The Concept of the Mental Screen

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The Concept of the Mental Screen: The Internalized Screen, the Dream Screen, and the Constructed Screen

Roger Odin

The most common definitions of the screen characterize it as a more or less large surface on which information is displayed (text, still or animated images, interface controls, etc.) by projection, transparency (slide), scanning, or contact. A screen designed like this is a physical object. I would like to show, here, that to understand what happens in a number of communicational situations, it is necessary to introduce, in opposition to the physical screen, the concept of the mental screen.

The Internalized Screen

To begin this reflection, I would like to share a story, told to me by a friend who is a specialist in image analysis: in the 1960s, my friend took his six-year-old son to see a football match at the local stadium; until then the child had only seen matches on TV, which at the time was in black and white; on entering the stadium, the boy said, “But it’s all in color!” My friend clearly intended for this to be a fable about the influence of television on young minds. However, I will draw a different conclusion, a theoretical one: the child had internalized the television screen so much that he evaluated reality with regard to this mental screen. I will use the term internalized screens to describe screens that have a physical existence, but that we carry in our mind (but obviously the term screen here covers both the actual screen and the device which it is part of).

I now want to use this concept to analyze a phenomenon that has taken on a remarkable importance today: the migration of movies from the cinema screen, for which they were intended, to other screens. Obviously, the television screen was the first and favorite place for this migration; it certainly still is, but today this migration also occurs on computer screens, tablets, and mobile phones.

To account for this movement, it is important first to construct the physical communication space of cinema; it can be defined as the theater space with all it implies: an enclosed space, spectators present throughout the film, a projection
in the dark on a large screen with surround sound. Nowadays, it is this device that we immediately think of when we think of “cinema”: cinema has become a mental screen, a screen that functions as a constraint when you see a movie in a physical communication space other than the cinema space.

So when I decide to watch a movie on a television screen, I am well aware that I am not in the physical cinema space, but the reference to the term “movie” invites me to expect that the communication will take place in the cinema space; hence the risk of conflict between the desired mental screen and the television space in which I am situated (the points of conflict are multiple: unprotected environment, screen size, image resolution, sound quality). Producers of TV shows devoted to movies and television manufacturers are well aware of this issue and provide introducers to help viewers better understand the relationship between the mental cinema screen and the physical television space. These introducers can be classified into two categories: discursive introducers and pragmatic introducers.

Discursive introducers are the opening credits and introduction of a TV program. For example, in La dernière séance (1982-1998), we see Eddy Mitchell enter a film theater (it is night time, it is crowded, the word “cinema” flickers on the facade of the building); he buys his ticket, chats up the usher and settles into his seat facing the screen on which the film is beginning. The idea is that viewers feel as if they were accompanying Eddy Mitchell (being “put in sync” [mise en phases] by the narrative structure of this opening sequence) and mentally enter the cinema space.

Cinémademinuit (1976-) plays on mythical references: stills from films depicting couples composed of an actor and an actress (stars) alternate in a cross-fading sequence. Cinéma cinémas (1982-1991) uses a symbolic dimension; the opening sequence mimics what constitutes the essence of the act of seeing a movie, entering “another” space (the diegesis of the story told): each sequence is introduced by a tracking shot in black and white (from Jean-Luc Godard’s movie Alphaville) where a man opens one door after another in a long corridor, discovering a different movie sequence each time; the movement of the camera and the opening of the doors become an introducer with great emotional impact.

By pragmatic introducer, I mean devices intended to modify the physical space of the viewing itself, in this case, the television space. This is the strategy of home cinema systems, which can transform your living room into a movie theater with ad hoc chairs, a window shutter system to make the room dark, a surround-sound installation (advertised as “Sound like the cinema in your living room in no time”) and, of course, a very large screen with a constantly increased resolution (the debate is launched on the competition between giant TV screens and video projectors; video headsets are also in the running).
But using the notion of introducer is not enough: to understand how the migration of a movie from one screen to another operates, we must give ourselves the means to describe the relationship that we have with the cinema space, i.e., how we summon it mentally and also how we construct it. Until now, I have reasoned as if the cinema space was defined once and for all, but this is not actually the case. The definition I provided is indeed very widespread, but it can be adjusted depending on the generation to which the audience belongs (those who have experienced cinema before the emergence of television, those born when television was already well established, those of the computer and mobile phone generation) and also depending on the personal history of the viewer.

In my case, for example, I was accustomed from a young age, long before going to the movies, to see films on a screen the size of a packet of cigarettes (my father was an amateur filmmaker and showed me his films on an 8mm viewer, which he used for editing); as a consequence, I do not mind watching movies on my mobile phone. I suggest calling **connectors** the relationships between the viewer and the cinema space.

I will use the term **exclusive rigid connector** to indicate a relationship that rejects outside of cinema any device that does not correspond to the cinema space as I have defined it. This is the position of Raymond Bellour: “The projection of a movie in a dark room, the time prescribed of a more or less collective screening, became and remains the condition for a unique experience of perception and memory defining the spectator and that any other situation more or less alters. That alone can be called ‘cinema.’” In this perspective, the cinema experience is linked to a specific space and cannot therefore be experienced on TV and even less so on the screen of a mobile phone.

A second kind of connector is the **inclusive rigid connector**: it is a rigid connector, because, as in the previous example, it aims at preserving the specificity of the “cinema” experience, but here the spectator makes the effort to mentally force the physical communication space to mimic the cinema space, even in conditions that might first seem incompatible with the cinema experience (watching a movie on your mobile phone while on the subway for example). In With Eyes With Hands, Francesco Casetti and Sara Sampietro have clearly explained the process that is at work here, speaking of the possibility of constructing existential bubbles [...] that allow the subject to create an individual space even within collective environments. When using a medium in public situations, one often surrounds oneself with invisible barriers that offer refuge, even though one continues to feel open to the gazes of others. This situation is not dissimilar from that of the traditional movie theater, in which one slips from a collective encounter to individual attention to film; in the first moment
one confronts the surrounding public; in the second moment one enters into intimacy with what is represented on the screen. The mobile cinematic spectator reactivates this situation. The institution of this “bubble” allows him to ideally replicate the spatial structure that characterizes the movie theater, even in open and practicable environments.\(^7\)

This is inclusion: the mental cinema screen encompasses and somehow erases the physical space. One should emphasize here the role of the desire of cinema and the importance of attention, which allows one not only to abstract oneself from the physical context but also to make do with the small screen. This positioning is certainly fragile, but it works: I once missed my subway stop because I was so immersed in watching a movie.

The third connector could be called flexible as it aims at doing everything to preserve our cinema enjoyment, including intervening into the physical viewing space and the cinema space itself. This is adaptation, negotiation. Buying a Home Cinema system reflects this approach. Regarding mobile phones, buying a model with a screen as large as possible,\(^8\) putting on a headset to be immersed in the movie soundtrack and eliminating as much as possible the sounds of the street, pertains to the same approach too. But other pragmatic introducers can also be used; for example, adapting your subway route to the length of the movie that you plan on watching on your mobile phone or vice versa: choosing a movie depending on your route. The definition of cinema space can also be adapted. In Que reste-t-il du cinéma? Jacques Aumont admits that “the mental model” of cinema can work on various devices – for example in front of the family TV and even on a computer – but he considers that “any movie presentation that leaves me free to interrupt or modulate this experience is not cinematographic”: “this is not cinema.”\(^9\) For Aumont, cinema can be defined as “the production of a gaze held in time.”\(^10\) Although it is somewhat ambiguous – what does the sentence “any movie presentation that leaves me free to interrupt” actually mean? Are we not always free to stop watching a movie, if only by closing our eyes or looking at the person sitting next to us? It seems to me that this definition opens up the possibility of experiencing the pleasure of cinema on virtually any screen: it is, then, only a matter of will from the viewer, who will make the effort (or not) to keep his eyes still for the duration of the movie.

Finally, I will use the term open connector when viewers enjoy, without asking themselves too many questions, the different ways of watching a movie on the various screens available to them, with their disadvantages but also their benefits (for example, mobile phones do have a small screen, but you can watch a movie at any time, in all places, and it allows a unique tactile experience of the image\(^11\)).

This approach can mainly be found among viewers accustomed from an early age to switching from one screen to another: for them, cinema is a mobile practice and the cinema space is associated with a nebula of various physical spaces.
(TV, computer, tablet, mobile phone) in which the movie theater and its large screen is only one space among others (important, indeed, but not the preferred space).

As we can see, taking into account the mental cinema screen is essential to analyzing the communication process at work when we watch a movie in another space.

**The Dream Screen**

To preserve its heritage, the “family” institution has used, throughout history, various operators: graves, chapels, sculpture, painted portraits, medallions, fetish objects (hair strands, menus, candied almonds) that are displayed under a glass dome in the living room or bedroom, or captured on sound recording, photography, film (16mm, 9.5, 8, super 8), analog then digital video. These operators can be classified into two categories: operators with the status of objects (they are there, present, visible to everyone) and operators whose function requires the use of a device that allows them to produce meaning and affects (without this device they communicate nothing). This distinction seems essential to me in order to understand what happened to home movies.

In the early years of cinema, people kept emphasizing the benefits of this technology compared to photography. In its issue dated December 30, 1885, the newspaper *La Poste* wrote: “When these devices [film cameras] will be available to the public, when everyone will be able to photograph their loved ones, not in their immobile form, but in their movements, in their actions, in their familiar gestures, with words on their lips, death will cease to be absolute.”

Yet, it soon became clear that the switch from the object operator, photography, to the device operator, the home movie, was not without its problems. Despite the efforts made to improve the situation in terms of cost and ease of use of equipment, watching a home movie is still a much more complicated process than looking at photographs: first, one needs a room that can (somehow) be blacked-out; one must then get out the projector, install a screen or a white cloth that will serve the purpose (but where and how to fix it?) and set up the chairs so that the heads of the spectators do not get in the way of the projector beam. In short, one must transform one’s dining room into a movie theater. Then, one must load the movie in the projector, which requires some skill and takes time. The projection finally starts, but it is not without its own risks: the film can jump, be scratched, break, or the lamp can burn out. One is also submitted to the constraint of the constant running of the film: if one starts making comments as one would usually do when looking at a photograph, if a discussion ensues, if viewers start evoking memories, one ends up missing part of the movie, which continues inexorably to run. To summarize, although it naturally appears indispensable to watching a movie, the cinema communication space
seems rather poorly suited to family communication. This is where the concept of the dreamed screen comes along: to escape these constraints, one begins to dream of another space. One must then find an operator suitable for this space.

Manufacturers of equipment for amateur filmmakers have thus offered projectors-screens (the screen is on the projector itself) to watch movies by simply placing the projector on a table; no need for a complicated setup or even to black-out the room, you just need to gather around the projector: a communication space totally different from the cinema space. Yet, this communication space is still far from ideal: you still have to get the projector out, load the film in the projector, while the risks and constraints due to the constant running of the film are still there. As a result, these innovations were a flop. One must also say that they were very expensive.

The move to video was a more significant progress towards the dream mental screen: firstly, as the television and the VCR were already in the living room or dining room, there was no need for specific installation and running the tape no longer posed any problems; secondly, and this is probably the major breakthrough, the addition of the pause and rewind buttons on the recorder allowed viewers to stop the movie or to watch a sequence again to comment on it and share their opinions with others. But it was still far from the flexibility of photography.

The dream screen would be an operator that one can hold in one’s hand, watch as long as one likes, as many times as one likes, alone or with others, a screen that one can carry around, that one can keep with oneself at all times, an operator allowing for exchange and discussion, an operator that can be passed from hand to hand and that would even allow one, like photography, to send moving images to distant family members or friends.

Today, this operator does exist: it is the mobile phone. With the mobile phone, I carry in my pocket both a screen and a whole collection of home movies I can choose between, which I can watch alone or with others, any time, any place, that I can easily share (“pass me the movie then means pass me the mobile phone”), of which I can adjust the viewing as I please (do a freeze frame, rewind, fast-forward) and that I can, with a simple click, send to anyone near or far. The dream screen has become a physical screen.

Note: If you change point of view in terms of relevance and switch from the memory function to the social function, it appears that something has disappeared in this transition to a new communication screen: the ritual value of the home movie, linked precisely to the cinema space. One must note, however, that this ritual value has probably lost much of its importance in today’s families. The evolution of communication spaces indeed follows social evolution.

It is interesting to note that the story about the “grafting” of the camera onto a mobile phone, as told by Laurence Allard in Mythologie du portable seems to sug-
gest that this assemblage originates precisely from the desire to give substance to this dream screen.14

In 1977, Philippe Kahn, a computer scientist, who came to support his wife during childbirth, with, as usual, a small camera and his mobile phone, realized that he would like to send a picture of the baby to his family and friends; while his wife was in labor, Kahn began to tinker with his devices. By the time he found the solder wire, his daughter was born and he could use his makeshift device to take a picture on his mobile phone and send it by e-mail. True, false, or arranged, this anecdote is significant: described like this, the addition of the camera is undertaken in the context of private communication as an enhanced phone call and a family photo. The objective is therefore to turn the mobile phone into a memory communication device within the family space. One then naturally switches from the camera to shooting movies.

The Constructed Screen or the Screen as a Frame

In La vie esthétique, Laurent Jenny recalls a curious experience:

As often, my eye was attracted by the picturesque display of one of those New York stores open day and night and run by Pakistanis, offering a motley selection of merchandise ranging from ballpoint pens to bouquets of flowers [...]. Mechanically, I took out my cell phone... and to see even more, I fell again into my habit of zooming in, focusing on the transparence effects between ice cubes and pineapple chunks. I looked at the result immediately and it filled me with astonishment. The subject had become totally unrecognizable, replaced by an undeniably Cubist composition reminding me of the wonderful years between 1908-1912 when Braque and Picasso competed at the edge of abstraction. [...] The whole image gave the impression that colors and shapes had been crushed into a frame that can barely contain them and from which they would have liked to escape.15

Here, the mobile phone works both as an optical filter (with the zoom, it becomes a sort of “cultural series”16 of prisms, lenses, distorting mirrors, etc.) and as a frame that, as emphasized by Laurent Jenny, violates reality by coercing it. The physical screen is the place of a construction that transforms it into a mental screen leading the viewer to see the world through the pictorial space.

As underlined by Laurent Jenny, this phenomenon is not new. Regarding this, he quotes a passage of In Search of Lost Time in which Marcel Proust mentions this “framed vision”:17 in the train taking him to Balbec, Marcel Proust suddenly sees the sunrise through the window of the carriage: “In the pale square of the window, over a small black wood I saw some ragged clouds whose fleecy edges were of a fixed, dead pink, not liable to change, like the color that dyes the wing which
has grown to wear it, or the sketch upon which the artist’s fancy has washed it.” As a bend caused him to lose this magical vision, Marcel spends his time running from one window to another “to reassemble, to collect on a single canvas the intermittent, antipodean fragments of my fine, scarlet, ever-changing morning, and to obtain a comprehensive view of it and a continuous picture.”

“Caught in the train of existence,” comments Laurent Jenny, “he applies to it the windows of art,” then adding: “There is nothing here of course that can surprise us, we who look at the world not merely through windows, but through the digital screens of our cameras and mobile phones.”

Looking at reality through a frame has now become something natural. It is as if having a screen-frame constantly at our disposal (i.e., the specific affordance of the mobile phone, the phablets, and small cameras) reactivating a thousand-year-old process, which, according to evolutionary anthropology, has somewhat forged our way of seeing: the desire of our hunter-gatherer ancestors to find a vantage point to see without being seen by protecting themselves under a shelter and the frame constituted by the branches of trees. The screen-frame makes us “feel protected while we engage in a quiet visual exploration,” notes cognitivist Laurent Jullier. It is the consequences of this increasingly significant presence of the screen-frame in the space of everyday life that interest me here.

A first observation is that the fact of framing helps us to see better and make the world be seen. I have often been fascinated by how children use a mobile phone, which was given to them: visiting a museum for example, they turn and turn around the works of art to select those they will put in their personal archive; walking in nature, they look for insects, flowers, or stones to photograph, with an attention to the things of the world that they had never shown much interest in before. Similar behavior can be observed in some tourists. All the theorists of the frame emphasize its power of concentration (preventing the gaze from wandering), insulation and ostension (it has a deictic value).

Here, the mobile phone is part of the “cultural series” of microscopes, telescopes, etc. However, it would be wrong to stop there. Framing is not just simple observation: the screen is a mental operator, a filter that produces distance and changes the perception of reality as it introduces points of reference (the edges of the frame) that lead us to build relationships that do not exist in reality.

Very often, this process is coupled with a will to communicate. Louis Marin has shown how the frame in painting is a device aimed at predicting the viewer’s gaze. All photographers and filmmakers know this: framing means choosing a “view” on the world and transmitting it to the viewer. What is new today is that everyone is aware of this mental process. One sees, for example, how participants in a demonstration are anxious to frame their images to show what the media often does not show (i.e., police brutality), to locate the place for authentication purposes (by filming street names), to cause a reaction (framing close-ups with highly emotional images, i.e., the swollen face of a beaten protester). With
these techniques of construction, the screen does not work in the present, but is projected mentally into the future.

Finally, the desire to see something “framed” reflects a will to transform the world into an aesthetic space: “What was a refined aesthetic practice has become a kind of democratic habitus,” notes a somewhat disillusioned Laurent Jenny. Let us observe ourselves looking at the world through the screen of our mobile phone: we move this frame until the game of relationships that is created satisfies us. In so doing, we eject from our field of vision everything that is outside the frame. The frame cuts and eliminates, reflecting our will to select in the world what we want to keep, what seems interesting or “beautiful” to us. The frame is a beauty operator (“Look how beautiful it is”). But there is more, as Karl Sierek pointed out. This operator does not just fix the presence in the moment, it aims at a building to capture “for the future a state that will be experienced as beautiful.” The screen tells us: “Tomorrow, it will have been beautiful.” The frame creates a mental screen that fixes the world in beauty for eternity. One can see this movement as a way to extract or at least to protect oneself from the world and its hazards. The frame effect can then turn into a screen effect: framing to make something seen, but also screening oneself from the world.

One also tends to turn the frame-screen towards oneself (more and more often) to make a self-portrait (when this self-portrait is designed to be put online, it is called selfie). The process shows both a will for self-distancing (the frame-screen is held at arm’s length), but also a will for self-affirmation by including oneself in a chosen space, with or without chosen partners. In a way, it is the opposite of taking family photographs (photo or home movie) that was imposed upon us: it was generally an initiative of the father; I have shown in other work how traumatic this could be, especially for children. Framing oneself is a process of mental construction aiming at reappropriating one’s image through the voluntary gesture of photographing oneself. Morphing is part of this phenomenon: you laugh, alone or collectively, at the distortions that you impose on your face, but it is you who operates software. This is another function of the frame-screen: the screen is a mental go-between the self, self-representation, and the world. In an interview with Le Monde, Laurent Jenny rightly notes: “Have you ever noticed that people use their mobile phones not to photograph and record, but to look immediately at what they’ve just taken? They somehow want to have a ‘framed’ vision, to see themselves or what they observe set in a frame [...]” As clearly demonstrated by Laurence Allard (drawing on the reflections of Michel Foucault), this process belongs to the “technologies of the self”; that is to say, the “procedures [...] that are proposed or prescribed to individuals in order to determine, maintain or transform their identity.” Through the frame, the screen functions as an operator in the construction of the self.
Conclusion

This essay has no other ambition than to offer more tools for the analysis of communication in the spaces centered on the screen.\textsuperscript{32} The notion of a mental screen has been developed in three parts. The notion of internalized screens corresponds to physical screens (cinema, television) that have become mental spaces. Dream screens are mental screens waiting for physical manifestation; one must note that this type of screen is the source of certain inventions: cinema and television have been dream screens before being invented. If these two types of screens have the common characteristic of being in us, the status of the frame-screen is a little different: it is a physical screen that a construction process transforms into a mental screen (a screen functioning as an operator generating various mental processes).

In the three examples studied here, the screens do not have the same function. In the case of a film seen outside the cinema space, the mental cinema screen appears as a constraint that may cause a failure of communication. In the case of the home movie, on the contrary, the mental screen is what allows us to escape the constraints that impede communication, it is a liberator. Finally, the constructed screen, i.e., the frame-screen, regulates our relationship with the world, with others and with ourselves. One final note: this trivialization of the frame-screen should not hide the opposite trend, even if it is still marginal: its disappearance with the emergence of virtual reality.\textsuperscript{33}

Translated by Nick Cowling and Marie-Noëlle Dumaz