

Screenology: the visual dimensions of experience

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Our social existence is increasingly contaminated by relations with images and the presence of the screen. From the perspective of understanding the spirit of the times, we can therefore highlight the construction of a vision of the world expressed by images and screens that form a particular dimension of the experience. How then do images and screens structure our social imaginary? What are the forms of the experiences of everyday life? Questions that will lead us to reflect on an existence in which seeing becomes a central action of the current social world through the perspective of screenology as an effect and condition of a technological and media environment in which screens must be thought of as inhabited surfaces.

Keywords: screen, imaginary, images, visual culture, mediology

Ecrãlogia : a dimensão visual da experiência

Resumo

A nossa existência social está cada vez mais contaminada pelas relações com as imagens e pela presença do ecrã. Da perspectiva da compreensão do espírito dos tempos, podemos, portanto, destacar a construção de uma visão do mundo expressa por imagens e ecrãs que formam uma dimensão particular da experiência. Como é que as imagens e ecrãs estruturam então o nosso imaginário social? Quais são as formas das experiências da vida quotidiana? Estas perguntas levam-nos a refletir sobre uma existência em que o ver se torna uma ação central do mundo social atual através da perspectiva da screenologia como efeito e condição de um ambiente tecnológico e mediático em que os ecrãs devem ser pensados como superfícies habitadas.

Palavras-chave: ecrã, imaginário, imagens, cultura visual, mediologia

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“So, once again: don't think, but look!”

(Wittgenstein, 1984, p. 277)

Our epoch is increasingly characterized by the prominence of the image as a visual dimension of the social world. The current cultural panorama is distinguished by a visual environment that surrounds us in a period that, according to Gillian Rose (2007), is defined as "oculocentric" where the centrality of vision predominates as a contamination effect of the social body. The experience of the world, our way of being in the world, is thus that of a visual incorporation in which the form and act of “seeing” represents both an outlet for knowledge and an interactive form with the world. The centrality of the eye - it should be emphasized that this centrality does not negate the other senses in the act of knowledge and interaction - shows us how we are increasingly in an action of visually

seeking out the elements of our world. A visual attention where the act of seeing is a central action and where the gaze, following the analysis of Anne Sauvageot (1994), represents a product of the social and also a producer of knowledge. In this case, it can express the process of "knowing how to see" the world through the practices of visualization, which means saying and constructing a narrative of the world, producing a *Weltanschauung*: thus, a vision of the world based on the act of visualization in order to determine the pieces of our reality. From this point of view, it will be necessary to adapt a comprehensive epistemological posture that highlights a multi-perspective from which Visual Culture Studies should be nourished in order to propose a knowledge of this socio-visual world.

Moreover, visual culture, placing at the centre of the analysis the dynamics of images as a perceptive and communicative modality and also of the social construction of reality, operates according to our perspective an attitude of "monstration", that means an action capable to producing meaning and knowledge and establishing an aesthetic-sensitive vision of the world of everyday life. Heuristically, the sensible as a faculty of "feeling" and the sensitive theory that emphasizes the senses, show the effects of a process of visualization of the world and of the visual character of experience that should also be considered as a kind of scientific spirit and epistemological revolution rehabilitating, following Gilbert Durand's (1960) perspective, the role of images and the imaginary in the process of knowledge. By emphasizing the importance of the image and the perceptual process of seeing and knowing, there is an indexical relationship with the real. The profusion of images and visual devices transforms and affects the social body. And in this direction of a sociological sensibility allowing us to present the world in which we live, the act of showing points the way, the indication and the making of seeing, generating what can be called a "monstrating instance" of the image that represents a record of what our eye pays attention to.

We must immerse ourselves in the visual dimension of the world by accentuating the intensification of visual solicitation where the image is to be thought of in a "climatological" form of the daily life since it participates in the constitution of social spheres and represents an epistemological typology of knowledge. A phenomenological sensibility is also in action in this profusion of images that relate our consciousness to the things of the world by developing, in a Husserlian perspective (Husserl, 1950), a "vision of essences". Our gaze is then directed towards these various "essences" in order to illustrate socio-cultural aspects where the image is a condition of possibility, a space in which, following Walter Benjamin's (1936/2003) thought, our experience is consumed.

From a paradigmatic perspective, concerning our contemporary *zeitgeist* there is a need to change the conceptual structure with which we look at the world. A form of adjustment with the *zeitgeist* is necessary in order to indicate the directions in which to look, a model from which to establish a theoretical elaboration of a worldview. If Benjamin's (1936/2003) *angelus novus* had his gaze backwards in time directed towards the past, today this gaze is plunged towards the present in a form of attention to the action of adapting the eye and the mind to a new mode of seeing which must, as a consequence, consider the technical evolution and the instruments of vision. In this type of discourse, which is based on the evolution of ways of seeing and thinking, we can focus on contemporary visual structures in which the evolution of technology, from the point of view of social changes, cultural aspects and devices, favours and adapts the instruments of seeing. The communicative forms, the apparatuses allowing us to see and to make see are then essential since the perception of the lived is never independent of the technical structure and of the instruments allowing us to enlarge the seizure of the real. Technique, in this sense, constructs and produces the real and it is thus possible to highlight the various visual alterations that influence our modality of vision through a logic of mediological succession where visual language has an increasing socio-aesthetic significance.

In a type of voyage, or path of the social imaginary, we can illustrate the different techno-media successions that permeate our social sphere and channel us towards a trans-immersion in an ever more visual context that also influences knowledge. If in the modern era knowledge was conveyed by verbal language, in our contemporary era images are increasingly becoming the predominant

cultural form, generating the conception of a world as image. Moreover, let us remember that the crisis of the grand narratives illustrated by Jean-François Lyotard (1979) coincides with the passage from a textual culture to a visual culture.

From a historical point of view, we have witnessed a predominance of the visual with the multiple transmutations of photography and cinema as arts of making people see and show, and that have a visual attention on the world. Thus the emergence of a famous iconic turn, – named by Gottfried Boehm (1994) in his questioning *Was ist ein bild?* (What is an image?) and then developed by W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) with his pictorial turn – which is to be understood not as a simple affirmation of the massive presence of images but as much by its importance in designating the prevalence of images as producers of meaning, thereby announcing a hermeneutic turn, that is to say, a knowledge of images to be conceived also in the direction of the consideration of the advent of new technologies. Boehm's iconic turn indicated that the image is a founding act of meaning (Stiegler, 2008); we are faced with a paradigm shift defining certain iconic logos that is found in the action of seeing and in the logic of images, to be understood as "the logic of monstration" (Boehm, 2010, p. 35). Thus, the iconic turn places us in a reformulation of the status of the image and a paradigmatic mutation accentuating the value of visual studies against what Mitchell (1994) called "the imperialism of textuality" by seeking to establish a thinking with and about images. Of course, this does not mean, in our opinion, a binary confrontation between language and image or the cancellation of one in relation to the other. This would be too broad a discourse to undertake here, and we are content to point out that the image is a language expressing the meaning of reality, and this "turn" shows the evolution of the image in the social world, which today must also be understood in the perspective of the influence of technological mutation defining visual literacy, and we could speak of a kind of techno iconic turn.

So, this does not mean erasing language, but considering the importance of the visual as a text and as a language that is founded and articulated via new digital forms that allow us, remaining in the logic of Boehm's (1994) thought, to express new meanings. If, on the one hand, we are experiencing visual chaos or even visual disruption or a phase of visual shock that invades our daily lives, we must nevertheless consider images in a dynamic relationship in the sense that these images, as Mitchel (1994) observes, are living subjects interacting with the individual/spectator. The proliferation of images in the age of their technological reproducibility (La Rocca, 2015) is also to be understood as one of the possible ways to access the world. A world made of images and a world in images, or a world as an image, illustrating to us that the image constitutes a characteristic element in the social construction of reality. In each era the image has a specificity in a cultural context and with its own expressive forms, and besides being a medium of transmission it must also be thought of as a *medium* allowing us to understand and know the world. We are in a logic of visual display and presentation where the various instruments of visualization represent a foundation from which social reality is constructed. Echoing the historical analysis of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), we can show that the image participates in this process and through it we perceive reality, that is the world of everyday life in its immanent presence that we share with others. It is in the banalities of everyday life that we must immerse ourselves in order to highlight the importance of the image and the imaginary as structuring forms that crystallize this everyday experience. Crystallization as a vision of a world that represents the mirror of the lived experience where it is possible to observe a visual *Bildung* as an informative and formative process from which images play an edifying role of social connection with its multiple verifiable meanings in their presence mediating interactions and interconnections. The presence of the image is not only a mirror of the world, but also an edification of this world in which individuals give meaning to their actions via images that one must be able to interpret and identify with symbolic meanings as produced in a social activity and with both ontological and phenomenological impact on reality.

Images, it should be remembered, are not faithful copies of reality but are the figurative and presented reality to which we want to give meaning through the configurations of reciprocal exchange that today we increasingly actualize through the practice of the shared image (Gunthert, 2015) via technologies.

The techno-media environment is to be considered as a form of influence on the lived experience where we can observe the preponderance of the development of the existential inter-facial relationship between individuals indicating a characteristic of the use of devices and their conditioning on the social world. A path of the imaginary is then created that encompasses the techno-media succession that originates in the forms of the lived experience of our contemporaneity contaminated by nomadic objects, immediacy, emotional messages, the circulation of visual emotions in communicational flows, the screenology of existence and presence via digital interfaces. This ensemble, in our perspective, generates a type of technological *Dasein* through which we inhabit our world by means of communicational platforms. It is a post-organic situation in which being merges with technique, creating a hybridism that we can highlight through a techno-symbolic penetration that modifies sensory aspects. Let us think, for example, of the various mutations in everyday life such as the "screen" presence, the smartphone, hyper-connectivity, the ubimedia logic and what we call the man-flow. These are some of the elements that seem to us to be relevant to express the era in which we are located and in which there is the possibility of observing the passage from mono-psychic centrality to the flux-schizoid personality, thereby decreeing the death of the Cartesian subject and the current hybrid presence of the symbiotic man.

From the perspective of the process of constructing social reality and identities and the consequent "connective affinities" (Susca, 2016), we must reflect this hybrid fusion of reality with digital inhabitation and its multiple windows which, according to Sherry Turkle (1996), in everyday life through interfaces become metaphors for thinking the self as a multiple system. Following Turkle's (1996) analysis, we can legitimately question whether we live on or in the screen. But we can also add through the screen. This makes manifest the way in which the individual is in a situation of photo-presence, video-presence: that is to say, a perceptive visualization of the being and its modes of inhabitation. Visualization is therefore an immediacy of experience, an ontophanic feeling as a new way of inhabiting the world, of feeling oneself in the world (Vial, 2013, p. 152). Let us remember that ontophany is a form of the appearance of being and something that shows itself to us and that we find in Mircea Eliade's (1965) analysis of myths and the sacred.

So, in the age of the technological image and of the "screen" presence, we can point to a type of ontophany which at the same time represents a form of narration through technological prostheses such as the smartphone and the successive explosion of the visual. In this sense, we need to ask ourselves what is our relationship with the screen device and in what ways do these screens modify our relationships? We need to think of screens as projection surfaces of our existence through which a manifestation of being and appearance originates. A projection accompanied by the identification, that is an emphatic process, of expressive phenomena manifested in the relationship with the other which, in this type of situation, is mediated by the screen. Looking at reality through screens puts us in a condition of considering an existential modality where intersubjectivity, using Heidegger's (1927) thought in his *Sein und Zeit* (Being and time), is the domain of "being-with" others. Moreover, following the Heideggerian logic, we know that being-there is a being-in-the-world and therefore in the screenological perspective the screen represents an inhabited surface allowing us a being-there; a surface moreover considered by Giuliana Bruno (2014) as a material configuration of the relations between subjects and objects and it is seen as a *medium*, an atmosphere of projection. It is from this perspective of projection that we can illustrate the screenology proposed by Erkki Huhtamo (2004) through his proposal of "media archaeology" which questions the nature of screens as surfaces and supports of the appearance of visual phenomena. In Huhtamo's (2004) view, the screen is defined as surface information and image culture is then found in a proposal of new forms of vision from a socio-cultural point of view of experience. Thus, screens are environmental surfaces that also connect the various spatialities and places where they are present and therefore reconfigure our socio-spatial practice. Moreover, the semiologist and media expert Francesco Casetti (2014) in his questioning *Che cosa è uno schermo oggi?*, puts into perspective the fact that, in our daily existence, we are in a growing relationship with screens which modifies the very nature of the screen by becoming a form of display to be understood as a place where images fluctuate. The function of the screen, for Casetti (2014), is to be understood as

a point of transit of images that circulate in our social space, images that, thanks to screens, are then available in every place. Casetti's (2014) screen-display is thus a new screen form that makes images present by placing them in front of us to use them as images in transit.

In this context, we can situate our gaze into inter-medial relations and cultural forms by considering screens also as a narrative form. In the dynamics of projection/identification we observe in the sign of a technological evolution the passage from the individual to the dividual with its masks and multiple and ephemeral identities. In technological contemporaneity everything is divisible, everything is mobile and everything is flux. And it is in the perennial mobility, in the acceleration of journeys, that we can see the evidence of the screen presence of lived experience through what we can define as a "screen alterology" where the screen is the means, the *medium* that puts us, in any case, in contact with the real that makes lived experience visible in all its forms. Placing ourselves in a dynamic of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1960) phenomenological thought, in relation to screens, we can note the "figures of the visible" participating in the imaginary structure of the real which is made visible by means of screen mediation. The screens actualize the logic of the exposure of the lived experience, or of the online presentation of everyday life, where the various social networks represent the most apparent expression of this. If everyday life is increasingly lived in front of and through screens in their multiple forms and in the various existential spatialities, then we must think of these screens not as simple technological devices but as optical-environmental devices that influence the mind and emotions. They are, therefore, ontological devices that characterize our being-in-the-world and offer the interactive possibility with which the self is realized through the others. And here we can think of the mirror effect or the looking glass self of the American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1902), a reflexive self that we can observe, from our point of view, also through the screens. If others are the mirror of myself, then from the point of view of sharing images of oneself and one's own experience, this desire to merge, to lay bare one's own existence, which is externalized in the media processes of joint participation, becomes apparent. In this we can understand, for example, the seriality of the images of oneself in the instagrammed capture of daily life, a sort of "dramaturgy of the everyday", using here a Goffmanian expression (Goffman, 1959), showing this effect of staging oneself in order to be and appear.

In the permanent exchange of rivers of images of oneself and the environment around us, we are faced with a transformation of the perception of the world where "fluidity" is the essence of this dimension of sharing in which the practice of images becomes, as André Gunthert (2015) shows, a "conversational" practice. The various fragments of images exhibited and shared via screens constitute a set of what can be termed as a contemporary "puzzle of the imaginary" and direct the gaze towards an attention to this existential fluidity in which - without any moral judgement - a type of directional gaze is also organized towards the forms of lived experience that are exposed in the rhizomic landscape of the digital network by developing and reinforcing the social construction of reality. In this scenario, the idea of presence in the world is strengthened, and this is achieved through visualization. Indeed, the perception of experience and presence, the being-in-the-world, are not independent of the technological situation and of the instruments that enable the real to be expanded. Moreover, let us recall how Roland Barthes (1980) in his *La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie* showed that photography guarantees the existence of the real and certifies presence. Thus, the current dimension of visual fluidity seems to confirm this presence, which should not be thought of only in terms of the simple (and also pathetic) psycho-pathological critique that shows the harmful effects of this epidemic of images. In this atmosphere of the pervasiveness of the visual in which we are inserted, the exposure of the lived experience filtered by the screens where the portraits, the masks and the facets of the beings are shown, is realized. We are faced with the idea illustrated by Andrea Somaini (2013) according to which the *medium* of perception (of Benjaminian origin, it must be emphasized) is a sensory environment that conditions what is experienced.

In this discourse of sensory extension, the culture of the selfie, for example, can be thought as a movement of being that spatializes and duplicates itself in the ubiquity of its presence. If *Esse est percipi* according to the famous philosophical formula of the Irish philosopher George Berkeley

(1710/1920, p. 3), that is "to be is to be perceived", then we could relate this formulation to the technique of the selfie, of the vision of oneself in order to be perceived in the complementarity of the presence that circulates in the digital existential territories. A being-in-the-world through which the screen projects itself inside the world and allows us to be seen from the outside, to visualize aspects of our lived experience. The selfie as a "screen" effect of being is a tendency to be visible in a perennial way, a return to the self in which this same self is conceived through the other who shares the moments and participates in the visual fluidity of being. The screen is then a phenomenological revolution putting into action a multiple system where the I is to be thought of as an accumulation of various instantaneous presences that give rise to a multiplicity of identities. We are then in a perspective of co-presence and living with: this is living with and through screens that represent "discursive notions" (Huhtamo, 2004, p. 33) and allow the narration of the lived experience that is actualized via the capacity of display that in the flow of daily life permeates the process of visualization. We could reformulate Descartes' (1637/1894) famous *cogito ergo sum* with the passage to "I am seen, therefore I am" or "I see, therefore I am": a passage that illustrates to us the modality with which fragments of everyday life are put on display in digital walls (we are thinking of Facebook, for example) or instantaneously in the flow of diffuse photographs (as is the case with Instagram) immortalized in situations of self-representation (the selfie, therefore). This perceptual situation does not only concern a current historical-social event but also coincides with the unveiling of a new phenomenological experience of the world, of the modality through which existence is and appears. It is also the sign of a sensory and perceptive extension of our eye that changes in nature through the solicitation and stimulation of capturing everyday moments exalted visually thanks to the ease of techno-digital access to the visualization process. *Photo ergo sum* or *Video ergo sum* are a transmutation of the lived experience showing how the spread of visual devices and screens increase the shaping of the everyday life where one can see a production of aesthetic forms (in the sense of a shared perception) in the connective flow that particularizes the contemporary mind. The vision is enlarged, augmented and the *in visu* experience is experienced in the perceptive modality given by the techno-digital "screen" medialization. Photographing and filming everyday life with the smartphone, to be thought of as a sensory extension that determines a kind of "third eye" – and this refers us to the idea of the "cine-eye" in Dziga Vertov's (1923) manifesto expressed in the famous movie *The man with a movie camera* (1929) – an act to which we add the action of sharing lived snapshots and the exchange of experiences in order to create techno-symbolic links, is now becoming an ordinary process of capturing the world in image. A world of visual hyper stimulation that generates a hyper-visibility where the social body shows itself continuously. Every day we communicate facets of ourselves to others through a typology of "screenological" face-to-face communication, to be understood as a constant relationship to the image and to sharing, thus representing the visibility of the social body. This produces a kind of communicative carnivalization where the selfie, in our opinion, indicates the most banal and foundational tendency of the desire to be seen; it can be conceived and interpreted as an object to understand the mutations of communicative forms, a means and practice to send visual messages to various communities and intensify bonds or an affective sacredness, a mode of expression of emotional situations and of one's own socio-spatial existence. The screenological interfaces, aesthetic and sensitive, allow this profusion and circulation of emotions and, in this panorama, the visual practice of digital photography and the selfie-Instagram cultural universe allow the visualization of existence conceding to externalize the present moment of the identity manifestation. The screenology of experience, through the multiple acts it generates, leads to a dilation of the world to be understood as one of the contemporary communicative forms where the ecstasy of sharing and emotional connectivity is activated. It is a sign of a modality of experiencing the world and living the present in its instantaneous immanence, of immersing oneself in the experiential environment in which appropriating the world also means adhering to this gestuality of capturing via screens and digital visualization styles that have become a habit of living.

If each epoch has its stylistic conventions, we can understand in what way the techniques of vision are the fruit of an augmented perceptive action; and also understand, from Joshua Meyrowitz's (1985) theory, that the modification of the structure of the social situation, the transformations of a situation, entail at the same time the modification of the role of individuals and the way in which

the technical instruments of communication and visualization change our way of inhabiting and being present in a place. We are faced with a "situational geography" (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 373) which can be interpreted today through diffuse mobility. Our current attitude of always being available to the action of seeing and showing can also be understood as a symptom of an ontology of being and of technical instrumentation that modifies existential and perceptual traces. It is clear then that screen contamination also means contamination of the real where it is possible to apprehend and see this real via the images projected and diffused by our screens. We are immersed in a digital communicative culture which shows that the digital is not a dead substance but an inhabited space, an environment with a set of connective spaces. The experience of the world is thus influenced by this ensemble and we cannot neglect the contribution of the digital, of technological interfaces in the constitution of the lived experience. The perpetual exchange of photographs and videos, visual instant messaging, hyper-media ludism, nomadic vision through sensory devices, emoticon-emotional exchanges, and the amusement of gifs: all this forms a composition of actions that feed the vision and perception of the details and fragments of the being-in-the-world. A being-in-the-world that becomes more and more visually recognized by giving all these actions a well-defined socio-cultural connotation with a relevance of what is contemporary communicative acting. An action that takes place and has substance in its phenomenological component of the "world of life", to say it in the manner of Alfred Schütz (1987), of the experience of everyday life where we observe the attitudes of individuals that manifest themselves in symbolic actions and through its singular communicative signs in order to organize this world of everyday action.

In the process of knowledge, it is necessary to create a synergy of acclimatization, that is to say, a mode of unveiling the roots of what is lived in the *hic et nunc* of the situational atmosphere in order to reformulate a sense of the real through the screenological experience of living. The screenology we propose is to be considered as a new naturalism conditioning the modes of access to the social universe. The screenological imaginary - we could, for example, discuss the phenomenology of the *Black Mirror* (Brooker, 2011-2014) TV series which represents a portrait of our world or a *Weltanschauung* as a sensitive representation of the world, a new vision producing a sensory experience - is one of the conditions of possibility for understanding human nature which propels us into a connection between the real, the imaginary and the digital in order to allow us to illustrate fragments of the world we live in.

Biographical note

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