projections, but a transformation of the architectural space as it appears in museums and exhibition spaces. Crough considers this a new standard of spatiality through the model of the screen, which is here seen more as a material screen than as a surface of dematerialized projections. In the context of contemporary art screening it is not only a possible model but also an intentional goal. We stay within the confines of the museum with Raymond Bellour's "But Who Actually Watched Mark Lewis's Films at the Louvre?," the title of which refers to the exhibition of four of Mark Lewis's Films (*PYRAMID*, *CHILD WITH A SPINNING TOP*, *THE NIGHT GALLERY*, *IN SEARCH OF THE BLESSED RANIERI*), which were projected in a paradoxical place, a "non-place" if you will, in the sense of Pascal Augé.¹³ Because instead of being exhibited in a enclosed space, the projection took place in a transitional place at the Louvre Museum, where people walked and talked on their way to other exhibitions. Just a few seats and a few people and, at the same time, an aesthetic experience adding transitional views – "like wisps of smoke driven by an automatic energy," Bellour writes – to the transitional place where they appear, an intense experience of perception by

which the eye and the attention are constantly challenged, producing both perturbation and pleasure.

With the final part of the book, we enter a space for dialogue. Similarly, the essays are less focused on a unique problem, and more on a set of questions inspired by the shared interest of both interviewer and interviewee. The first dialogue is a conversation between Martine Beugnet and Annie van den Oever entitled “Gulliver Goes to the Movies: Screen Size, Scale, and Experiential Impact,” in which they reflect on the recent changes in viewing experiences in an attempt to show that shifts in scale and technology could possibly have a disturbing experiential impact on viewers. The dialogue’s title refers to Erkki Huhtamo’s concept of the “Gulliverization” of the screen, i.e., the dimensional variations of frame and representation, from miniaturization to gigantism.¹⁴ The human size provides a benchmark from which Lilliputian and giant devices and/or representations deviate, so that the question is both technological – considering, for example, the gap between the screens of smartphones and those of IMAX theaters – and aesthetical, insofar as it deals with *ostranenie*, the grotesque, the sublime, and similar values, but also with the distance and tactile issue. The haptic element, of course, immediately calls to mind the work by Laura U. Marks, the author of *The Skin of the Film*,¹⁵ whom we were delighted to have join us in conversation. Based on close-readings of her books, the dialogue, “The Skin and the Screen,” deals with the way the screen and the screening can be defined through the hypothesis of the skin, either literally (the film materiality) or metaphorically. We explore whether there is a difference between the skin of the screen and the skin of the film. Furthermore, we ask Marks how screen participates in the embodied experience of movies, and how the question of tactility can be considered from the viewpoint of the screen. These issues are also related to Frank Kessler’s thinking. We approached him because we think that, as far as we know, his *dispositif* theory is one of the most in-depth research on the topic to date. In the dialogue “The Screen and the Concept of *Dispositif*,” we ask whether the *dispositif* issue could be focused on the screen and screening. This question may be addressed using the definition of *dispositif*:¹⁶ what is the role of the screen in the *dispositif*? It may also be treated through a discussion involving the different approaches of *dispositif* (Foucault, Baudry, Metz). Another and more precise angle broaches the distinction of *appareil de base* and *dispositif*, leading the discussion to a terminological debate. Refining the discourse step by step, Kessler is able to deepen the theory of screen effects in movies and television. This contribution, among the others, shows the richness of the question of the screen and, at the same time, that it is still open.