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The deep time of the screen, and its forgotten etymology

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ABSTRACT

While "screen" is usually considered a word with a Nordic origin, its older and forgotten classical root shows that its semantic field is more curious than media archaeology commonly thinks. Above all, this proves the existence of a long-lasting connection between the screen and the act of seeing, and the very notion of spectacle in its broader sense. Such a different—Latin, Epicurean—etymology of "screen" can put the idea of separation at the heart of the concept of spectacle. From this perspective, the value of a spectacle stems from a vision of difference—the act of spectating being both detached and detaching, as it enables the spectators to take themselves out of the picture, and thus to draw a morale from what they regard as other than themselves. If we bring this understanding of "screen" to the field of film theory, we deal with an idea of experience that has less to do with the notion of engagement adopted by contemporary approaches focusing on affect, emotion, cognition (and neuroscience), and more to do with the disengagement of the spectator from whatever is represented, and even more to do with the added value that such disengagement brings forth.

Expanding the history of screen practice

The screen has been, often and also recently, a privileged object of inquiry in the field of media archaeology. Erkki Huhtamo (2004) even suggested the phrase "screenology",[1] to designate a branch of archaeological studies that has proven itself capable, so far, of generating a lively, erudite, and stimulating debate. These efforts stem from a widespread critical concern, which calls into question the tendency to regard the screen as a transparent object. Studies in screenology aim precisely to make screens visible once again, and do so by addressing their materiality, but also their role and usage in mediating perception, i.e. the function they imply now and have indeed implied throughout history.

This essay intends to contribute to this debate by taking a slightly unusual approach. The screens I consider here are of a different ilk from those usually addressed by scholars of screen studies. In order to re-frame some of the questions being currently discussed in the field, I focus on a few examples that are, perhaps, atypical representatives of what we currently understand as "screen". Here, in fact, I do not address the cinematic apparatus, nor—strictly speaking—the film screen as such. Rather, I turn back to a couple of (very) pre-cinematic episodes that I find particularly revealing in terms of our understanding of the whole concept—our understanding, that is, of what a spectacular experience mediated and enabled by a screen entails.

If we really want to place the cinema in the "larger context" of what Charles Musser (1984) suggests we should call "the history of screen practice", then this context should be kept as large as possible. Musser traces the origins of screen practice back to the mid-seventeenth century, and specifically to the work of Athanasius Kircher. I propose to go back even further, and precisely to the late thirteenth century, when the first known instances of the term "screen" (and its equivalents in other languages) appeared, at least in writing. Indeed, the first episode I consider involves a living screen—by which I mean, literally, someone's body. It is, in fact, the body of the *screen lady* described by Dante in his little book *Vita Nova* (*The New Life*), written in the 1290s. Nor do I stop there. The search for a new etymology, or—rather—the rediscovery of a lost etymology, one that involves the Latin verb *cernere*, as I discuss later, points even further back, to the first century BCE: much earlier than either the word "screen" or its media acceptation are usually dated in all the main historical dictionaries, including the *OED*. Respectively fourteen and nineteen centuries before [fig. 1].

The extent of this time-span serves to justify the title of this article. The phrase "deep time" refers to the growing interest of media archaeologists and theorists in wider, "geological" time scales (e.g. Zielinski 2006; Peters 2015; Parikka 2015). That said, however, it is worth pointing out that my understanding of "deep time" is mostly metaphorical, as the term
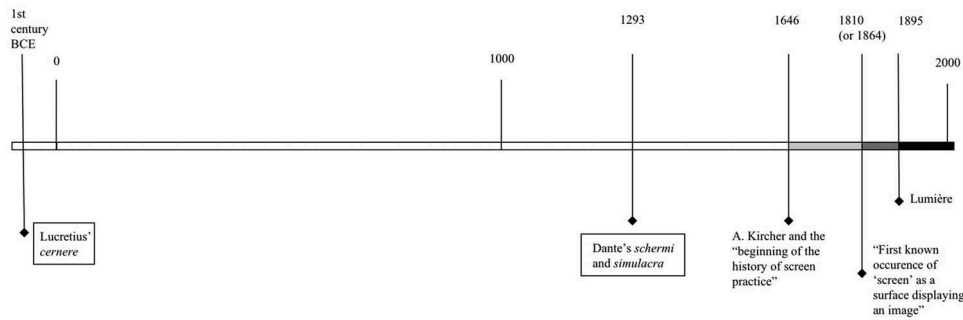
Figure 1.

here is only meant to imply a timeline longer than the one usually considered. Put otherwise, my main concern here is not—as it is, e.g. in a 2015 article by Mitchell—to sketch a palaeontology of the screen, intriguing though that idea might be. Rather, my aim is to pursue a more comprehensive approach, and, indeed, a sense of historical depth: I intend to retrace some deep and ancient strata of meaning, and some practices and values related to the screen that media historians have occasionally neglected.

In my pursuit of such "geological" depth, however, I do not claim exhaustiveness. I am, for example, entirely aware of the limited scope of my insight, which remains (also due to its linguistic focus) exclusively concerned with Western visual culture—even though, as is well known, Arab mediation played a fundamental role in defining the tradition of seeing and representing in European modernity, and indeed already in Dante's times (see Belting 2011). Nor do I follow a systematic, wholly consistent method. This investigation is, by necessity, fragmentary, and only capable of proceeding cautiously, as it were, through speculation.

Perhaps better: through hypothesis and falsification. In trying to resist too narrow a focus, one that sees the screen solely as the outcome of a modern phenomenon, I aim to recognise the wider historical reach of the concept, and push the debate well beyond the self-imposed brackets which—at times—seem to constrain it. In line with the spirit of media archaeology, the aim of this article is to call into question, and try to refute, some discontinuities routinely assumed by most histories of the screen.

Such discontinuities can be divided into two fundamental categories. In the first case, a *semantic* shift is assumed. Scholars who endorse this view stipulate that, in the recent past, the concept of the screen has acquired a meaning that is vastly *different* from that which it had for centuries. The second case depends on a more *etymological* discontinuity, as historians claim that the word "screen" in itself is relatively *young*, and cannot be traced back to any classical root.

As one can imagine, taking these discontinuities for granted has consequences, and it may even lead to radically reducing the complexity that marks the cultural history of the screen. While such a reduction can be useful, from a heuristic perspective, here I prefer to take the opposite direction, and pursue both depth and complexity, with no pretension of drawing a conclusive picture, but with hopes of sketching at least a rough outline, whose full contents remain, by necessity, out of focus.

What is at stake is not only the accuracy of a cultural genealogy. I believe that an archaeological approach, paired with the sort of etymological reflections I suggest here, might pave the way to something more: namely, a review of current theories of media and of aesthetic experience, including those concerning the cinematic apparatus. Such a critical review I outline at the end of this article, if only tentatively and without much detail, given the obvious constraints. What I hope to achieve, prospectively, is a redefinition of what is specific about the screenic experience, considered across the spectrum of its manifestations in different arts and spectacular contexts, though of course, my main ambition is to say something about cinema, especially in relation to our contemporary mediascape.

In this sense, my proposal could also be seen as tentatively polemic towards other current approaches. My assumption, which I postulate here, even though it shall be clearer at the end, is that three elements ought to be considered when searching for the specificity of the screenic experience. The first two have to do with a) the sense of sight and b) the interrelated concepts of separation, discrimination, distance, difference. However, as I will argue in the final pages of this article, it is the intimate overlapping of those two first elements what confers this experience its specific character. What marks the screenic experience, in other words, is c) the sight of a difference/distance: the vision, or even the visual awareness in the subject who enjoys the spectacle, of the distinction between spectatorship and representation, with all the connotations and values that such a distinction entails. Indeed, it is precisely those values and connotations that the "true" etymology of the term "screen" appears to reveal, for it designates a physical item as much as it does *a set of practices*. If my proposed

derivation from the Latin verb *cernere* is correct, at the etymological core of the phrase is not a material object, but rather a particular, spectacular mode of relation with the world, a bundle of field lines, a setup, be it material, spatial or ideal.

The question of meaning(s)

What sense, or, rather, what multiple senses lie within the concept of a screen? Genealogical reconstructions in media archaeology have repeatedly pointed out that the meaning of "surface for presenting images" came to be attached to the concept of screen only late in the course of its history, around the first half of the nineteenth century, following the spread of a number of optical devices, designed for entertainment, that relied on projection. Yet, as we are told, the original use of the word had less to do with entertainment, and more—in fact, *exclusively*—to do with notions of concealment and protection. Most scholars appear to agree on this point. In fact, this particular semantic explanation has become something of a rhetorical topos in the literature, see, e.g. Huhtamo (2004, 2016), Strauven (2012), Elsaesser and Hagener (2015, 42), Casetti (2015, 157), Pinotti and Somaini (2016, 142), Chateau and Moure 2016b, 14).

According to these and many other recent accounts in the fields of media and visual culture, then, it is only relatively late that the word "screen" acquired the meaning of "displaying something, making something visible", thus displacing the previous, more or less "opposite" (Elsaesser and Hagener 2015, 42) usage of the term, which related more to hiding, protecting, and blocking. In short, proponents of this view suggest that the term underwent a sort of semantic evolution, if not a proper reversal.

Now, I would like to suggest that this distinction between two different orders of meaning should not be taken for granted. While all these different denotations are indeed related to the term we are investigating, I believe, and here I try to demonstrate, that these two orders of meaning are, to begin with, different, but not incompatible, and that we should not consider the mid-nineteenth century as a watershed, that is to say, as a "point of diffraction" leading to a radical semantic shift for the word "screen".

To the extent that a political agenda can be ascribed to media archaeology, the questioning of perceived epistemic discontinuities ought to be seen as one of its primary items, with the aim of curbing the enthusiasms that may arise, perhaps too hastily, in response to assumptive and under-scrutinised epochal shifts. From this perspective, the present intervention falls squarely within the purview of media archaeology. Indeed, my intention is to set aside an outdated (though not entirely mistaken in either form or substance) rhetoric of novelty, according to which the screen in its current understanding belongs uniquely to the contemporary age.

To be clear, I do not propose to dismiss all other readings of the term, nor do I think that "screen" always meant the same thing throughout time. Yet, if any ideological agenda—as it inevitably happens—can be found to inform this article at all, it is perhaps the belief in a deep, long-lasting *connection between the screen and the act of seeing*, which in turn leads me to affirm an intimate *complicity between the screen and the notion of spectacle* in its broader sense[2]—the precise nature of which I discuss later in this article.

The current meaning of the term—as we are often led to assume, or indeed explicitly told—is inextricably linked to the spread of new visual media in the nineteenth century. That is to say, it is linked to the diffusion, in modern times, of optical technologies of various kinds, lensed and projective apparatuses, "devices of wonder" (Stafford and Terpak 2001), and new visual spectacles—i.e. what has also been called "early media" (Parikka 2012, 19). Could it be, however, that such an account be flawed, undermined by what amounts to a (pre)cinematic bias? Could there be a hint of partiality, of teleological thinking? Put otherwise: is it possible that the supposed opening act in the history of screens might not be the opening act at all? Let us be clear: as far the usage, the spread and the meaning of the term, both the nineteenth century and the emergence of early media devices played a key role. That is beyond any doubt. The insisted recurrence of these historical claims, however, pushes us almost irresistibly to verify—falsify, if possible—their underlying assumptions, and call into question the dominant view of history.

Dante's contribution to an archaeology of the screen

In the history of the term "screen", concealment and showing have *coexisted* since the beginning. I discussed some of these intersections between showing and concealing elsewhere, if briefly, and so did Carbone (2016), whose convincing arguments occasionally overlap with mine. To be sure, the word "screen" was, for centuries, mainly used to denote protection, separation and concealment. Alongside those meanings, however, the word was *also*—if occasionally—used to express the sense of "showing", i.e. in relation to representation and monstration, as illustrated by an example dating as far back as seven centuries ago, when Dante first used the term *schermo* in his book *Vita Nova*.

Incidentally, Dante was not the only writer to use the phrase in the thirteenth century, when Italian literature emerged from its Medieval Latin cradle as a distinct tradition. *Schermo*, though not a very

commonly used word, can be found in several other authors of the time: Petrarch, Guittone d'Arezzo, Jacopone da Todi, Brunetto Latini (Dante's master), Cecco d'Ascoli and Cecco Angiolieri (see Colussi 1991, 61–62). And Dante does not use the word just in *Vita Nova*; he also uses it a few times in his major work, the *Commedia* (1304–21).

Both there and elsewhere, Dante uses the term with the meaning that was most common and established at the time. Battaglia's *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* provides the following definition for *schermo*: "that which is used to cover or shelter someone or something from external agents, inclement weather, or harmful factors, to hide it from view: cover, shelter", and also, figuratively, as "that which is used to combat or avoid a negative circumstance, a difficult, damaging or unpleasant situation."

In terms of the established use in Dante's times, however, Battaglia's reference to the context of seeing (the screen as something that covers or shelters from view) seems already metaphorical. In the *Commedia, schermo* usually has a more concrete and material sense—screens are, for example, the defences constructed by the Paduans along the river Brenta, and by the Flemish at Wissant and Bruges, to protect the waterfront (*Inf.* XVI, 4–8). But *schermi* are also the attacks, the fencing moves performed by the devil Malacoda and his companions, who, armed with threatening hooks, try to prevent Dante and Virgil from continuing on their infernal path (*Inf.* XXI, 79–81). Not by chance, as it is well known, *schermo* is closely related to *scherma*, fencing.

On closer inspection, however, these last two examples already show that a more complex matrix of meanings is at work, even when Dante sticks to the common usage of *schermo*. The point did not escape the attention of contemporaneous readers. Writing in Latin around 1328, just a few years after the redaction of the *Commedia*, Guido da Pisa noted:

> The author uses a single Germanic word, *schermo*, in fact implying two different meanings, that is defence and offence. This word *schermo* comes from the military art that is called *schermire*. And indeed, the act of the military *schermire* comprises two opposite gestures, defence and offence, because with one hand or one gesture a man defends himself, and with another hand or gesture he hits or attacks the opponent.[3]

In passing, it should be noted that Guido too believes in the German, non-classical origin of the term. I am less convinced by this etymology, now commonly accepted by all commentators, for reasons that I explain later on. For now, however, I only wish to point out the interesting fact that, in his comments, Guido describes already (with a certain surprise) a double meaning embedded in the term *schermo*,

its semantic split between defence and offence. Even in the *Commedia* we thus find two "opposite" meanings conflated in one word: a curious ambivalence indeed, though not quite the one that interests me here.

Before the *Commedia*, in fact, the term is firstly and more famously used by Dante in *Vita Nova*. Even if the exact textual passages are not as renowned as others, the phrase "screen lady", *donna schermo* or *donna dello schermo*, is widely known, immediately recognisable to every high school student in Italy.

Vita Nova is the earliest work by Dante, written around 1293, when he was in his late twenties; it is a sort of autobiographical novel set in Florence—and the first novel of Italian literature—including both prose and verse recounting the author's love for a local woman named Beatrice. A few passages of *Vita Nova* are especially relevant when looking at the archaeology of the screen and at the history of its practices.

As the rules of courtly love demanded, the identity of the beloved woman had to remain secret. In Andreas Capellanus' *De Amore*, written at the end of the twelfth century, a maxim summarizes the precept as *Amor raro consuevit durare vulgatus*: "when made public, love rarely endures." Therefore, the woman's identity had to be concealed from the audience, either by changing her name (as with the *senhal* in troubadour poetry) or, as with Dante's screen lady, by pretending that the poet's love was directed towards another woman, i.e. by using another woman as a screen, behind which the poet's real feelings could hide. We, as readers, know that Dante is in love with Beatrice, while Dante's fellow citizens do not and should not.

Chapter V of *Vita Nova* describes, with ample detail, a spectacular setup consisting of an enclosed space, an observer and an observee, straight lines of sight, an audience and a (living) *screen*. Put otherwise, Dante carefully arranges a system of subjects, objects, spaces, partitions, lines, sights, attention and belief—in short, everything one needs to constitute an actual apparatus of vision:

> It happened one day that this most gracious of women [Beatrice] was sitting in a place where words about the Queen of Glory were being listened to [a church], and I was positioned in such a way that I saw my beatitude. And in the middle of a direct line between her and me was seated a gracious and very attractive woman who kept looking at me wondering about my gaze, which seemed to rest on her. Many people were aware of her looking, and so much attention was being paid to it that, as I was leaving the place, I heard people saying, 'Look at the state he is in over that woman.' And hearing her name I understood they were talking about the woman who had been situated midpoint in the straight line that proceeded

from the most gracious lady, Beatrice, and reached its end in my eyes. Then I felt relieved, confident my secret had not been betrayed that day by my appearance. And immediately I thought of using the gracious woman as a screen for the truth, and I made such a show over it in a short amount of time that most people who talked about me thought they knew my secret. I concealed myself by means of this woman for a number of years and months […].[4]

Here the screen appears already to be part of an apparatus whose function, in a way, is to produce a *public spectacle*. Nor is this a detail of secondary importance: it shows that the screen had a role outside the private sphere, and into the "world of public entertainment", much earlier than it is usually claimed (see Huhtamo 2004, 2016).

The screen, hiding the truth "for this great love of mine", is what the majority must see, to prevent them from gazing at what Dante is really interested in—Beatrice—and to direct their attention elsewhere, i.e. to make them believe that they know what actually remains a secret. It is a defensive, concealing device, but it serves that purpose *also because* it enables representation, monstration: *tanto ne mostrai*, writes Dante—"I made such a *show* over it". It is one *and* the other, *at the same time*: it protects by showing something *different*.

Vita Nova is, after all, "a visual work", as Parronchi (1959) writes. Dante, in describing such a complex spectacular geometry, draws from the vocabulary of medieval geometrical optics, with words like *linea retta* ("straight line") and *terminare* ("reaching its end"). The insisted focus on eyes, sight and gazes also goes to demonstrate the optical streak of the novel. Indeed, many scholars explored this connection with geometrical optics, and Dante's possible sources have been the object of a complex debate (among others, Parronchi 1959; Boyde 1993; Gilson 2000; Akbari 2012). Throughout all his work, and above all in the *Convivio* and in the *Commedia*, the poet showed an awareness of all the key *quaestiones* of medieval optics: issues regarding direct, reflected, and refracted vision, perception of light and colour, errors of perception and so forth.

Theories of vision have often had philosophical connotations, and that is true both in medieval treatises and in Dante's *Commedia*: light is a figure of divine truth, and there is a correspondence between the laws of vision, as those concerning radiation, and ethical or theological laws. *Vita Nova*, however, stands at a crossroads between the sacred and the profane. Scholars such as Tarud Bettini (2013) note how, already before Dante, the vocabulary of medieval optics had been appropriated by Italian love poetry throughout the thirteenth century—in Tuscany but also in Sicily. Nor should this come as

a surprise: poets such as Guido Cavalcanti were, for all extents and purposes, accomplished intellectuals, who had read Alhazen, knew about theories of phantasy, and about the intromission and the extramission of the "rays of vision". From this body of knowledge, with its problems, images, and its specific vocabulary, these writers derived a poetic language that entailed, as Bruno Nardi (1945) puts it, a veritable "philosophy of love". This explains why love, in Stilnovistic poetry, may sometimes resemble a fight, a battle, with gazes crossing spaces like arrows or darts—what has been called a "ballistic" of vision (Parronchi 1959, 22).

The poetical legacy of medieval optics thus exerts a strong impact on the *Vita Nova*. Indeed, in the excerpt above another scientific term appears: *mezzo*. The screen lady is literally the midpoint, the median, the medium, *colei che mezzo era stata*—literally: "she who medium had been". According to Dante's description, the medium, i.e. the screen (lady), is thus a device primarily of protection and separation, but also of *illusory, deceptive representation*. In describing the functions of the screen, then, Dante borrows at least another optical term: *simulacra*. The phrase can be found a few chapters later, after Beatrice's refusal to greet Dante on the street—an episode recounted in chapter X—due to the circulation of too many rumours about his relationship with the screen lady. The object of those rumours is, in fact, a second screen lady, who becomes the recipient of Dante's *simulato amore*—literally: "simulated love"—after the first one leaves Florence. The goal, again, is to protect the true (and sacred) recipient of the poet's real feelings. And once more, it should be noted, simulation involves both concealment and showing. Beatrice's coldness plunges Dante into despair, until, at last, in chapter XII, Love appears to him as a young man dressed in white, advising him to finally let the true object of his love be known, as he commands to him in Latin: *Fili mi, tempus est ut pretermictantur simulacra nostra*—"My son, it is time for our false images [our simulations] to be put aside." The *simulacra nostra*, our simulations, or false images, are indeed the screen ladies, or rather the false feelings that—through them—the author had striven to project. In Dante, the screen is therefore *already*, explicitly if not always literally, *a screen of images*.

As I mentioned above, *simulacra* is another term derived from medieval optics. *Simulacrum* is indeed one of the many synonyms of *species*—together with *imago, forma, idolum, fantasma, impressio…*—employed in the theory of the "multiplication of species", articulated by Roger Bacon (ca. 1260) but widely known among other medieval thinkers (cf. Denery 2005). According to this theory, visual cogni-

tion happens through the mediation (or manifestation) of forms and colours ("species") radiating along straight lines, which in turn depart from a source ("agent"). Species—*simulacra*—are similar in nature to the agent; indeed, they are an emanation of the agent, but they are *not* the agent. Albertus Magnus, one of Dante's most probable sources, also uses *simulacrum* (along with words such as *terminare, linea recta*), though in his understanding the word refers to the reflected form of something, like the image one sees in a mirror. In both cases—direct emanation or reflection—the language of these medieval perspectivists implies both similarity and difference between the *simulacrum* and the agent.

What is new in Dante's use of the word is that *simulacra*—the images—are not really linked to the agent, i.e. to the object they stand for: the screen ladies are neither a reflection nor an emanation of Beatrice. The "straight line" does originate from Beatrice, it does reach its end in Dante's eyes, as the text says, yet the *simulacra* are managed, controlled, and in a sense produced or projected, not by Beatrice, the source, but rather by the other subject in the setup, Dante, who is positioned at the opposite end of the line, while the "medium" itself remains, aptly, in the middle. Put otherwise: it is Dante who produces, manages and manipulates the images—the *simulacra*—to ensure that they serve his intended purpose. And, eventually, it is Dante himself who has to interrupt the simulation.

Here, I believe, the medieval perspective is turning into something radically different. Behind Dante's model lies no longer just a theory of *perception*, of visual cognition: rather, Dante is sketching what appears to be a theory of *representation*. He is, in other words, foreshadowing another semantic shift, that of the word "perspective", from the science of vision (*perspectiva naturalis*) to science or art of figuration (*perspectiva artificialis*), which would happen in the same city of Florence 100 years later. Dante's screen interrupts a bundle of straight lines of sight much in the same way as Alberti's linear perspective would later require the *intersection* of straight lines with a picture plane.[5] In both cases, *fiction* is produced thanks to the interposition of something (or someone) between subject and object of vision—a table, a screen.

The screen, in Dante's *Vita Nova*, is thus linked to concealment as much as it is to showing, which is to say to the exhibition of (false) images: though admittedly the *donna schermo* can be construed as an image only in a particular metaphorical sense, one that also falls firmly within the traditional sense of "protection", which, as said above, was dominant at the time of Dante's writing. The screen lady prevents others from seeing something, and does so precisely by showing them something different. Dante's use of the phrase in the *Vita Nova*, however, remains strikingly figurative, and undeniably suggestive. It may be precisely this more abstract understanding of "screen" (as opposed to its more concrete use in the *Commedia*) and the emphasis on the sense of sight what enable the main two functions of protection and representation to be later superposed. It also seems possible to suggest that something of the twofold connotation attached to the "fencing" origin of the word *schermo*—i.e. the interplay of defence and offence mentioned earlier by Guido da Pisa—might be already at work in Dante's strategic description of the screen lady.

I have argued so far that Italian love poetry borrowed the vocabulary of geometrical optics, with some of its philosophical and theological connotations. During the same time, the rules of courtly love, as they became literary material, demanded a particular spectacular geometry to keep the beloved woman's identity a secret. The need thus arose for an apparatus that could conceal something (from the rays of sight) while at the same time producing a fiction. The screen is that apparatus. As a machine, the screen makes it possible to handle this complex setup: it conceals and yet shows, allowing to feign, to simulate, to project images in a public context—and all that already in early Dante, at the infancy of screen practices.

Infancy, I said: but not, I believe, the absolute beginning. Indeed, it might be more appropriate to consider Dante's spectacular setup as just one seminal moment: it involves a very early occurrence of the term "screen", a representational "surface", a medium, and a visual context ripe with optical terms and images. As far as the chronology is concerned, however, Dante's model is certainly not the first, and I do intend to move even further back in time. That said, primacy itself is not necessarily my main concern, here. What interests me, rather, is to find occurrences far apart from each other, or, in fact, *re*currences, to understand how they might have sedimented over time. Perhaps the screen (as a device, be it material or ideal) could be seen as a topos—one of those motifs in media culture whose trajectories and transformations, according to Huhtamo (2011), media archaeology should try to trace, avoiding any and all teleologies. Rather than focusing on chronologies, then, I believe Dante's screen can offer a heuristic point of reference for all archaeologies investigating projection devices and devices to direct attention, not unlike Plato's model in Baudry's (1970) discussion of the cinematic apparatus. As in Plato's case, moreover, Dante's screen raises the question of the "spectacular" role of misrecognition, or even deceit and manipulation. Such a question, which here I do not explore any further, has often been

a point of interest for art and film theorists, including theorists of the apparatus in its broader sense, as in the case, for example, of Althusser's (1970) argument about ideological state apparatuses. Setting that aside, however, Dante's example can certainly serve to disprove the claims that, for centuries, the concept of "screen" had nothing in common with what it would later come to signify.

Focalizers of vision in the middle ages

It is curious to notice that Dante's model—the model of an apparatus—describes what is, in reality, the act of *profaning* another apparatus. I refer, of course, to the church, inside which gazes are exchanged and attention carefully directed, though neither gazes nor attention goes in the direction of the "Queen of Glory", whom the community is, at least nominally, gathered to worship. The sacred space, however, lends something of its sacredness to the other apparatus, Dante's screen, which in turn appropriates it in a quasi-blasphemous way.

It might be worth recalling here that, for centuries, the screen played a key—and in some ways almost cinematic—part in religious architecture (cf. Pugin 1851; Cox and Harvey 1908; Bond 1908; Bond and Camm 1909).[6] Across Europe, throughout the Middle Ages (and in Dante's Florence, in Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella) churches—Gothic churches in particular—featured internal gates, which consisted of partitions made of wood, stone or metal, often decorated and illustrated, mostly used (*in medio ecclesiae*) to separate the nave from the chorus (while others separated the apse-chapels from the transept).

These architectural elements, which replicated partitions typical of early Christian churches, were almost entirely removed and destroyed after the first half of the sixteenth century. This was due, in some areas, to the influence of Calvinist iconoclasm, and in some other areas to the effects of Counter-Reformation politics. Many of the screens that survived came under renewed attack in the nineteenth century, as the "ambonoclastic" (or antiscreen) critiques sought then to open up the space of the church, eliminating all partitions, so to facilitate churchgoers' participation—which, it was believed, the architectural screens impeded, by limiting freedom of movement and by blocking sight-lines.

The ambonoclastic appraisal was at least partially mistaken. The screen they so successfully opposed, variously called rood screen, *Schranke*, *jubé*, *tramezzo* (I return on the name later on), was, indeed, meant to regulate the movement of churchgoers, but—not unlike the iconostasis of Eastern Christianity (Constas 2006)—it also fulfilled a subtler theological necessity. As Jacqueline Jung (2013) effectively argued, such screens played a fundamental role in the symbolic architecture of the great Gothic cathedrals (and not only those). They constituted "permeable" thresholds, whose true purpose was *not* to exclude and hide from sight. On the contrary, they served to attract and direct the gaze, to "enhance" and "sharpen" vision. They established a sacred space—that of that altar—by detaching it from the rest, and they also served to regulate and mediate the observers' communication with that very space. Arches, windows, openings in the screen allowed the congregation to see through and, literally, frame what could be glimpsed beyond the screen: namely, and for the most part, the Elevation of the Host.

In Catholic liturgy, the ritual of Elevation celebrates the mystery of transubstantiation, whereby the substance of the sacramental bread is mystically transformed into the substance of the body of Jesus Christ. The presence of the screen during such ritual thus contributed to the impact of the mystery, as it distinguished two ontologically distinct spaces—divine and human, invisible and visible. The screen itself, on which a crucifix was often displayed, redoubled—so to speak—the duality intrinsic to the mystery, by offering an image of the divine in human form. Its surface, moreover, acted as a support for painted or engraved images, figural imagery, narrative and iconic programs dealing with the most important themes and mysteries of the Christian faith, such as the Incarnation, the Passion, and the Resurrection of Christ.

The screen in use within Gothic churches was thus part, again, of an apparatus, whose intended function was to control space, turn the congregation into an audience, and then direct their gaze towards the images represented on its surface, while also channelling the gaze beyond, by "framing" the "epiphanic" and "salvific" sight of the ritual taking place behind the gate. It seems clear, then, that a "screen experience" of sorts was an important part of the larger visual practices of medieval culture; a surviving legacy of its importance can be found—according to Jung—in the proclivity towards windows and frames inherited by Renaissance perspectival painters. What is more, even in this instance a screen serves to construct an apparatus whose purpose is to focus a gaze (functioning, in Jung's words, as a "monumental focalizer of vision"), to reveal by hiding, to make visible, to offer images, to frame, and to turn bystanders into spectators ("orchestrate the beholders' lines of sight and patterns of movement'). And again, this complex set-up pre-dates by various centuries the time when—according to the established view of screen studies—screens started serving these very purposes.

Interestingly, scholars of architecture and medieval art refer to these structures—and indeed have done so

for the past two centuries—with the English word "screens", albeit always with the caveat that this was not the term in use at the time, since other words such as "rood loft" or *Schranke* were preferred then (though the German word shares, at least in my view, the same root as the English term). As well as media archaeologists, even scholars who devote specific attention to screens in religious architecture often point out that the term "cannot claim any antiquity", and that, at the best, it can be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century (cf. Vallance 1936; Williams 2008).

While an analysis of the primary sources falls decidedly outside the scope of this article, I can nonetheless offer some evidence that appears to disprove such claims. Indeed, a number of exceptions allow us to shift the chronology back by at least a couple of centuries. A quick search on the most popular digital databases shows entries that attest how the term was used specifically in connection to churches—and thus in relation to the range of purposes I describe above —by the second decade of the eighteenth century, and even as far back as the 1680s (e.g. Dart 1723; Browne 1718; Keepe 1683). Aymer Vallance, who dates the emergence of the term to the seventeenth century, was even able to find an exceptional occurrence in the Churchwardens' Accounts of Heybridge, Essex, dated 1525.

This last occurrence, however, appears to be dubious: even though the accounts mention a payment "for carrying of the skreen in the cherche", they do not make clear whether the "skreen" in question is of the same type as those discussed above. This is worth mentioning, as it leads me towards the next step of my analysis, namely, the etymology of the word itself. In fact, for centuries, the word "screen" served to describe other objects as well: for example, specific elements inside particular architectural arrangements. In the Middle Ages, the walls (and the adjoining areas) of old English mansions that served to separate one of the short sides of the hall from the kitchen "were anciently called 'the screens'" (Willson 1825, 19; see also Turner 1851; Parker 1882). These structures or spaces were situated on the opposite end of the high table and the master's chair, and above them were often placed the so-called minstrels' gallery, where minstrels would perform (much in the same way, screens in churches were sometimes walkable, and could be used by singers and musicians).

The term "screen"—as might indeed be the case in the Churchwardens' Accounts—could also refer to a trunk, a casket: in short, a self-enclosed repository, a receptacle in which valuable things (money, jewels, books, letters, papers, and also prototypes of units of measure) were held. In that sense, the word could serve as a synonym for *scrinium*, which in itself denoted a piece of furniture central to the administration of medieval and early modern institutions, be they public, religious, commercial or political. In the *Report on the Deeds of King's Lynn*, for example, the author notes that "'on the scrinium', or 'on the skreen', or 'skrene', 'on the chest called the skrene' are the constant entries for centuries" (Harrod 1870, 29). With those formulas, the *scriniari* indicated entries, payments, taxes as they archived them in the iron-bound treasury box placed, in this case, in the hall of the local guild of merchants. A *scriniarius* was an accountant, or a chamberlain in charge of public accounts, which is to say, in charge of the chest of the treasury.[7]

The screen and its doubles

The patent link between "screen" and *scrinium* poses a cogent challenge to the accepted etymological explanation. According to most accounts (again, see e.g. Huhtamo 2004, 2016; Strauven 2012; Elsaesser and Hagener 2015, 42; Pinotti and Somaini 2016, 142; Chateau and Moure 2016a, 13–14; and the *OED*), in fact, the term "screen" cannot be traced back to any classical root, and yet *scrinium* is obviously a Latin word.

As anticipated, the issues facing an investigation of the concept of the screen from a "deep time" perspective appear to be of two, albeit interconnected kinds. A first problem lies in the intrinsic semantic duality of the term and, as I stated, in the fact that our established accounts assume that the current, "spectacular" meaning ought to be seen as chronologically distinct from the earlier sense of defence, and indeed as only emerging in relatively recent use. Secondly, the commonly accepted etymology appears to prevent any attempt of a deep time analysis by dismissing the possibility of a classical root, shortening, as it were, the linguistic genealogy of the word. And indeed, if "screen" was such a (relatively) young term, there would be little room for any meaningful consideration of deep time.

To be sure, most sources appear to validate precisely such claims. The main etymological dictionaries, as duly mentioned in all screenology studies, point alternatively to a Langobardic (*skirmjan*), Old High German (*Skrim*, *Skerm*) or Old French origin (*escrin*, *escren*). And indeed, there seem to be no nouns in either Latin or Greek that are similar to "screen" or *schermo*: no true equivalents in the strict sense of the phrase. There is no such word as *schermum* in classical Latin, though *scermum* is (rarely) attested in Medieval Latin, e.g. in a Venetian charter of maritime law dating back to 1255 (Predelli and Sacerdoti 1903) (70 years later, Guido da Pisa also attempted to translate Dante's *schermo* as *schermum*). Conversely, *schermo* is typically used in early Italian

to translate the classical Latin word *defensio*, which obviously has a different root.

Nor are there explicit mentions of screens in Plato's myth of the cave, traditionally regarded as a prototypical setup for spectacle, and yet missing precisely the term we would expect the most. Interestingly, Plato avoids naming the wall of the cave at all, in Book 7 of *Republic*, as he refers to "the part of the cave that lies opposite" the prisoners-spectators. If anything, the only real screen in the myth is the one that keeps the makers of the spectacle hidden from view: Plato calls it a *teichion*, often translated as "screen", though, again, the word clearly derives from a different root. This is not to say, of course, that *teichion* carries no spectacular implication at all: the epic trope of the "teichoscopy" comes to mind, which involves characters gazing from the top of the walls, from afar, as distant observers (e.g. in Book 3 of the *Iliad*, where Helen gazes from the walls of Troy).

I insist on this point for two reasons. First, as I summarised above, the assumed origin of the term carries implications that go beyond merely etymological concerns, and have an impact on the semantic history. Second, and despite all the lack of direct equivalents in Greek and Latin, I am not completely persuaded by the etymological explanations put forth by contemporary dictionaries. Most of them, including the *OED*, appear to presume a semantic distinction that is, in itself, entirely modern, as they distinguish between the meaning of words derived from *scrinium*—such as "scrine" and "shrine", for example—and the meaning of screen. Instead, the same root might actually apply to both: and it would be, indeed, a classical, Latin root, albeit a forgotten one. I am suggesting to follow this path based on similar readings of the two terms already proposed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[8] Both the screen and the *scrinium* separate objects and spaces[9]: they can both derive in fact from *secernere* (or *excernere*), to set apart, distinguish, separate,[10] or even from *cernere*, which, even without the prefix, shares the same meaning as its composite form, though with a further layer of semantic ambivalence in addition: I return on this later.

For now, and assuming such a hypothesis about *cernere* is correct, I submit that the etymological parentage of "screen" might well be more complex and definitely more curious than it seemed before, and not exclusively of Nordic origin, but indeed classical. I also suggest that the common thread uniting all these words in one semantic field is the concept of *distinction*. The Indo-European root could then arguably be **(s)kerh-*, Ger. *trennen*, *teilen*, to cut, to divide, to separate (cf. LIV, 1998).

At this point, we have enough to attempt a semantic re-mapping of sorts, with the help of any good dictionary. "Screen" seems to have something to do with, among other terms, *scrinium*, (It.) *scrigno*, as we have seen, and also with "scrine"-"shrine", where the relics of saints are preserved, in structures that are occasionally ostentatious, and often displayed for

veneration. Furthermore, "screen" shares its linguistic roots with (It.) *scherma*, *schermire*, *scrimire*, (Fr.) *escrimir*, all of which are terms for fencing, i.e. terms describing a duel, a match between two opposing swordsmen coming at each other from opposite directions. Hence, for example, "skirmish" (Fr.) *escarmouch*, and (It.) *scaramuccia*, also the boastful soldier, one of the stock characters of the Commedia dell'Arte. But "screen" is also a cognate of (Fr.) *escrime*, (It.) *scrima* and *scriminatura*—meaning both the parting of the hair and the ability to "discriminate", i.e. to recognise or establish otherness, or even to tell right from wrong. See, e.g. the Italian phrase *perdere la scrima* (Fr. *perdre/oublier l'escrime*), which is to say to get flustered, to lose one's temper, or to lose control—indeed, control over the criteria of right and wrong.

Also deriving from the same root as "screen" is the verb "to discern", a word whose importance in our culture can hardly be overstated. Descartes equates the ability to discern with reason itself: it separates truth from falsehood, and thus man from animals. Equally, from the same root descend "discrete", "discreet" and "discretion". But then, also, we should relate "screen" to "cream" (It.) *crema*, (Fr.) *crème*: the part of milk that separates from the rest, floating on the surface, and then comes to represent, figuratively and in many languages, the best part of anything. And indeed to "decree", i.e. to decide, to proclaim an official decision.

Various shades and facets of meaning depend on the prefix preceding the common root: "concert", an agreement between various parties; "concern", something that regards or aggravates someone in particular, "excrement", that which is refused and expelled. The crowded field of terms that—according to my hypothesis—share the same etymology as "screen" also features some extremely suggestive words, among which "secret", what is separated from public knowledge, and another word, equally consequential: "certain", what is clear and distinct.

If we then consider a possible Greek equivalent to the Latin *cernere*, namely the verb *krino*, meaning to choose, distinguish, judge, decide, our semantic map expands even further, to include terms such as "critique", i.e. to decide and separate the value of something according to pre-established categories, and "crisis", a moment that forces someone to assess and decide between two distinct options: leading to one outcome or the other. And, lastly, "crime": what is defined as wrong and separated from what is right.

Cernere or to discern: The Epicureanism of the screen experience

At the Latin root of such an expanded semantic tree, I suggest again, is the verb *cernere*. If my etymological

hypothesis holds true, then, it is now worth turning back to what increasingly appears to be a long-lasting connection between the screen and the act of seeing. Without any prefix, in fact, *cernere* retains the sense of "to discern", but yet it also has a second acceptation, which can still be found even in its English cognate—"to discern" meaning both to separate *and to see*.

In Latin, *cernere* is also used in contexts where the act of distinguishing is performed not through one's "spirit", but, rather, through the senses, and especially through the sense of sight (Lewis and Short 1879). Over 100 occurrences of this use of the term, for example, can be found in Lucretius, in his *De Rerum Natura* (first century BCE). Atoms—the philosopher-poet explains—are too small for human beings to *cernere*, i.e. to distinguish them by use of the eyes. Even more interesting for our purposes is how Lucretius uses the verb in the proem of Book 2, one of the most famous passages of his work, and indeed of Latin literature as a whole. In light of what I discussed so far, it is perhaps possible to approach the passage with a renewed awareness, and legitimately add it to an expanded history of screen practice—if not to inscribe it at its very origin:

> It is sweet, when on the great sea the winds trouble its waters, to behold from land another's deep distress; not that it is a pleasure and delight that any should be afflicted, but because it is sweet to see [*cernere*] from what evils you are yourself exempt. It is sweet also to look upon the mighty struggles of war arrayed along the plains without sharing yourself in the danger. But nothing is more welcome than to hold the lofty and serene positions well fortified by the learning of the wise, from which you may look down upon others and see them wandering all abroad and going astray in their search for the path of life, see the contest among them of intellect, the rivalry of birth, the striving night and day with surpassing effort to struggle up to the summit of power and be masters of the world. O miserable minds of men! O blinded breasts! [...][11]

The passage is a celebration of Epicurean philosophy, of that ideal state of wisdom that sees pleasure as freedom from both bodily pain and spiritual turmoil (*aponia* and *ataraxia*). It is also, however, what Blumenberg (1997) describes as an archetypal "configuration" laying the groundwork for any future "aesthetics and ethics of the spectator". Lucretius describes an arrangement of subjects and objects of seeing; the difference (the separation) being that the subjects—and the subjects only—are empowered by their gaze: in fact, the entire passage revolves around the sense of sight. The Latin poet conjures up scenes that could come straight from a nineteenth-century Panorama: shipwrecks and battlegrounds. In this ideal scenario, seeing is something best done from afar: from firm ground, if looking at the sea, or from above, if looking downwards. In short, Lucretius

suggests here that one should engage in the act of seeing from *templa serena*, i.e. a detached space, a locus of security (and superiority) from which the wise man, in a godlike manner, can contemplate the world from above, as well as the lives, actions and vain struggles of men—or, rather, of *other* men.

Such "configuration" went on to enjoy enormous success in Western culture, paving the way, among other things, to a fertile streak of metaphoric imagery in the discourse of theatre, as shown, e.g. in the notion of *theatrum mundi*, but also in the idea of the theatre itself as a *visorio*, as proposed by various authors in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in an age of theatrical rediscovery (not to mention the rediscovery of perspective). The idea, that is, of the theatre as an apparatus meant to create a "space of constructed visibility", to borrow Foucault's formula. Or a machine, able to archive and make universal knowledge available, along with the pleasure that can be derived from such a knowledge—not by chance, the word "theatre" over the course of the sixteenth century appears in countless publications, often illustrated, including the first printed atlas by Abraham Ortelius, whose world map is accompanied, as per tradition, by a classical aphorism on the vanity of human endeavours.

But let us turn back to the text. Lucretius, here, uses a number of vision-related verbs: *spectare*, *videre, tueri, despicere*. And, of course, *cernere*, which after all is the verb that best summarises the meaning of the whole "configuration". *Cernere* perfectly describes the act of distinguishing (seeing) other situations and people, and, at the same time, the act of recognising one's own position and distinguishing it (regarding it as distinct) from those other situations and people.

To be sure, no screen *per se* can be found in Lucretius, but its function appears to be present, and so is the term *cernere*, which I singled out as its possible point of etymological origin. In effect, the passage describes a "screen experience": it entails a separation between spectator and players (on a world-stage), and, at the same time, it entails seeing. And it also entails the *pleasure* of looking from afar, from a state of safety and stability, which is to say the pleasure of distinguishing one's own position as a spectator from that of the players. Epicurean philosophy uses the word *katastematic* to describe such a pleasure, indicating with it a static and negative pleasure, deriving from the absence of all disturbances, as opposed to *kinetic* pleasures, which are instead dynamic, sensuous, active, and which would not, therefore, adequately fit the mediated, detached and ultimately "screened" experience put forth by Lucretius.

It might be worth asking, at this point, if and to what extent this "screened" or "screenic" experience

played a key role not just in anticipating the optical and cinematic devices of the nineteenth century, but in the history of Western spectacle as a whole. At the heart of the matter is the idea that the value of a spectacle stems precisely from *a vision of difference*: from the notion, that is, that the act of spectating is both detached and detaching, as it enables the spectators to judge, to take themselves (more or less) out of the picture, and thus to draw a morale from what they regard as other than themselves.

Lucretius is not the only source to put forth a similar idea during classical antiquity. One of the oldest and most accredited explanations of *katharsis* in Greek tragic theatre (cf. Diano 1968)[12] describes it precisely as the art of freeing oneself from pain (*techne alypias*): the releasing of one's worries, according to this interpretation, follows the *representation* of pity and fear. Spectators learn how to recognise what chains of events lead to pain, and that possibility, in turn, enables them to anticipate the same events in their own real lives, before they happen. Crucially, this dynamic of recognition and anticipation does not require identification with the characters, nor does it follow automatically from it. In other words, the key element of the tragic experience, as Aristotle presents it in the *Poetics*, is *not* the spectator's simulated and empathic participation in the action on stage (though some scholars read Aristotle this way) but, rather, the realisation that those events and feelings *belong to others*. Even Plato, in Book 10 of the *Republic*, mentions the tragic spectator's awareness that "these are *other people's* sufferings" (*allotria pathe*), making room for a certain "degree of mental dissociation between the hearer and the poetic character" (Halliwell 2002, 78). Without wishing to push it too far, one might speculate that Aristotle too is sketching, in effect, a theory of spectacle whereby the effectiveness of the spectacle depends, for the most part, precisely on this "screenic" element, which is to say on the spectators' ability to distinguish their own condition from that which takes place in front of their eyes—on the representation and acknowledgement of *allotria pathe*, or other people's feelings, more than on the identification of someone with them.

How much, if anything, of this understanding of the visual spectacle has survived in the modern and contemporary mindset? I refer, again, to the spectators' ability to distinguish (and enjoy) what is represented as different, as something removed from their position as onlookers. Elements of it could be retraced, for example, in the theory of *photogénie*, or in Siegfried Kracauer's idea that film can specifically reveal the *secret* meaning of things, i.e. meaning purified from the spectators' emotional investment, because cinema, unlike everyday experience, represents objects (and persons) that are not materially and directly available to them, which in turn would allow the spectators to finally see—distinguish—them as they truly are (see Kracauer 1960, 13ff. and 305ff.).

Alternatively, one could think of all those practices and theories that take spectacle—and that includes cinema—as a form of *critique*, and do so specifically through estrangement, i.e. through a type of representation that does not require identification, and indeed resists it, by a variety of means: acting and narrative style, editing and framing, manipulation of the soundtrack and of the musical accompaniment, etc. Examples of this can be found in both European and American modernism, but also, just to mention it in passing, in Robert Altman's ensemble films, as well as in certain contrapuntal uses of voice-over and music.

Furthermore, and more in general, one could consider the use of photographic and cinematic means of reproduction to represent what is distant, either historically or geographically, from the observer, which is to say the use of representation to institutionalise a difference, which then becomes even more established, distinct, *discriminated* through its very own representation (see, e.g. ethnographic and touristic films, all forms of primitivism and exoticism, etc.).

Equally, one could bring to mind the way images —including, of course, moving images—are used for documentary or scientific purposes, where those images are, again, supposed to be free from human interference, and thus guarantee a degree of objectivity, *certainty* of analysis, i.e. the opportunity to regard and assess correctly. One might even consider how some "impossible objective views" (Casetti 1998) in the film can be used for similar purposes, with aerial perspectives, for example, conveying an all-seeing gaze, which is hardly an everyday experience, in order to enable, once more, a full and detached view.

Secrets, critiques, discriminations and *certainties*; one could retrace the whole history of cinema looking for such "doubles" of the concept of screen—without necessarily expecting to explain each individual film or genre in these terms, of course: not all that we call cinema can be reduced to the screenic experience (the so-called "body genres" function, e.g., according to different principles). Conversely, I do not presume to chart, here, the full territory covered by the offspring of the idea of "screen" as it emerged in my analysis. I do wish, however, to suggest possible avenues of inquiry, and indeed the theoretical relevance of such an approach. Every theory (and practice) that, at its core, points to *the split between ordinary experience and mediated experience* can be traced back, I suggest, to the deep time of the screenic experience, as I reconstructed it, on the grounds of what I believe to be its true etymology.

As one can easily see, these premises take me in a very different direction compared to other

approaches, fully justified in their own regard, which seem to be gaining traction in contemporary film studies. One may think, to mention just one possible example, of the neuro-cognitive approach, which seeks to apply the methods and findings of neuroscience to the study of the film (cf. Gallese and Guerra 2015), and thus focuses on elements of the spectator's experience that are radically different from those discussed here. Indeed, such approach does not seem to pay much attention to the "screenic" nature of the mediated experience as I understand it, insisting instead on the simulation, the "tuning in" of the viewer and framed spectacle, the processes of alignment, empathy, mirroring, identification and embodiment. Put otherwise, neuro-cognitive scholars of film and other mediated spectacles focus on the spectator's ability to build and inhabit fictional worlds, and develop an emotional connection with the characters, based on the theory that mediated experience would activate perceptual and neurological mechanisms, in response to the represented objects, that are similar to those triggered by real-life stimuli.

If I were to make an educated guess as to why the discontinuities I challenged throughout this article tend to be so commonly accepted by historians of the screen, I would be inclined to interpret such genealogical "mistakes" as symptoms of a much larger tendency. I refer here to the widespread reluctance (and, at times, downright diffidence) that seems to characterise film theory today in relation to the idea that separation/distance/difference may be integral aspects of the act of looking at a spectacle, of its value, and of the specific enjoyment it can produce. *Contra* such attitude, the deep time of the screen shows us precisely how those dual aspects, distance and discernment, are both intrinsic to the screenic experience, and more closely connected to each other than it would appear otherwise. The reluctance to consider this crucial aspect of the mediated spectacle seems to be the key factor underwriting the very success of approaches such as the neuro-cognitive one mentioned above. More generally, the same reluctance appears to underpin the hegemony of all those contemporary theoretical paradigms that focus on cognition, affect and emotion, and therefore also on emotional (and character) engagement, affective attunement, visceral experience, bodily responsiveness, immersivity, etc.[13] These theoretical positions, as I argue, reflect an attitude that goes beyond a narrow focus on cinematic spectatorship, to embrace a larger view of the aesthetic experience as inextricably linked to the sensuous and embodied *participation* of the viewer. Such line of thinking, it is worth noting, has been in vogue in film studies for a number of decades now, and well before the recent strand of neurofilmological studies: one needs only to think,

as an example, of Vivian Sobchack's phenomenology of cinematic (cinesthetic) experience. This tendency, which brings together theorists "who believe art to be an inundation of the whole being", appears to be something of a revenant in the history of film (and not just film) aesthetics, judging from the fact that already in 1950 Raymond Spottiswoode dismissed it as "distasteful" (129). To be sure, any attempt to group and summarise those paradigms here cannot but result in an incomplete, almost caricaturistic account. Nonetheless, I believe it is possible to say that—despite their different and at times very divergent positions—all those approaches have in common the tendency to shorten the distance, as it were, between real and mediated experience, a propensity to slim the screen until it almost disappears. I mean by this that they all share the tendency to naturalise and disintermediate the spectator's mediated experience, to make it indistinct, ordinary (down to its physiological aspects). Outside of film studies, instead, the emphasis on the necessity of precisely such a distinction appears to be more present, as is the case, e.g. for certain strands of contemporary media philosophy. I refer to Krämer (2015) and her rehabilitation of the "postal principle" in communication, which gives more relevance, including ethical relevance, to recognising and respecting the distance/difference between the communicating parties—whereas other strands in media theory insist on a rather opposite "erotic principle", emphasising the ethical benefits of synchronising and bridging the gap between the communicants.

I should state again that I do not intend to challenge the legitimacy of a big part of contemporary film studies. I do suggest, however, that it might be worth counterbalancing the scientific evidence on which they often rely, as well as the theories of cinema and spectacle they always imply (i.e. even when they appear to be describing the nature, or the simple physiology of spectatorial practices) by referring to other, complementary evidences, such as the historical and critical materials I discuss here. Those evidences seem to attest the continuing influence of a certain understanding of the screen, both practical and theoretical, throughout the deep time of Western spectacle, where both "screen" and "spectacle" are to be taken in the broader sense of the words. Such understanding relates to both the act of seeing and the experience of representation, and implies, in turn, the idea of separation, disembodiment, distance, distinction—which is to say an idea of aesthetic experience that has less to do with the notion of *engagement* described in those approaches that focus on affect, emotion, empathy, cognition (and neurosciences), and more to do with the *disengagement* of the spectator from whatever is represented, not to say, ultimately, even more to do with the *added*

value that such disengagement brings forth. This conceptual framing represents, in my view, the contribution that a critical-historical approach to screenic experience could and should bring to bear on the history of media and spectacular practices—all the while resting on the assumption, of course, that such history will then have to be written from a wide range of different, and apparently incompatible points of view.

And when, in the writing of such history, the point comes to deal with the screen as we know it, one ought to wonder whether the values and functions I describe here still persist, or whether they do not, despite the obvious persistence of the screens themselves. After all, as Blumenberg himself anticipated, one should not necessarily assume that the ideal configuration of the "shipwreck with spectator" has remained unchanged. It is entirely possible that certain media practices today may call into question the distance and indeed the attitude which, for centuries, such model has implied and fostered.

Or, to the contrary, it might be the case that a very traditional screen still exists, even where one is tempted to see something different altogether.

Notes

1. A preliminary mapping of the entire debate concerning the screen and its history would be difficult and necessarily incomplete, here, given the variety of the approaches, positions and of the various fields of enquiry involved. Indeed, entire volumes would be needed to do it justice, such as those (among the most recent to be released) edited by Stephen Monteiro (2016), as well as Dominique Chateau and José Moure (2016a).
2. In making this claim I also find myself at least partially disagreeing with others, who use—however cautiously and intelligently—the supposedly late connection between the screen and its meaning as "surface to show images" to argue—and not without some reason—for the necessity of understanding the history of media not only in relation to the sense of sight, but also in relation to "minor" senses such as touch. See Strauven (2012).
3. Guido Da Pisa (2013), my translation.
4. Dante Alighieri (2012).
5. In passing, it is worth remarking that the concept of interposition is not exclusive to theories of representation. In the field of medieval astronomical optics, in fact, the interposition of a celestial body serves to prevent the negative influence of another celestial body. See Federici Vescovini (2003, 227).
6. On screens and the "architecture of spectatorship" cf. also Friedberg (2006), and especially ch. 4. On the integration of churches and cathedrals into the larger history of spectacle (including cinema), cf. Griffiths (2008).
7. Instances of this use of the screen as a synonym for *scrinium* can be found, for example, in the accounts for the years 1374–76 originally penned by the treasurers of King's Lynn, see Hillen (1907, 99).
8. Cf. Bailey (1721); Britton (1838). See also Smedley, Rose, and Rose (1845). This last reference crosses Wachter (1727) and Ménage (1694). Even today, e.g. in DMLBS (2012), listed among the definitions of *scrinium* is the one that links the word to "screen".
9. And the possibility of making a "connection between the screen and the closet, more specifically the baroque *Wunderschrank*", the cabinets of curiosities, should not sound too strange: see, Strauven (2012).
10. There are those who link *scrinium* to *scribo*, but this origin was suggested even by Gardin-Dumesnil (1777).
11. Lucretius (1864, 51–52).
12. Diano echoes the interpretation of catharsis originally proposed by Francesco Robortello, who authored the first (1548) commentary of Aristotle's *Poetics*.
13. A non-exhaustive list of these studies includes, for example, M. Smith (1995), Grodal (1997, 2009), Plantinga and Smith (1999), G.M. Smith (2003), Plantinga (2009).

Notes on contributor

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Disclosure statement

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