

BOOK REVIEW

Mauro Carbone and Graziano Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens: Showing and Hiding, Exposing and Protecting*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2023, 194pp., 124€, ISBN: 978-3-031-30815-4

Is it possible to set a new paradigm for a nascent discipline? What is Anthropology all about? With these two questions in mind, the effort of Mauro Carbone and Graziano Lingua in developing their first joint work will be fully appreciated. *Toward an Anthropology of Screens* is a multicolored and at the same time unified study around the idea of ‘arche-screen’ (Carbone, 2019). This book might be considered a sort of continuation of Carbone’s previous *Philosophy-Screens: From Cinema to the Digital Revolution*, where the idea of arche-screen was established, together with an enrichment provided by Lingua, particularly effective in the Christian history of relationships with images. With an original shifting between media theory and media archaeology, ethics, iconology, cultural anthropology and history, the result is a solidly-built, though not easily defined, introduction to a new screenology, equally distant from Huhtamo (2004) and recent Italian aesthetics theories in digitality and immersive environments (Casetti, 2015; Pinotti, 2021). A third way, in a sense, has as its main goal a rethinking of platonic dualism on the one hand, and a foundational ethics discourse around digital media on the other.

Following the latest observations to the international debate from Luciano Floridi (2021, 2023), the way toward an anthropology of screens seems to pass through two sections: an introduction where our contemporary relationship with the screen is defined and critically proposed, and a conclusion in which the authors set up a decalogue for a new relationship with images, screens and technology. One of the first questions that arise is: Which anthropology is based on this strong ethical approach? The answer, not necessarily convincing, seems to be not a classical one. The anthropology of screens to which the title refers is properly explained during the long dissertation as a more pragmatic anthropology of screen experiences, and this is the reason for the final focus on the ethical aspects of this kind of pervasive experience. Perhaps this striking title might make some people turn up their noses, but, in the end, the book gives good examples and explanations of the theoretical direction the authors decided to take.

In this regard, the notion of ‘arche-screen’ is outlined in the *reciprocal differentiation* between the various historical-cultural configurations that have been gradually taken on by the related screen experiences. In fact, the ‘arche-screen’ should be understood as a (musical) theme – or, according to the meaning of the Greek *archē* as a ‘principle’ – which, however, is not found ‘in the beginning’, as traditionally happens in the ‘theme and variations’ musical form. Rather, the ‘arche-screen’ is a theme that never ceases to form and transform itself *with* and *through* its prehistorical and historical variations. In this capacity, time after time it *retro-jects* itself as a ‘principle’ – as a theme, indeed – that claims to establish once and for all the variations that would follow it. ... In this sense, as we already stated above, the arche-screen should therefore be understood as a *trans-historical* principle in which *the power to distribute the visible and the invisible* interweaves with other powers that not only involve the presentation of *figures, images*, or other *signs* but also imply one’s exposure to the environment and one’s ability to mediate the relationships that this exposure involves, protecting oneself from the *excesses* it may bring. (pp.18–20)

From this particularly theoretic standpoint, and assuming the human body as the real principle at the origin, the interconnected paradigm of showing and hiding, exposing and protecting by the screen is developed via the similar ambiguity of positive and negative regimes of light. Then the authors

develop a historical recognition of different proto-(arche-) screens, following a media-archaeological approach and narration. Being only a parenthesis in the global work in comparison with more classical authors of media archeology, for example Wanda Strauven (2021), or the previous foundational work edited by Huhtamo and Parikka (2011), this compendium may seem rather short. On the other hand, the discourse intentionally searches for different approaches and thus can easily transform itself into a version of Plato's allegory of the cave. This analysis of the shadow in this more thematic passage allows the authors to connect the myth with contemporary moving image experiences, considering cinema as a great example of arche-screen and at the same time finding a convincing proof of existence for the desire to be immersed in images evident in prehistoric art as much as in modern digital media.

The thematical-historical – let's finally say anthropological – discourse between the body and proto- or alternative screens is relaunched in the following chapters, where from a consideration of the body and a rethinking of the film – which, not by chance, in some languages (Italian for instance) have the same etymology – the most fascinating part is the summary of the Christian concept of idolatry and images in an on-going history of illustrated theology, wars, tools and inventions. As a result of this back-and-forth history, we find real-time projection technology and, nowadays, digital media. A fragmented and non-linear reconstruction of examples which

urges us to place questions about the continuity or discontinuity between analog and digital in the context of a reconstruction that pays phenomenological attention to the implications that their joint use historically produced on the pragmatics of screen experiences, avoiding the temptation to reduce those questions to the mere technological-ontological consideration of the two data reproduction systems. (p.65)

It is this analytical pathway that leads the authors to a discussion of what they call 'regimes of visibility' and 'regimes of speakability' about digital images. An interesting standpoint that underlines how words/texts and images are more mixed than we generally realize, starting from the visualization code which generates every single digital pixel. For example, 'In the gap between the immediacy of the images we see on screens and the mediations that the machine actually performs, the problem of the so-called digital transparency and their consequent use creeps in' (p.99).

It is from this premise that the most solid anthropological dissertation arises. In the subsequent two chapters, the authors criticize what they call the 'ideology of transparency 2.0', a problem which equally involves social organization, public and private control, surveillance and neoliberal capitalism. For Carbone and Lingua, the concept of transparency, deceptively understood in a positivist way, is by its own definition impossible to establish and at the same time is full of dangerous side effects. Afterwards, from this assumption, the authors propose the idea of bodies as 'quasi-prosthesis', and the human condition as 'dividual'. With the digital revolution, wearable and/or immersive technologies are defined especially by the term 'quasi-prosthesis' to flag the particular status of 'mediators' (Latour, 1993) – 'between the organic and the inorganic, between the human and the nonhuman – that those organs assume within relationships in which the first term tends to lose its centrality in favour of the second' (p.143). From Deleuze's term 'dividuel', and the partial definition of Appadurai (2016), our authors arrive at a state of 'dividual plurality' (p.151), which could reveal how 'we have never been individuals' (p.152):

technologies that have brought us to the digital era exert on the structure of an ontology of dividual relationality, shaping it precisely in a peculiar way that exemplifies its trans-historical character. ... digital hyperconnectivity produces precisely the hyperdevelopment of a dividualized and dividualizing relationality that fosters not only the partition but also the multiplication of our identities. ... Thus understood, the notion of dividual, rather than merely denouncing the loss of a previous condition, challenges us to positively redefine it in order to allow for a more nuanced and propositional interpretation of the changes we are experiencing in our relations with ourselves, with others, and with the world. (pp.152–3)

A revolutionary conceptualization is born and used to interpret the ‘posthuman agencies exerted by certain digital devices’ (p.153), allowing us to reconsider from a phenomenological point of view the digital experiences of today as ‘non-imagocentric screen experiences’ (p.153):

For sure, in such a state persistent individuation and emerging dividualities will coexist while clashing with each other and, at the same time, hybridizing in the ever-closer interaction with nonhuman or posthuman agencies produced by digital civilization. The proposed anthropology of screens will thus inevitably be situated in an increasingly anthropo-decentered universe. (p.153)

Toward an Anthropology of Screens is a complex book, perhaps sometimes too reiterative in its slogan of ‘showing and hiding, exposing and protecting’, but surely a major contribution to the contemporary phenomenological and aesthetics debate on images. Francesco Casetti is going to publish, on the same or at least a linked theme, a book emblematically entitled *Il Complesso Proiezione/Protezione nei Media Schermici*. In a solid dissertation which explores different approaches, the authors reveal their wide preparation and mutual intellectual exchange. For those who are not familiar with their previous individual research topics, the intertwined meeting ground of these philosophies might seem unrelated in some passages and might encourage some to read the entire book in order to follow the theory. However, as a declarative foundational and innovative theoretical proposal, this book should be regarded as a stimulus to critically debate the authors’ essay, and to imagine the future of our relationship with screens, words and images, as well as a complex, appropriate, and ever more complete anthropology to help us understand it.

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