

# Screens as Relational Thresholds in Human Experience

**Book Review of *Toward an Anthropology of Screens: Showing and Hiding, Exposing and Protecting* by Mauro Carbone and Graziano Lingua**

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*Toward an Anthropology of Screens* provides a deep anthropological and philosophical, as well as ethical and political reflection on our experience of screens, intended as interfaces mediating our relationships with the environment. More specifically, Mauro Carbone and Graziano Lingua aim to illustrate the crucial role that screens have played—and continue to play—in shaping human experience of the world. As we shall see in this review, this study on screens provides us with some effective conceptual tools for critically rethinking humanity in its constitutive processes.

Here, far from being able to exhaust the vastness and richness of the book, I will present those passages that I found particularly relevant to today's human and philosophical condition. I will first contextualise this operation by referring to the introduction, in which the authors outline the framework of their project. Then, I will delve into the five chapters composing the book. Finally, I will offer some personal reflections on the relevance of this work.

From the outset, the centrality of screens to human experience is emphasized. In this respect, the COVID-19 pandemic, which drastically forced human beings to retreat from in-person relationships, is seen as an important turning point. The authors describe the pandemic as a true *phenomenological epoché* that allowed human beings to socially experience unprecedented potentials and uses of screens. Indeed, the pandemic is regarded as an epochal occasion to deepen our understanding of screens and their impact on our lifeworld, making it possible to “relearn to see [them].”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, following the authors' arguments, to properly seize this epochal occasion, it is first necessary to understand how screens have always had the function of activating or preventing relationships, positioning themselves as founders of mediated experiences. In short, “rather than being mere surfaces, screens have always functioned as interfaces,”<sup>2</sup> which is why they should be conceived as “real operational thresholds,”<sup>3</sup> allowing different orders

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1 Mauro Carbone and Graziano Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens: Showing and Hiding, Exposing and Protecting* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 13.

2 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 4.

3 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 65; cf. Graziano Lingua, “Che cosa c'è di nuovo nell'immagine digitale?” *Vite digitali. Essere umani nella società del XXI secolo*, ed. Alessandro De Cesaris, (2020).

of our being in the world to communicate with each other.

From this perspective, it is therefore crucial to note that this feature is not intended by the authors to be exclusive to our digital devices. Rather, the *screen functions* of showing and hiding, protecting and exposing must be conceived from what they referred to as the *proto-screen*, meaning the human body itself. The body is the first medium with which human beings are endowed in their experience of the world, already potentially possessing those functions that will characterise the different historical variations of screens. In this respect, the text aims to conceive screens from their embodied roots, that is, conceiving them as an externalisation of the body's *screenic functions* in the form of prosthetic concretisations of corporeal potentials, opening new techno-aesthetic possibilities for humanity. This mainly implies grasping screens from the sensible texture of perception, thus inaugurating "a pragmatics of screen experiences"<sup>4</sup> structured according to a relational ontology. In this regard, they are rightly defined as *quasi-subjects*—a term proposed by the phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne<sup>5</sup>—meaning that, almost-independently from human subjects, they have the power to *express a world*.

Moving into the main body of the text, the reflection on screens starts according to its proper ontological scope, focusing on the notion of *arche-screen*. This notion forms the backbone of the second chapter, indicating the structuring principle of perceptual experience. In this respect, the notion of arche-screen refers to "a theme that never ceases to form and transform itself *with* and *through* its prehistorical and historical variations."<sup>6</sup> Building on this, the arche-screen is thus conceived as the *trans-historical and variable principle* of our experience, endowed with an epochal, metastable and differential power to distribute the visible and the invisible, as well as that of exposing and protecting human beings to the environment.

Therefore, particularly instructive in conceiving the structure of the arche-screen is the description of its functioning in shaping images in perceptual experience. In this regard, the authors consider Plato's allegory of the cave, providing an intriguing new interpretation. Deepening some reflections developed in Carbone's previous work *Philosophy-Screens*,<sup>7</sup> the platonic cave is described, following the notion of arche-screen, as a visual apparatus characterised by two screens: a *positive* one, which accommodates the shadows projected on it, and a *negative* one, namely the shapes that interpose between the light source and

4 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 11.

5 Mikel Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward Casey, Albert A. Anderson, Willis Domingo and Leon Jacobson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

6 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 18.

7 See Mauro Carbone, "Delimiting to Exceed: The Theme of the "Arche-Screen" Founding Itself with Its Variations," in *Philosophy-Screens: From Cinema to the Digital Revolution*, trans. Marta Nijhuis (New York: SUNY Press, 2019).

the positive screen. The positive one is then described as a *quasi-world* or an *infra-world*, on which the spectators can fertilise their desires, wanting “*to see themselves among the images on the cave walls.*”<sup>8</sup> Hence, the notion of arche-screen becomes the conceptual tool to describe a foundational perceptual and situated dimension of experience that refers as much to visual and embodied characteristics as to empathically connoted modes of participation in the environment, enabling the elaboration of an effective theory of desire.

With this theoretical framework established, the third chapter turns to a genealogical analysis of the historical variations of the arche-screen. Following a path that leads from the veil as the separator of the sacred dimension from the profane world in Jewish traditions to Alberti’s window and the solar microscope as modern viewing devices, the authors illustrate some peculiar screenic functions, effectively showing how screens are to be understood as *operational thresholds*.

In this perspective, the Jewish veil, separating the sacred and transcendent zone in the temple from the profane world of humans, is described as a peculiar historical concretization of the arche-screen. Sacredness and profanity for human experience are co-articulated by the boundaries drawn by the veil that interposes to the subjects’ gaze. In this regard, the veil isolates portions of space and thus makes them sacred. Therefore, the authors describe the Jewish veil according to its peculiar seductive features to explicate how *to screen* some parts of reality can mean sacralising them, that is, establishing privileged places that have the power to orient human experiences.

Another important historical variation of the arche-screen to highlight is Alberti’s window, as theorized in his treatise *De Pictura*.<sup>9</sup> The authors recognise in this visual apparatus the foundational elements of the first scopic regime of modernity. Through the window device, a new historical way of relating to the world is established: “The intersecting grid, surrounded by the frame, geometrifies reality, makes it calculable, and strips it of all magical and spiritual forces.”<sup>10</sup> Alberti’s visual device thus mediates between the artist’s gaze and the perceived world, producing through its geometrizing function a supposed “real space.” Hence, this geometrical space progressively imposes itself as the only real one, retroactively geometrizing and crystallising the very gaze of the observer: “*Through the medium of intersection, in fact, not only is the world exposed as “representation” to the gaze of the observers, but the observers themselves are constituted as such and as such are exposed to the world.*”<sup>11</sup> In this respect, Alberti’s window is seen as a variation of the

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8 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 36.

9 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Rocco Sinisgalli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

10 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 55.

11 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 56.

arche-screen decisive in establishing the modern regime of knowledge centred on the mathematisation and rationalisation of nature, providing modernity with the conceptual and visual tools to experience control and mastery over reality.

The genealogical analysis conducted in this chapter, irreducible to the two examples that I brought up, thus becomes the occasion of acknowledging some key attributes that have shaped screens' evolution, with an emphasis on those that remain relevant in their contemporary forms. In this regard, Carbone and Lingua significantly posit that screens embody a *truth-value*, whether scientific or religious, according to a seduction strategy hinged on their screenic functions.

Consequently, in the following chapter what is at stake is the debate concerning the relationship between images and words in the age of digital screens. To examine this issue, the authors present a telling investigation concerning the interrelation of these two elements in Christian culture under the rule of Gregory the Great:

In short, images are like a book for those with no special cultural skills, and in them the word finds a screen on which to 'project' and give concrete form to its contents. On the other hand, however, the image needs the spoken or written word, for only in this way can it emerge from the indeterminacy to which its polysemic nature condemns it.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, through this historical analysis, images and words, rather than being understood as opposing and irreconcilable modes of expression, are conceived in their co-implication, as epochally co-structuring regimes of visibility and speakability, instituting representations of reality and society. For the authors, especially considering the increasing capacity of digital screens to coordinate the relationship between them, it is therefore necessary to overcome the cultural war between images and words to fully understand their *screenic* co-implication and their effects on the constitution of the representation of reality.

Then, following this same path and deepening this analysis toward the structuring of our contemporary reality, the authors raise the crucial question concerning the *dual nature* of digital objects. Referring effectively to the study of Frieder Nake,<sup>13</sup> screens are mainly characterised both in terms of their *surface*—the way they appear to users—and their *subface*—their underlying algorithmic structure. In this respect, while the subface of digital images is their actual algorithm, their surface “allows us to interact with the

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12 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 87.

13 See Frieder Nake, “Surface, Interface, Subface: Three Cases of Interaction and One Concept,” in *Paradoxes of Interactivity: Perspectives for Media Theory, Human-Computer Interaction and Artistic Investigations*, ed. Uwe Seifert, Jin Hyun Kim, and Anthony Moore (Transcript Verlag, 2008).

machine without necessarily knowing the written code,”<sup>14</sup> helping to generate “the illusion that digital environments are capable of producing disintermediation on the social and political fronts.”<sup>15</sup> This essentially implies a primacy of what screens make visible over their proper technical structure, fuelling a naive sense of immediacy and transparency.

The elements discussed in this chapter thus lead the authors to properly consider the question of ideology as it is structured in our current society.

In this sense, built on the myth of transparency and the proliferation of digital devices, the authors denounce what they call the *Ideology of Transparency 2.0*, an ideology fostering an illusory sense of social disintermediation and consequently driving a growing obsession with visibility. Indeed, according to this conception, what is socially visible is immediately equated with truth, while what is hidden is assumed to be falsehoods and lies. In this regard, the analysis of Dave Eggers’s novel *The Circle* that the authors developed is emblematic, as it exemplifies the potential motto of the Ideology of Transparency 2.0: “Secrets are lies.”<sup>16</sup>

Carbone and Lingua criticise this ideology particularly being the ground of certain contemporary political projects of e-democracy, which emphasize transparency, visibility, and disintermediation as fundamental political values. In their perspective, if such political projects are meant to create a system of complete participation and full awareness on the part of voters and citizens, conversely, they risk “reducing participation to a passive form of spectatorship that erodes the propositional capacity and active role of citizens.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as the authors powerfully remind us, the digital devices that sustain and ground Transparency 2.0 are intrinsically programmed according to choices that direct their use. From this perspective, citizens/users are seen as more or less consciously participating in the structuring of a *reticular Panopticon*—as conceptualised by Byung-Chul Han<sup>18</sup>—which, given the progressive multiplication of digital devices, offers an increasingly vast array of opportunities for controlling, monitoring, and surveilling everyday human and non-human life.

The structural and endemic pervasiveness of digital devices is then further explored in the sixth chapter, starting with the elaboration of the notion of *quasi-prosthesis*—implying a fundamental rethinking of corporeality concerning new digital technologies—followed

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14 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 97.

15 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 98.

16 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 112; Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (London: Penguin, 2014), 303.

17 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 116.

18 Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 46.

by the analysis of the notion of *dividual*—fundamentally paving the way for an ethical reconsideration of our relationships within the technological system in its complexity.

For the authors, the notion of quasi-prostheses indicates how “certain *organs of our body* (the retinas or the skin, for instance) [are used] as *additional components of technological (more precisely digital) artifacts*.”<sup>19</sup> Hence, this notion shows how some parts of the human body are progressively becoming an integral part of the functioning of digital technologies (such as *Google Glasses*, which are equipped with a projector that uses the retina as a screen upon which to direct its beam). In this regard, the term “quasi” is significantly employed to describe a condition in which the modern subject-object philosophical dichotomy is essentially challenged by digital technologies. Indeed, the “quasi” explicates the intrinsic entanglement of these two poles: the passivity of the object is inherently interwoven with the activity of the subject and vice versa, being ambiguous to identify an absolute origin of agentivity.<sup>20</sup> This chiasmatic intertwining between subjects and objects explicated by the term “quasi” plays a pivotal role in the philosophical reflection concerning technical objects, providing the conceptual means to introduce what the authors define as our *dividual condition*.

The notion of *dividual* is then discussed in the context of our increasingly pervasive technological and screenic experience of the world and the consequent partitioning of our perception and our personal and social identity. In this perspective, the modern notion of individual is denounced as not being able to account for the experiences that are provoked and fostered by today’s technologies. Following this argument, the notion of *dividual* is first presented by referring to Deleuze’s article *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, namely, according to a negative connotation of this term, aimed at denouncing that capitalism of control that exploits the partitioning of individualities for economic and political purposes.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, to explore the full scope of the notion, the authors present an instead positive interpretation of *dividuality*, as exemplary put forth by Michaela Ott,<sup>22</sup> which could effectively help us better deal with our existential contemporary condition. Indeed, this notion offers an opportunity to rethink *relations* as the ground

19 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 137.

20 In this respect, a reference to the Merleau-Pontian assertion that philosophy must address the “passivity of our activity” can be noticed. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 221. It is worth mentioning that this line of reflection constitutes a significant theme in Carbone’s philosophical work; see Mauro Carbone, *An Unprecedented Deformation: Marcel Proust and the Sensible Ideas*, trans. Niall Keane (New York: Suny Press, 2018), 17; Mauro Carbone, *The Flesh of Images. Merleau-Ponty between Painting and Cinema*, trans. Marta Nijhuis (New York: Suny Press, 2015), 39.

21 Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” trans. Martin Joughin. *October* 59 (1992), 5.

22 Michaela Ott, “Dividual Subjectivations in the Society of Control,” *Coils of the Serpent* 5 (2017): 165.

of our interactions with others, the world, and ourselves, helping us move beyond the substantialist ontology inherent in the modern ideology of individuality. Considering our *dividual condition* is thus the opportunity to explicate a relational ontological ground concealed by modernity to rethink the metastable roots of our very individualities, providing a fruitful basis for developing more effective countermeasures to the dominant socio-technical system. Therefore, this operation enables us to find *lines of flight* from the dominant system, helping structure what the authors indicate as “a phenomenology of the emerging experiences of dividual relationality.”<sup>23</sup>

In conclusion, through its chapters, this book leads us to reconsider screens as *apparatuses of action*, unmasking their ideological and socio-political function. They are “capable of globally orienting our social interactions and radically reconfiguring our relationship with the spaces, near and far, to which we relate.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, as we have seen at the beginning, they are conceived as externalisations of primordial bodily functions, which is why, thanks to this book, the debate on digital screens turns out to be radically refocused on the bodily relationship we have with them. As the authors exemplarily point out concerning the debate on screen time: “The idea of responsible screen use cannot, therefore, be exhausted in setting a dedicated time for it but rather refers back to the quality of the lifestyles with which we relate to screens.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it is in this same direction that, proposing a *pragmatics of screen experience*, the authors critically state: “We need to focus not so much on the *objects* as on the *functions* that come into play in our screen experiences,”<sup>26</sup> namely, on the relationship we have with and through them.

In this regard, the book suggests a pragmatic understanding of screens, based on a dividual, and therefore relational and phenomenological ontology. In my view, this essentially means conceiving screenic functions as being embodied into their sensible, expressive and material structures, thus paradoxically preventing any *merely functionalist* understanding of their complete mode of being. Indeed, a purely functionalist approach—tending to reduce screens to their current and socially normative functions—may not be prepared to embrace other historical variations of the arche-screen and its functions. In this respect, it is worth repeating that considering screens following the authors theoretical operation means conceiving them as *quasi-subjects*, namely, according to their implicit functionalities and irreducible expressiveness with respect to human experience.

*Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, as well as being an enjoyable and rich read, makes a significant contribution to an ontological rehabilitation of our embodied experience of

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23 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 156.

24 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 162.

25 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 165.

26 Carbone and Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens*, 165.

screens. Considering them in their functions, the authors fruitfully and critically present their instituting and relational role in human life. This means, on one hand, to individuate and denounce their negative effects on society and human beings and, on the other, to recognize their beneficial implications for identifying and managing otherwise unsolvable problems (especially concerning the progressive complexification of our contemporary societies). In Stiegler's terms, they are thus seen as *pharmaka*—both poison and cure for the individual and collective issues of modernity—becoming the very spaces in which emancipation from the psycho-social power they embody becomes possible.

Finally, far from pre-emptively adopting a technophobic or techno-enthusiastic stance, the authors embrace Gilbert Simondon's philosophical posture, advocating for the urgent reintegration of screens into human culture and social life. In this sense, this powerful book incites and accompanies the readers in a profound reflection on digital technologies we surround and endow ourselves with, helping us both to understand who we are becoming through and among them, and to orient the search for a never-conclusive definition of what reality is. Therefore, the reflection the authors provide encourages us to recognize the intimate technological and screenic interconnections between ourselves and the world, helping us to shed light on the sensible and technical dimensions in which both we and our screens are primitively rooted.

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