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# Mauro Carbone, "Philosophy-Screens: From Cinema to the Digital Revolution." Trans. Marta Nijhuis

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**Mauro Carbone.** *Philosophy-Screens: From Cinema to the Digital Revolution.* Trans. Marta Nijhuis. SUNY Press 2019. 166 pp. \$95.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781438474656); \$31.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781438474649).

Film and television are media not much more than one hundred years old. Yet, various historical examples ranging from the Lascaux cave paintings in France, to the projected shadows seen by the prisoners in Book Seven of Plato's *Republic*, to today's ubiquitous culture of smartphones and other screens, indicates that screened images are a perennial and crucial object of vision for Western consciousness. What drives the human fascination, evident from early Western history, with the images that live on screens and other surfaces? In addition, what has led philosophers, especially in the 20th century, to take an interest in reckoning with the meaning and significance of screened images? This brief but penetrating book by the Merleau-Ponty scholar and philosopher of art Mauro Carbone explores these questions. Mixing approaches informed by psychoanalysis, phenomenology, media studies, and anthropology, Carbone's work condenses impressive scholarship into a tightly woven, highly original work.

The text is divided into two parts. The first part is historical in scope, highlighting the sustained engagement with the ontology of moving images among philosophers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book's second part takes a more theoretical approach, exploring the ontology of screened images in their own right by analyzing phenomenology decisive for the evolution of screen media. Here, Carbone develops some provocative views on the unifying traits latent in the various forms of screened images, rounding out the final chapter with a focus on the transformation of screens in the present context.

The book opens with an examination of how 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers understand the advent of cinema. Henri Bergson regards cinematic representation as an illusion; he discounts cinema's capacity to render its subjects meaningfully present (6). Jean-Paul Sartre in his early work on the imagination proposes that cinema 'inaugurates mobility in aesthetics' (5), revealing that motion, and not just stability, functions as an impetus for aesthetic thought. Maurice Merleau-Ponty regards cinema as a medium capable of communicating the gestalt-like character of perception (9-10). And perhaps most well-known, Deleuze in his major two-volume *Cinema* series advances the view that cinematic images can function as a vehicle for philosophy to do its work. In this last guise, Carbone observes, the dawn of cinema in the 20<sup>th</sup> century equally instantiates an epochal change in the nature of thinking. Philosophers come to see that cinema is philosophical, that it 'thinks' in a way that recasts the traditional categories of interior and exterior, space and time, and physical and psychic reality. The 'philosophy-cinema,' as Carbone refers to it (adopting this concept from Deleuze), thus emerges as a medium that can reflect both on being and on itself in cinematic fashion (8).

The heart of Carbone's historical analysis comes with his discussion of Merleau-Ponty in the second chapter. Of special focus is the text 'Film and the New Psychology,' Merleau-Ponty's most well-known essay on cinema, which compares cinema to the lived experience of embodied perception and proposes that cinema uniquely shows the inextricable bond of subject and world. More importantly, Carbone juxtaposes this understanding of cinema with Merleau-Ponty's conception of imagination, particularly as imagination's connection to vision exemplifies the phenomenon of 'precession.' The latter term characterizes the phenomenological, atemporal interdependence of seeing and the seen in vision. Neither comes prior to the other, yet each needs the other in order to be. For Carbone, the crucial takeaway for imagination is this: insofar as imagination and image perception rely on the real, this pairing likewise reveals a cleavage inherent in vision, whereby

perception of the real is interdependent with perception of the imaginary. What this means for cinema is that the imaginary character of its images has a relation of precession with vision's connection to the real. In other words, imaginary and real are not distinct from one another. Carbone summarizes: 'if the image is not a "second thing," this is because of its mutual precession with 'what is.' And it is precisely because of this mutual precession that we see "according to, or with images"' (35).

The third chapter begins by exploring historical conceptions of vision. A question latent in Merleau-Ponty's conception of vision concerns the ambiguity of whether the real appears in the manner of parting of a veil, or whether the real is disclosed through a screen or filter. The former conception construes the seen in a theatrical guise, as if the real were hidden, fundamentally severed from the one who sees. This would render vision as representation. Whereas a screen, Carbone suggests, renders a more direct contact between seeing and the seen (41-2). The chapter goes on to consider some contributions by Jean-Francois Lyotard to this question, particularly as it pertains to vision engagement with cinematic images. Carbone finds it noteworthy that Lyotard's break with phenomenology coincides with the latter's interest in image consciousness, especially the images of cinema. Influenced by Lacan, Lyotard holds that vision in the modern world is to be equated with desire, and furthermore, that desire is associated with motion (44). The moving pictures of cinema, Lyotard suggests, reveal a corresponding structuration in the viewing subject's desires, in a fashion analogous to the manner in which Lacan's mirror provides to the infant a centered impression of identity. In brief, the moving pictures of cinema have a function of satisfying desire for the viewer. At the same time, however, Lyotard observes that the postmodern movement in plastic art and in cinema reveals a transformation of desire. The inner workings of the given medium are put on display, deconstructing the illusion the medium previously afforded. In the case of cinema, Carbone suggests, the viewing surface, or screen, what Lyotard calls the 'specular wall,' comes into focus (45). As Carbone describes, Lyotard's legacy reveals that a change in the ontology of vision has occurred in tandem with a change in desire. This change has an equal corresponding effect on the technologies that enable vision, for instance, cinematic images and other screen media. This transformation sets up a thesis at work for the remainder of the book, namely that the 'technologies of perception and expression' both mediate and shape our bodily existence, especially embodied vision (52).

The remaining chapters comprise the second of the book's two parts. A central position of chapter 4 holds that historical conceptions of screen media variously suggests a phenomenological truth about screened images and their way of captivating human beings. Screens have comprised a constant, sought-after vehicle for seeing images (71); they enhance and shape the faculty of imagination. Screens present their subjects under the guise of constant presence and contact, as we see with the advent of television and the internet (76-7). Carbone calls this historical theme the 'arche-screen,' in order to convey that the screen 'does not give itself preliminarily to and independently from its "variations"' (66). The arche-screen has the character of appearing in countless variations, but also exceeding these, becoming only in the manner of these media's own ways of becoming, and as noted importantly above, transforming in tandem with desire.

Chapter 5 advances the view that the proliferation of screens in the contemporary world reveals screens' 'seductive' power (81). That is, because the human captivation with screens operates in tandem with desire, the enhanced vision granted by screens both enhances and increases desire. But screens do not merely enhance seeing and the seen; they also foster an increased desire of subjectivity to *be seen*. A paradigm case Carbone cites is an interactive video billboard in New York's Times Square, placed on display in 2010, in which a video image of a Forever 21 model

beckoned to passersby and put them in the picture (87). Beyond this instance, however, a more telling, living example for Carbone is the global adoption of social media applications in personal smartphones. The proliferation of these applications, as Carbone writes in the final chapter, demonstrates a fully realized instance of screens converting desire into panoptic vision (as evidenced with the post 9/11 24-hour news cycle) and into ever-increased visibility of the self (101-02), this last phenomenon evidenced with the explosion of platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. In the end, smartphones appear to have become prosthetic seeing devices (104-5), which is to say, tools permanently grafted onto the human body which also fundamentally transform embodied vision.

Carbone's book, while quite dense and challenging, offers a number of profound insights into the advent and contemporary life of screens. One picking up this text should not expect an easy read, but it is a book that rewards careful study. Here is my principal caveat with the text: it is almost too difficult and condensed to be accessible, with Carbone often shifting focus or taking leaps in logic that are not clear at first glance. All of these things being said, the book deserves to be considered as a vital primary source for philosophy's reckoning with the significance of screens.

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