

## Reflections on The Resurfacing of the Screen at The Whitney Humanities Center

As more than a month has passed since The Whitney Humanities Center hosted The Resurfacing of the Screen, it seems appropriate to begin our reflections with a meditation on the space, conceptual and physical, that the workshop opened up at Yale. As Film and Media Studies graduate students, we would like, first and foremost, to extend our thanks to those who made our presence at the weekend's events possible, by literally making space for us at tables and including us in meals and catering plans -- to Francesco Casetti, Rüdiger Campe, and Craig Buckley, as well as to Gary Tomlinson and the Humanity/Humanities initiative at the WHC, and to Katherine Germano for her inveterate organizing. The weekend was a model of collegiality, both in the knowledge and experience we gained as students listening to the diverse presentations, but also in the sense of shared responsibility we felt in creating and preserving a space that allowed for a single concept -- the screen -- to transport us from digital mandalas to Helen Frankenthaler's paintings to medical screening technologies. It signaled, and was exemplary of, the best kind of interdisciplinary work that occurs at Yale when a key concept (the very notion of the screen's resurfacing pointing to its contemporary currency) is explored along multiple lines of thinking, allowing for historical and theoretical valences to emerge and co-exist.

The surfacing of the screen revealed itself as a surprisingly early phenomenon of which its digital heydays are the outcome of a long and ongoing development of shifts and changes. The fact that we encounter screens on a daily basis and that it is technology surrounding the world rather than the other way around has become common sense. However, the very beginnings of image projection widely depended on the human body as their material ground, namely the hand. That the hand would serve as a screen might – after a closer look – not come as a surprise given its relevance as the organ of sensory self-affirmation. Touch is what brings one

closer to the world and allows for the distinction between subject and object. In the wake of early 20<sup>th</sup> century mechanization the hand might therefore be read as a counterbalance to the manifold apparatuses challenging the sensory abilities of the human body. As Ruggero Eugeni has shown in his talk, one such emphasis on the hand vs. the apparatus can be found in the emergence of the flat hand figuring as a screen for hypnosis, a phenomenon that found its way into numerous examples of early cinema. This questions notions of filmic versus psychic imagination as well as haptic versus visual immediacy of the filmic medium. The hand as screen also underpinned the invention of x-ray technology with the first x-ray image depicting the hand of Wilhelm Röntgen's wife. Beatriz Colomina showed the popularization of x-ray images through photo books of the era, which generally included a high number of x-rayed hands. On that end, Colomina suggested a possible thinking of the permeability of modern architecture along the lines of the pervasive nature of x-ray technology – an argument that shows how much the ubiquity and pervasiveness of screens should not only be scrutinized as merely a contemporary phenomenon but traced back to its historical breeding grounds with the hand figuring prominently among them.

Another stimulating conversation that emerged during the workshop addressed the material topology of the screen. There was a collective drive to dispel the notion that the screen is inherently an inert, flat surface that receives the light emitted from the projector. Theoretical frameworks of expansion, dematerialization, and transmutation, manifested themselves across the papers. Bernhard Siegert, through invoking the films of Jean Epstein and the still photography of Hiroshi Sugimoto, produced an ontological model of the screen based upon the viscous and entropic properties of water. This fluidity also aligns with other feats of engineering, such as microwave radar and computer graphic interfaces. Colomina was also interested in the

archaeology of imaging technologies but instead introduces translucent glass in a different topology. Also rooted in discussion of physical chemistry, her discussion challenged the opacity of the screen and the strict delineation between “inside” and “outside” of bodies and inanimate objects. Carol Armstrong offered yet another disciplinary approach in her reading of the paintings of Paul Cézanne and Helen Frankenthaler, whose canvases and dynamic experiments with spatial depth challenged the conventional verticality, flatness, and rational illusionism of the screen. In passing from water to glass and finally to canvas, we not only observe a multifarious topology but survey the means in which cinema studies, architecture, and the history of art interrogate the ontology of the screen.

As the Film and Media Studies program at Yale explores the implications and new directions of its renaming, two things become evident: Yale is already a place where fertile new thinking about media studies is taking place in departments ranging from Art History to English. To append Film Studies with Media, then, is neither a hopeful designation nor a helpless capitulation to the new. Rather, what *is* new about Film and Media Studies at Yale is the designation of a meeting point within the university, the creation of a home for this type of thinking. We might recall that the birth of film studies itself was rent with controversies and debates over legitimacy; with the benefit of hindsight, however, we might realize that, deflecting the questions about medium and art for a moment, what the birth of film studies really *birthed* was certain habits of thinking that transformed the humanities at large. This is the vantage point, hopeful and exploratory, that *The Resurfacing of the Screen* leads to.