On the Meaning of Screens: Towards a Phenomenological Account of *Screenness*

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Abstract. This paper presents a Heideggerian phenomenological analysis of screens. In a world and an epoch where screens pervade a great many aspects of human experience, we submit that phenomenology, much in a traditional methodological form, can provide an interesting and novel basis for our understanding of screens. We ground our analysis in the ontology of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* [1927/1962], claiming that screens will only show themselves as they are if taken as screens-in-the-world. Thus, the phenomenon of screen is not investigated in its empirical form or conceptually. It is rather taken as a grounding intentional orientation that conditions our engagement with certain surfaces as we comport ourselves towards them "as screens." In doing this we claim to have opened up the phenomenon of screen in a new and meaningful way.

Key words: communication, computer, Heidegger, information systems, information technology, media, phenomenology, screens, television

1. Introduction

It seems evident now that screens are a relevant part of our contemporary world. Whether at work, at home, traveling, or immersed in some form of entertainment, most of us find ourselves increasingly in front of screens – television screens, cinema screens, personal computer screens, mobile phone screens, palmtop computer screens, and so forth. The last decades have witnessed a massive diffusion of television screens into people's day-to-day lives. In 1969, 100 million people watched the landing on the moon. In 1985, the "Live Aid" music festival, in London and Philadelphia, attracted an estimated television audience of 1.5 billion (RM, 2002). More recently, the majority of the world's population watched the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. on the Internet, that is, on screens. In 2005, the funeral of Pope John Paul II was followed by a television audience of approximately two billion people.

When we consider the screens of personal computers and the mobile phone, this diffusion is even more impressive. It is projected that by 2007 the number of personal computers in use will reach 1,150 million (CIAI 2004). When it comes to the mobile phone, its diffusion is even more pervasive than that of the personal computer. According to Nokia there will be two billion mobile phones in use worldwide by 2006 (Wearden, 2005). It is quite possible that we will soon inhabit a world where there will be more screens than people. It seems evident that screens are increasingly a medium, a way, or a mode into the real as well as a part of that same reality. The world we encounter is increasingly a screened world.

Within this pervasive screen context, we want to inquire into the significance of our increasing engagement with screens for our understanding of ourselves and the world of everyday life in which we have our being. What does it mean, this ever-increasing presence of screens in our lives? What are the fundamental meanings of our engagement with screens? Directly or indirectly these themes have been discussed in various disciplines (such as Heim, 1993, 1999; Manovich, 1995, 2001), and more particularly in the phenomenological tradition (for example, the work of Ihde, 1990, 2002; Sobchack, 1991, 1994, 1999). In addition to these, one should also mention the work of Marshall McLuhan (e.g., 1962, 1964/1994) on media as human extensions, which not only bears interesting phenomenological affinities but also provides some important insights for our understanding of the contemporary and increasingly screened world.

This paper does not aim to replicate this existing work, or to ignore it. It will rather add to it through a phenomenological analysis of the screen as a particular, and important, phenomenon in our contemporary way of living. We suggest that a suitable response to the questions above could in part be found in a phenomenological understanding of the meaning of the screen qua screen – that is, in its essential unfolding in-the-world where it already screens (Heidegger, 1927/1962). In doing our analysis we do not want to focus on the experience of watching screens, nor do we want to focus on the content of screens. We want to suggest that there is something prior to all of these, namely that which conditions us to turn to it "as a screen" in the first instance. Thus, the phenomenon of screen in this paper is not investigated in its empirical relevance nor is it conceptually analyzed. The screen is phenomenologically analyzed as the grounding intentional orientation that conditions our engagement with certain surfaces in as much as we comport ourselves towards them as screens (Husserl, 1913/1964). This might be formally indicated as the *screenness* of screen.

The paper is structured in three sections. In the first section we present the ontological grounds on which the phenomenological analysis relies. The second section of the paper presents the phenomenological analysis of screen. Finally, in the third section we relate our findings to existing work on screens.

2. The Phenomenological Horizon of the Analysis

Methodologically as well as ontologically this paper finds its direction and horizon in the work of the phenomenologist Martin Heidegger (1927/1962, 1955/1977, 1950/1984, 1975/1988). This means that our application of the phenomenological method to the phenomenon of screen will be contextualized within an explicit ontological account – that is, Heidegger's (1927/1962) phenomenology of the human way of being, as presented in *Being and Time*. Although we tend to follow the major steps of the Husserlian phenomenological method, our detailed analysis within these steps is based more directly on Heideggerian existential phenomenology, which we will review briefly here. Obviously, for the purposes of this paper we cannot go beyond a mere sketch of *Being and Time*'s central ontological claims, which will inform our analysis. We believe its relevance will become evident as we proceed in our phenomenological analysis.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1927/1962) pointed out that the human way of being (which he calls *Dasein;* from the German words *Da* – there – and *Sein* – being) is a being of being always and already absorbed, involved and entangled in-the-world. We and the things (such as screens) that we encounter are never "outside" our ongoing flow of living. However, in being this being-in-the-world we also transcend this immediacy of the flow of life. This transcendence means that we as *Dasein* are already somehow ahead of ourselves; we are projected. When we wake up in the morning the day ahead of us is already and immediately present as "things that needs doing"; when we get up from our chair the door is already and immediately there as a possibility for leaving, etc. We do not need to "create" or invent these possibilities or worlds around us every time, again and again. Being projected, always already in the future, also means already knowing that we will die. In already grasping this finitude our being is transformed from an "I am" to an "I can be." In our projects (or rather our already projectedness) our existence, to be, is always and already an issue for us, it matters. In the horizon of existence, this already mattering, things show up, not as mere things before us, but as possibilities to be this or that particular being-in-the-world. Magda King (2001) articulates this unity of finitude and world as follows: "The very finiteness of *Dasein* makes it both possible and necessary for him to 'form' a world" (55). Hence, Heidegger's fundamental insight is that our intentional relationship with the world is *not epistemic* – as Edmund Husserl assumed – but rather practical and ontological. We engage with the world not to know it but rather to *be* our life project. This ontological account of Heidegger (which we adopt for our analysis below) transforms Husserl's notion of intentionality by insisting that "intentionality must be understood in terms of the structural features of *Dasein*, specially *Dasein's* transcendence, that is, the fact that *Dasein* is already somehow beyond itself, already dwelling in the world, among things, and not

locked up in the privacy of its own consciousness as the representationalist, Cartesian picture assumes" (Moran 2000: 42). For Heidegger "all consciousness, all knowledge, all human undertakings, are drawn on an ever present substratum: the world, a world that is always already-there, radically primary" (Thevenaz, 1962: 84). Let us consider further Heidegger's notion of world as it is very relevant for our understanding of screens in-the-world.

Early on in *Being and Time* Heidegger (1927/1962) argues that the world is not simply the collection of familiar and useful objects (things, practices, values, etc.) that surrounds us as we go about our projects. Such a view of the world already draws on a more originary "worlding" of the world, disclosed through the "mattering" that is our finite human existence. Without "mattering" as our human way of being we might imagine that our experience of the world would be similar to what appears on the lens of a camera. It would not be objects and possibilities but merely variations in frequency of light. Thus, in this ongoing horizon of human existence, things show up as that which they are, not simply because we "choose" to take them to be this or that thing, but rather it is possible to take them as this or that thing because they are already revealed as such, within and through the ongoing referential whole of ongoing human existence. This already-worlding of the world is exactly what allows the familiar and useful to "show up", as familiar and useful, in the first instance. For Heidegger the worlding of the world is the ongoing and dynamic *referential whole* in which things always and already have their meaning as this or that familiar and useful thing.

For example, for a pen to be disclosed as "a pen" – namely as a possibility-for writing and not merely a PVC object full of a chemical compound – it necessarily already refers to a world of writing. This "world of writing" already presumes a writing surface as a possibility for writing on (such as paper, white board, etc). Likewise, the writing surface (paper or board) necessarily already refers to a location for writing (desk, book, lap, wall, etc); which refers to the need for writing, which refers to the need for communication, and so forth. Thus, things are revealed or disclosed as that which they already are within a referential whole in which other things already refer to them and also draw upon the whole to be what they already are taken to be, by *Dasein* in-the-world. When we use the term "refers to" we mean that the thing in question (the pen in this case) will not be disclosed as that which it is a pen *unless we take it (the pen) as already implying these references*. Differently stated, these references are necessary for it to be disclosed as that which it is, as a pen, rather than as something else. This can be seen very clearly when we "strip" the pen of its necessary references, its world; for example, if we would drop the pen into a society that does not have any form of writing practice. How would those in such a society encounter this thing we take as a pen? They would most certainly not encounter it as "a pen," not as a possibility-for-writing. The referential whole that is necessary for it to be disclosed "as a

pen" would simply not exist – even if it was made by someone else, familiar with the world of writing, to be "a pen". Such prior "making" only already makes sense in a "world of writing", where the pen is already revealed as necessary. Heidegger (1975/1988) suggests that:

> [T]he world is not something subsequent that we calculate as the result from the sum of all beings. The world comes not afterward but beforehand, in the strict sense of the word. Beforehand: that which is unveiled and understood already in advance in every existent *Dasein* before any apprehending of this or that being, beforehand as that which stands forth as always already unveiled to us. (165)

Joseph Kockelmans (1972) refers to this "world" as the primordial praxis: "a certain whole is also given as that in which each concrete thing can appear as meaningful.... This whole of relationships, within which things mutually refer to one another and can manifest themselves as meaningful is called 'world'" (12). It is important to reemphasize that for Heidegger (1927/1962) the primordial horizon that constitutes the disclosive possibility of things, as the things they are, is the ongoing concern born in the finitude of human existence. It is in this ongoing horizon of always already becoming – a manager, friend, lover, politician, etc. – that things show up as "possibilities for" – i.e. they have their being as this or that particular thing.

Based on this ontological horizon our phenomenological account below will take as evident that screens are screens *in-the-world* where screens have their being. Furthermore, we will take it as evident that in order to understand the meaning of screens we need to disclose its referential whole by exploring those references that are strictly necessary for the screen to continue to appear and be taken "as a screen" in our everyday involvements with screens. In the section to follow we will provide a phenomenological analysis of the phenomenon screen as located in this horizon, the human way of being-in-the-world.

3. A Phenomenology of the Screen

In a strict phenomenological manner, following Husserl's counsel (1913/1964, 1954/1970, 1931/1995), this phenomenological analysis will initially set aside important research that address directly or indirectly the phenomenon screen (e.g., Heim, 1993, 1999; Ihde, 1990, 2002; Manovich, 1995, 2001; Sobchack, 1994). We will return to some of these in the final section of the paper when relating our findings to this work.

Let us remind ourselves that when we investigate the screen phenomenologically we do not aim to describe any particular screen, nor any particular empirical situation in which one engages with a screen or screens. This

investigation is not directed at this or that empirical screen, but rather to the necessary meanings that enables us to identify each and all particular appearances of screens *as "screens"* in the first place. This is formally indicated as the *screenness* of screens. This is the goal as well as the limitation of the phenomenological approach we follow here. We must be careful not to claim more than our phenomenological analysis provides. Hence, what we intend to consider is not the *content* on the television, cinema, PC or palmtop screen, but rather the screen as itself, in its meaning. What does it mean when we engage with a surface "as a screen" rather than as something else? What are the central meanings or meaning implied in such an engagement? What is the referential whole that discloses screens as screens, rather than as something else?

3.1. Holding Attention

Let us start our analysis by exploring an initial description of the screen as a screen – or more correctly the screen as and when it *screens*. It is rather surprising what we find when we start with the phenomenological description of the screen. When trying to describe a computer screen or a television screen, we immediately note that we never seem to look at a screen, as a "screen." We rather tend to look at screens in attending to that which appears on them. What seems most evident when looking at a screen is the content being presented on that screen – the text, images, colors, graphics, and so on – not the screen itself.

To try and look at a screen, and see it as a screen, not taking into account the particular content it presents, as well as all the implied references it draws upon, is apparently not an easy task. We are not familiar with this type of encounter with a screen. Rather our familiarity with screens or displays reveals them as things – maybe surfaces – which function in particular contexts and for particular purposes. That is to say, we draw upon screens as we act and relate ourselves to and in the world, mainly within familiar organizational or institutional contexts or situations.

This familiarity does not mean that we consciously know what a screen is as such, but rather that we are accustomed to screens. We are accustomed in our daily life to perform the kind of activities in which screens are already just naturally "there." However, what is familiar is not known simply because it is familiar (Hegel, 1807/1977). With Friedrich Nietzsche we note: "the familiar is that to which we are accustomed; and that to which we are accustomed is hardest to 'know,' that is to see as a problem, that is to see as strange, as distant, as 'outside us'." (1887/1974, no. 355: 301) In our involved daily coping we take for granted what we are transparently using, as a ready-to-hand being (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Indeed we may fail to see that which is closest to us, for what it already is. In our phenomenological investigation we want to

take note of this strangeness – that is, that we seem not to see screens qua screens. Nevertheless, this strangeness is not the strangeness of a turned-off screen. This latter strangeness is rather revealed through its presence as a mere object, a piece of the furniture as it were. It might be this strangeness that often moves us to turn on the television or the computer screen when we face it. It is only when we look at the screen in the phenomenological attitude, as a screen in-the-world, and try to focus our attention on the phenomenon of screen(ing) as such, that we can begin our phenomenological description. What do we note?

Screens in screening present, show, exhibit, what is supposed to be *relevant* information in each context, be it a spreadsheet while working at the office, or a schedule while walking in the airport, or a movie while watching television. Screens exhibit what was previously chosen, captured, processed, organized, structured, and finally presented on the screen. But what do we mean by "presented on the screen"? The screen, in screening, finds itself already implicated in the ongoing activity. In showing or presenting it attracts our attention, often also our physical presence, as it "locates" our activity – not in a particular space or location but rather in a particular involvement (Heidegger, 1927/1962). The screen is often the focus of our concerns in a particular environment, being at the office, working; or at home, watching the news; or in the cinema, watching a movie. Apparently the screen enters our ongoing involvement in-the-world – as a screen – when we attend to it by turning it on. When we push the "on" button the screen captures our attention as it is the place, the location, the setting, the scene, in which what is supposedly relevant for us at that particular time is happening. Screen has as its necessary condition this supposed relevance. We rely on it as a transparent ready-to-hand being that shapes, affects and mediates our own *being-in-the-world* (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Yet, this capturing and shaping of our attention, that screens are, does not sometimes happen (and sometimes not), i.e., it is not only when we push the "on" button that screening is present. On the contrary, *that* we push the "on" button means precisely that the screening of screen – its possibilities as well as its transparency – is already there as a horizon of possibilities. As beings already in a "screening world" we are already relying on, and basing ourselves and our possibilities for being on, this very *screenhood* of screens. We will return to this claim later on in the paper.

From our initial attempt at seeing the screen, as it screens, we note that a screen in screening gathers the attention of the people that surround it. The actions of those people are usually directly shaped by the presence of a turned on screen. In screening, it acts as the location where what is supposedly relevant will be seen. The description so far of a screen points to the notions of "presenting" or making present, "gathering attention," "suggesting relevance," and "acting as a medium". These all emerge in and through our involvement in particular ongoing activities in which we find ourselves. We now have a first

phenomenological description of some central aspects of the screen, be it a cinema screen, or a television screen, or a PC screen, or an overhead projector screen, and so forth. They all maintain themselves (have their meaning) in-the-world in and through the phenomenon of *screening*.

3.2. *The Screen-in-the-World*

We recall that in our phenomenological analysis we are not directed at any particular screen. The object of our investigation is simply the *screen* as such. Up to now in one way or the other we have relied on our experiences of particular screens to describe the phenomenon of screen. Now we want to set aside these particular experiences and attempt to describe the necessary references that makes a screen "a screen," rather than something else, irrespective of whether it refers to television screens, PC screens, cinema screens, overhead projector screens, or any screen for that matter. In other words, what are the necessary references that are implied for us to relate ourselves to certain surfaces "as screens" rather than as something else? More formally stated, what is the *screenness* of any particular surface for us to comport ourselves to it as a screen?

We note first and foremost that these things that we comport ourselves to as screens are *not* some pure isolated and abstract things that have meaning in themselves as such. It seems self-evident for us that to grasp the meaning of the screen we need to have already presumed its world – the screening world (the cinema, the office, the lecture, the airport, and so forth). The screen shows up, as that which it is, in and only in its *world*. By "world" we mean, following Heidegger (1927/1962), the referential whole within which things have meanings and are what they are, as discussed above. When we consider the screen, as it appears in its world, it seems to appear as something that calls for or grabs our attention. Without this already calling for our attention, screens would no longer be screens. Where does this taking hold of our attention come from? We already hinted that it lies in the world where the screen already appears as a screen. For example, in the cinema the screen is in front of us and the whole configuration of the space suggests that that which is relevant (the movie) will appear there. Thus screens, in their screen-ness, often appear or con*front* us as promises to bring into being, to make visible, that which is relevant in that world (be it watching a movie, reading an e-mail, attending a lecture, etc.) while simultaneously hiding their physical being behind that same relevance.

Screens have their meaning in the flow of our involvement in the world, that is, transparently as ready-to-hand things (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Because the content in front of us always shows up within our involvement (going to the movie, reading my e-mail, attending a lecture) it is already presumed relevant, as deserving our attention. This aspect is crucial. The content in front of us is not just presumed relevant, but is *already presumed* relevant. In soliciting

our attention its relevance does not depend on its specific content but on a particular involvement in-the-world in which we dwell. For example, in the lecture I initially attend to the overhead projector (OHP) screen, it already calls for my attention, not because of its particular content but because in the world of teaching I take that as the location where what is relevant will appear. In screening it already has my attention. Even if I subsequently discover that what I had taken to be relevant is just an old slide that the previous lecturer left by mistake. The fact that the OHP screen, as a screen, keeps its meaning of supposed relevance is stressed by the often urgent comportment by both the lecturer and students to replace the wrong slide as soon as possible. Thus, we would suggest that the meaning of a screen is a phenomenon that already has our attention when and as long as it screens in and through our ongoing activity in-the-world.

This last point can be made more clearly by realizing the kind of difficulty one has in continuing to attend to screens that do not present assumed relevant content at all, as if they do. For example, a PC monitor at the NY Stock Exchange displaying the schedule of the bus service of some foreign city; or the monitor of the cash registers of a supermarket showing air traffic control information, may have an initially curiosity value. However, this curiosity value will quickly fade into the background and it might even become irritant. We might initially attempt to recognize these surfaces as screens as we expect them to be; yet, we would not be able to continue to relate to them as "screens." They will have lost their screenness because they will cease to hold our attention *in a world where they appear as such*. Obviously, in an art gallery they may indeed hold our attention but then it is in a different world and our relationship with them will be different.

Another example of stripping the screen of its referential whole (worldliness) that might help us to clarifying the point we want to stress here. Can we imagine what a man from the Fifteenth century might think when confronted with a screen of an Automatic Teller Machine (ATM)? That surface we refer to as a "screen" would merely be a potentially curious object to him. The screen would not be "a screen" for the man because the screen, as it shows up within an involvement whole, *was not already* a screen for him – he would simply not recognize it as such. For him, screens, as screens, do not have any meaning, and therefore do not exist as such; they do not call for or hold his attention – except initially as curious objects. These cases demonstrate the difficulty of continuing to refer to the surfaces in the examples *as screens* because in order to do so we would need to abandon the meaning of the screen – holding our attention and framing relevance. This is made especially difficult for us who are already familiar with the screening world that already has our attention.

Screens, in screening, already hold our attention and display what is supposedly relevant for us in each situation in which we relate ourselves to them

as screens. Screens claim their being, their ongoing existence, in-the-world as focal entities, presenting, displaying, relevant content for our involvement and action in the world. If we are in the cinema we expect certain content; if we are in front of our computers, doing our e-mail, we expect different content. Thus, a screen screens – captures our attention and holds it – in and through our particular involvements in the world (the world of entertainment, the world of work, etc). Moreover, screens flow along by making evident our involvement in-the-world. They present an already screened world to us which is already consistent with our ongoing involvement in that world. Hence, foremost and primarily what screens show is not the content that appears on the screen, but simultaneously, and perhaps more fundamentally, *a way of being in that world.* As screens we look *at* them but also simultaneously, immediately, and more fundamentally, we look *through* them to encounter our way of being-in-the-world.

This phenomenologically reduced description of screen shows how closely intertwined the ideas of attention, relevance, and world are in the meaning of the screen – and as such it also hints of the necessary notions of agreement and perhaps truth. However, the step just presented is not enough for a fully phenomenological characterization of the phenomenon screen. In order to reach the full meaning of the screening of screens we must now try to reach beyond this common ground to identify the strictly necessary elements for the phenomenon screen to be what it already is.

3.3. Screens, Agreement and Truth

To gain phenomenological access to the more original meaning of the screen, common and essential to all screens, is not to generalize. Generalization itself already presupposes the existence of some essential meaning. For example,

> [T]he abstraction of the general idea 'red' is arrived at by leaving out of account all those respects in which several red objects differ in order to hold on to that respect in which they are similar. But the concept of similarity (or even respect) which is in question here itself presupposes the very comprehension (of the essence of 'red') which it is supposed to account for. (Macann 1993:9)

The way in which screens are screens in-the-world, the original meaning of screen(ing), is of course common to all screens; but that which is common might not be strictly necessary. In trying to describe the original meaning of the screening of screens we are searching for that which is common, not only to the examples analyzed, but for *all* potential examples. Let us proceed now to attempt to describe or "uncover" this more original meaning or common ground. We will do this through imaginative variation, to discover "what one can and what one cannot imagine" (Hammond et al.,1991:76). We,

who already have our being in a world pervaded with screens, do not need empirical observation for discovering the answers we need because in every new variation in imagination we know the object we describe is an object of that same kind, a screen, if we recognize it as such. Thus, the implicit criterion of recognition is *my ability to recognize the object as the object it is* (Husserl, 1954/1970, 1931/1995; Spiegelberg, 1975, 1994).

Firstly, we note that the same empirical surface, when located in different worlds, can be considered a screen and not considered a screen even if it displays the same content, as is clear from our example of the ATM above. Furthermore, if we have a mirror, the same size and shape of a screen, filled by the reflections of that which faces it, we do not consider it to be a screen but a mirror. Nonetheless, we can have a screen displaying exactly the same images as the mirror and consider it a screen and not a mirror. So, what is the criterion that is implicit in this imagined experience? We would suggest that mirrors *reflect* and screens *present*. This means that the kind of content displayed by these different surfaces have altogether different origins. In the case of a mirror, it is merely reflecting back what it receives. In the case of the ongoing presentation of the screen there operates a fundamental, and often hidden, process of ordering that renders it relevant and meaningful. Screening always assumes as necessary a certain ongoing coherency or "theme" in the way that a jigsaw puzzle, to be a jigsaw puzzle, assumes a whole that will be its ordering criterion. Where does this coherency and implied relevance emanate from? In screening, a screen assumes or derives its meaning from a certain pattern of life – one could say a form of life – that is necessary for it to be taken as relevant and meaningful in that pattern of life. Wittgenstein (1953/1967) made a similar point with regard to the ongoing meaning of words: "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false [use of words]? . . . That is not agreement in opinions [about correct use or not] but in form of life" (#241:88). He argues that the supposed agreement about the correct use of words is not because those that use the word have decided to use it in this way or that way but, more fundamentally, because they already cohabit a world that provides the coherency that makes such supposed agreement possible.

Likewise, relevant content that attracts and holds our attention does not depend essentially on the perceiving subjects' perspective or judgments about what is or is not relevant as such (i.e. it is not merely the result of their individual choices). Rather these supposed choices depend on a more fundamental coherency, namely the coherency or referential whole that is "our way of living" in a world where screens already appear as a screen. A screen presents content but also and immediately a certain coherency in accordance with the pattern of living in which it finds itself as a screen. Because screens as screens always present relevant content – as already meaningful ways of living – they gather and locate the attention of the people surrounding them.

In watching, one could of course disagree with the relevance of the particular content being presented on the screen (as our example above of the OHP screen illustrated), but that evaluation itself draws upon the prior coherency of the pattern of life the viewer finds herself or himself in. Hence, the agreement or disagreement over what is presented on the screen is already grounded in *a previous and more foundational agreement that the screen means*, which is our way of living in a world where screens screen. This original meaning that grounds the phenomenon screen is expressed through the notion of *already agreement.*

Hence, screens are not mirrors in that they do not reflect whatever they face. They are rather surfaces that present what is already relevant within the flow of our purposeful action. However, it must also be noted that in presenting or displaying – in making relevant or evident – other possibilities are immediately and simultaneously *excluded*. This is precisely one of the central common meanings of the word screening today (as selecting or choosing). These meanings are evident from the use of the word "screen" and its etymology (Introna and Ilharco, 2000). This inclusion/exclusion nature of screens is also seen in the fact that screens have frames or edges that allows us to refer to that which is "on the screen" as opposed to "off the screen". Screening, as inclusion and exclusion, is therefore also immediately a framing process. For this screening – including and excluding – to make sense there is the necessity of some previously agreed ground on the basis of which something can be screened. This agreement for screening, as in including and excluding, is not about the content of this or that screen but rather an already agreement about a particular way of living, or form of life, as we have suggested above. This way of living, that is the implied criteria of agreement, addresses something even more fundamental, namely the realm of truth. Truth here is not considered as correspondence of the content of the screen with the world but as an already agreement in our way of living that situates the screen as already meaningful. Heidegger (1955/1977) noted in his investigation of the Greek concept of truth, that the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, meant the simultaneous revealing and concealing of something. We might suggest that screens, as focal surfaces that grab and hold our attention, may indeed also appear to us as "mirrors" of truth – however, not reflecting that which is before them but reflecting a way of living already implied in their screening. As the grounding context of truth, screens condition that which can legitimately be asserted. This is an important conclusion if we consider the primacy of seeing in the Western way of thinking and living, often expressed through the saying "seeing is believing."

The screen is first and primordially involved in seeing, watching, perceiving with the eyes. Seeing, according to Heidegger (1927/1962:214), is "a peculiar way of letting the world be encountered by us in perception." In our *everydayness* the human sense of sight performs a central role in our involvement

in-the-world (Heidegger, 1927/1962). What is at stake in this supremacy of seeing, so to speak, is not a characteristic or feature of humans, but an ontological conception of being human *in which cognition is conceived of as seeing*. For us it seems that this ontological primacy of seeing brings into focus the ontological significance of screens. Let us elaborate this claim some more. Heidegger (1927/1962:215) notes that the early Greeks conceived cognition in terms of the "desire to see." Aristotle's (1998: 4, n. 980a) treatise *Metaphysics* opens with the sentence "By nature, all men long to know." In order to capture what Aristotle wrote, with reference to ancient Greek, Heidegger suggests that we must stay with the original meaning of the sentence, which would then translate as: "The care for seeing is essential to man's Being" (Heidegger 1927/1962:215). That such a reading is correct is supported by the text of Aristotle that follows that sentence:

> By nature, all men long to know [i.e., the care for seeing is essential to man's Being]. An indication is their delight in the senses. For these, quite apart from their utility, are intrinsically delightful, and that through the eyes more than the others. For it is not only with a view to action but also when we have no intention to do anything that we choose, so to speak, sight rather than all the others. And the reason for this is that sight is the sense that especially produces cognition in us and reveals many distinguishing features of things. (Aristotle, 1998: 4, n. 980a)

Such an ontological conception of seeing is at the core of Western thought, and grounds many epistemological developments ever since. Saint Augustine also noted this priority of "seeing" – this correspondence between seeing and cognition. In this regard Heidegger (1927/1962:215) refers to Saint Augustine's work from *The Confessions:*

> We even use this word 'seeing' for the other senses when we devote them to cognizing . . . We not only say 'See how that shines' . . ., but we even say 'See how that sounds, See how that is scented, See how that tastes, See how hard that is' . . . Therefore the experience of the senses in general is designated as the 'lust of the eyes'; for when the issue is one of knowing something, the other senses, by a certain resemblance, take to themselves the function of seeing – a function in which the eyes have priority. (Saint Augustine quoted in Heidegger, 1927/1962:215–6)

This priority of seeing, the primacy of the human sense of vision over the other senses, is also a thesis defended by McLuhan (1962, 1964/1994). He claimed that the phonetic alphabet, invented more than 4000 years ago, was the technology that brought about that primacy, introducing us into a world dominated by vision-based patterns, modes and equilibriums. This priority of seeing, in which cognition is understood as seeing, and thus seeing as the access to truth, gets revealed in a particular way in screens. In the phenomenon

screen, seeing is not merely being aware of a surface. The very watching of the screen as screen implies an already present ontological agreement about the nature of the world; a world that is relevant (and true) to us who share it, in and through the screening of the screen. This is an important hint if we are to understand the power of screens in contemporary organizations and society.

Let us now bring the strands of our analysis together. In screening, screens already attract and hold our attention. They continue to hold our attention as they present what is supposedly relevant in a particular ongoing way of doing. This ongoing relevance has as its necessary condition an agreement, not of content, but of a way of living and a way of doing. As such screens make our way of living evident – but also simultaneously and immediately exclude other ways of living and doing. As we face screens and continue to attend to them we behold not just content but also a certain already agreement on the "way we are" – a certain agreement about the possibilities of truth. Thus, in the primacy of cognition as seeing, typical of western thought, screens have ontological significance beyond the mere content of their surfaces. In Heidegger's terminology we can say that the screen is a kind of *Ge-stell,* or "enframing" (Heidegger, 1955/1977). The screening of screens is a kind of framework or frame at work, in which the possibilities for truth, our mostly implicitly agreed upon way of living and doing, is the background that makes relevance appear. In screening, the screen not only makes this way of living evident but simultaneously and immediately conceals other possible ways of being; indeed it even conceals its very own way of being. The frame at work also frames us in revealing screens to us in everyday life as mere representational surfaces, thereby concealing the already agreement they imply and depend on for their ongoing meaning. As such, screens function as powerful locations for the possibilities of truth. This is evident in the way we often conduct ourselves towards screens.

Screens, particularly television screens, are the context of contemporaneity. As Tony Fry (1993:13) puts it, television has arrived as the context. People who do not watch television, especially those who do not have television at home, seem to be out of context: "When you don't watch television for a long time, your way of thinking becomes different, your idea of what is interesting is not the same as what television people think should be interesting." (Tran, 2001:7) The media editor of *The Guardian*, commented with some irony that "the common factor to all 20th-century lunatics and serial killers, from Stalin to Lee Harvey Oswald, was this: they didn't watch enough telly" (Scott, 1999:17). In the aftermath of the September 11th, the White House and Hollywood cinema companies joined forces to extend the reach of Western television into the Arab world (CNN, 2001). What was at stake was precisely the context that television can establish, and indeed the traits of the already agreement that screens essentially are. "Rushing to shift perceptions of the United States in the Islamic world, Washington" was not looking to CNN but to MTV (CNN, 2001).

The power of television to reinforce what is presented just by the presentation itself has important consequences in our daily lives. Yet this power does not belong to television but rather to the screen in its screen-ness. This is confirmed when we hear somebody serving us at the bank, the doctor, the public office, and so forth saying: "that is not what is on my screen." In these situations the screen is often taken as more valid and trustworthy than ourselves – as many of us have found out to our dismay.

4. Other Screens and Some Concluding Comments

How does the phenomenological account of screens above relate to other work on screens? Obviously there is a large literature that talks directly or indirectly about the importance of screens. Due to the limits of space we will just refer to a few here. For example, in *Life on the Screen* Sherry Turkle (1995) argues that the screen has a certain plasticity that creates possibilities for being: "[w]e are using life on computer screens to become comfortable with new ways of thinking about evolution, relationships, sexuality, politics, and identity" (1995:26). She also claims: "In the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go on. . . [creating] an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion." (1995:10, 12). One could imagine that someone could treat a screen as a sort of theater for acting out their "other" selves – although this would mean an entirely different relationship to that which appears on the surface. Yet, this is not what she has in mind:

> The life practice of windows is that of a decentered self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time. The experience of this parallelism [life in the world and life on the screen] encourages treating on-screen and off-screen lives with a surprising degree of equality... now RL [real life] itself can be 'just one more window.' (Turkle, 1995:14)

Our phenomenology of the screen suggests that the significance and fundamental meaning of the screen is not in the content on the screen as such but elsewhere, in an already implied and agreed way of being. The supposed "parallelism" that Turkle suggests does not exist. Real life is not just another window, it is the *only* window, unless of course we treat the life on the screen as a game. As a game our comportment towards the surface we call the screen is entirely different. Without the implied real life, the screen will loose its significance and fail to hold our attention. Indeed computer game designers know this. In their attempt to make games more compelling, they increasingly imbue them with our human way of being. Albert Borgmann (1999) argues that the "unparalleled opportunity" of life on the screen put forward by Turkle

comes at a cost. To secure "the charm of virtual reality at its most glamorous, the veil of virtual ambiguity must be dense and thick. Inevitably, however, such an enclosure excludes the commanding presence of reality. Hence the price of sustaining virtual ambiguity is triviality" (189). Indeed he argues, such "fluid and multiple" identity is only feasible as long as it is "kept barren of real consequences."

Don Ihde (1990) suggests through his phenomenological analysis of human/technology relationships that we embody technology such as screens. He uses the example of wearing eyeglasses. In wearing my eyeglasses I do not only see through them; they also become "see through." In being that which they are, they already withdraw into my own bodily sense as part of the ordinary way I experience my surrounding. Our phenomenology of screens suggests that screens are not just embodied; they are also in a sense already enworlded. By this we mean they are not simply a way we look at the world (as representation of the world for example) but they already imply and draw upon a way of living. Hence, like the eyeglasses, they withdraw into our sense of what is relevant, or is not relevant, as part of our ongoing way of being. In this sense screens are embodied but also simultaneously hermeneutic (in Ihde's sense). Although I might fix my focus on the text or images on the screen, what I actually see is not the screen itself but rather immediately and simultaneously the world it already refers to, the activities, people, or things already implied in the text and images on the screen. As we increasingly draw on screens they withdraw to become for us immediately and already the world itself. However, these hermeneutic possibilities and withdrawal will only take place if the screen is already a screen for us. It is this prior screenness that our analysis brings to the fore.

The work of Vivian Sobchack (1991, 1994, 1999) on the phenomenology of the film experience is also very relevant for our discussion. The object of her work is different to ours in as much as her focus is on the cinematic experience, namely on the experiencing of experience that characterizes the cinematic event. She suggests that in the event of viewing there is a simultaneous embodiment and enworldment of both the film and the viewer. She also suggests that the cinematic experience happens when

> the attitude of our consciousness towards the cinematic object simultaneously positions us as existential subjects in relation to the screen and posits the existential status of what we see there in relation to what we have experienced and know of the life-world we inhabit. (1999:243)

However, our analysis suggests that for this cinematic experience, the ongoing screening, to happen at all, those in front of it must comport themselves towards the screen *as a screen*, rather than as something else. This might seem quite obvious at first glance, however, it has important implications,

as we hope to have shown in this paper. Screen-in-the-world has significant ontological contours because its grounding meaning is already agreement, that is, a grounding of the *worlding* of the world itself. In this sense our analysis inserts itself in the moment prior to the cinematic event. It might be said to be a condition for the cinematic event to happen as such. It seems therefore that Sobchack's work would function as a meaningful extension of our analysis; however, this would be beyond the scope of this paper.

McLuhan's investigations – probes or explorations, as he used to call them – can be said to bear some affinity with our work and with phenomenology more generally. This is clear if one considers his aim to get at what is most essential in a given phenomenon, and his considering of the constant interplay of ground and figure, that is, of how something is what it always and already is within a referential whole or background (Heidegger, 1927/1962). For McLuhan, societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the dominant technology of communication than by the content of the communication itself – hence his famous saying "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1967/2001). He considered that media (he used broad notions of media and technology, making these expressions almost equivalent) by extending human senses or capabilities, alter the environment, evoking in us unique ratios of sense perception. Thus, as human extensions media change us and the way we perceive the world (McLuhan 1967/2001). Contemporary electronic technologies, according to McLuhan (1964/1994, 1967/2001), are so powerful because they are extensions of many of our senses, including of our own nervous system. For him the effects of the new technologies are nothing less than revolutionary. He argued that electronic media will replace the book as our dominant technology of communication. New information that is surrounding us "at the speed of light" cannot be read, only "surfed." One could argue that in today's terms, screens (the television screen, the personal computer screen, etc.) constitute the dominant media, as we indicated in the introduction. As such screens structurally encourage an interplay among our senses, forcing us to participate and get involved. Thus, following McLuhan, we might suggest, that the screen "engages you. You have to be *with* it" (McLuhan, 1964/1994: 312; author's italics). In being "with it" the screen acts as a *translator* (McLuhan, 1964/1994). As such it is a form of knowledge that interprets by excluding. Yet, in doing this the television (or the screen more generally) "does not excite, agitate or arouse" (McLuhan, 1964/1994: 337) as the kind of interplay of the senses it brings about is one of depth of involvement, which is something that always in a sense paralyzes us. Such a McLuhanian argument has many connections with our phenomenological notion of already agreement as the original meaning of screens.

The central intention of this paper has been to enhance our understanding of screens in-the-world. We conclude that the phenomenological meaning of screen qua screen is an ontological agreement, which we express as already

agreement. It is this already agreement that already calls for our attention and holds it. Our analysis only provides a preliminary outline of a full phenomenology of screens. It still requires further critical consideration to expose suppositions yet to be scrutinized. Indeed the work of others such as Sobchack (1991, 1994, 1999) might be taken up fruitfully in extending our analysis to include, for example, the experience of watching screens. In addition our present analysis tends to privilege information-technology based screens. Some additional analysis is necessary to extend it even further. Furthermore, the Heideggerian ontology as well as the methodological approach of this investigation has set its boundaries – clearly other orientations are possible, especially in non-Western contexts. Even within phenomenology we might have chosen other paths such as the pragmatic phenomenology of Ihde (1990, 1993, 2002) or the ontological phenomenology of Ingarden (1962/1989). Given the path we have taken we believe we have shown that the screen is an important phenomenon in contemporary life that merits further elaboration and analysis. This paper is a step towards such a rich and varied phenomenology of screens; as such it opens new and meaningful possibilities for the understanding of screens in our already screened world.

Acknowledgement

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