

Screen Tests: The Catastrophe of the Screen

Steven Connor

A lecture given at the 27th International Screen Studies Conference, University of Glasgow, 25th June 2017.

The screen is always in jeopardy, and the history of moving image is the history of the efforts at once to assault the imaginary support of the 'dream-screen' and to affirm its joyous reconstitution. The screen is cut, cored, bored, buried, blotted, exploded, evacuated, morselised, vaporised and, in recent years, multiplied, yet is always, like Tom the cat, capable of reassembling itself, even as the very mis-en-scène of its giving way. The very formal language of film, with its shots, cuts, fades and dissolves, testifies to the imaginary woundings and resurrections of this ideal, literally religious (*re-ligare*, to bind back together) quasi-body. Perhaps Mallarmé predicts the condition of cinema in which 'rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu' – 'nothing will have taken place but place' (Mallarmé 1969, 10-11). In what follows, I wonder whether the contemporary morphological dispersion of the screen, in which the screen seems to have evaporated into ubiquity, as every surface may apparently become a scene of display, constitutes its eclipse or apotheosis. If eclipse, we may have lost a vital means of dispelling urgency and protecting ourselves from what we want and mean, leaving the immediacy of murder in its place.

Sorting

For most of its history, a screen has signified an obstacle: some method of shielding, deflecting or averting, whether that be the heat of a fire, the arrows of an assailant, or the wind. The screen protects by creating or, as we say, 'keeping' a distance intact. The primary meaning of a screen is therefore that it keeps some threatening or undesirable contingency entirely at bay, like the tortoise shell or the animal's hide.

But most screens in fact function in a more complex way than through simple blocking, aversion or forfending. For a screen is a kind of machine, which takes what is perhaps the essential form of every machine for performing work, in undertaking an elementary operation of sorting, a sorting into elements that in fact that may constitute every form of what we call work, the difference between manual and mental labour being the difference between physical and symbolic sorting. The work of the screen is equivalent to that performed by Maxwell's imaginary chamber, or rather the alert and choosy demon which guards the partition which divides it, and, by working a gate that opens up a distance or thermodynamic potential between hot or energetic particles and cool or less energetic particles, itself constitutes a screen, joining together division in space and division effected in time. For there to be the possibility of work, as opposed to energy spread uniformly and therefore inertly through a given physical volume, there must be distance and difference. Perhaps all living organisms require some kind of screening off from the world, some negentropic differentiation of order within disorder, for to live, as Georges Bataille puts it, 'like water in water' (Bataille 1992, 19), as he unaccountably thinks animals

must live, is to be no kind of body or distinguishable being at all. For there to be life, there must be the possibility of improbable order, which is to say stable and repeatable difference in a world of otherwise uniformly and universally transmissible elements. A screen establishes a division in the fabric of things, either a hard, physical division, or a soft, conceptual one. In fact, the principal function of a screen in the modern world is to bring the hard and the soft together, in a paradoxical kind of suturing division, in which the *or* of division meets the *and* of assembly, or, in Jakobson's terms perhaps, the axis of selection is projected into the axis of combination (Jakobson 1960, 358). A screen signifies the possibility of a division between the real and the unreal, the actual and the imagined, the given and the signified, even as it constitutes a space where the possible can be made actual.

In most cases, the screen does not supply a simple kind of distancing, but rather a variable distance or difference as well between distance and proximity. If I have a fire-screen, I can move it at will to let the warmth of the fire through, especially if I employ it in the form of a handheld object, like a parasol or a fan, the latter a common use of the word 'screen' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here the screening or selecting function is redoubled in a sorting behaviour, which sorts or modulates the work of sorting. This can be effected by some agent or entity deploying the screen in different ways, to let through varying amounts of heat or light. But it may also be embodied in the form of the screen itself, which acts therefore as a semiconductor, or the kind of variably permeable membrane that is typified by the dynamic surfaces of living entities, in the form of skin, hide or bark. For one rarely wishes to keep out everything: sun screen is what you apply in order to be able to expose yourself to the sun, that you would otherwise have either to avoid or encounter entirely unguarded. There was a time when everybody knew and believed the (false) story that the woman painted with gold paint for the James Bond film *Goldfinger* would have been at risk of death had not a square of unpainted skin been left on her back to allow her skin to breathe.

The screen therefore performs, in Peter Sloterdijk's helpful term, an immunological function, not only allowing for exposure to that which might otherwise harm, but also providing protection through the very act of exposure (Sloterdijk 2013, 449). For there are two ways in which one may be protected from a threat: you can violently expel or reject what is alien or xenic, or you can assimilate it in some modified form. It is the choice, in other words, between the simplification of externalisation, or the complexity of incorporation, or, in Melanie Klein's terms, the choice or passage between projection, or the violent expulsion of bad things, and introjection, which requires and allows for ambivalence. Amid all the many forms of xenophobic intolerance displayed by human beings lusting after the violent simplification of community, that longing for belonging ('libido d'appartenance') that Michel Serres rightly specifies as the source of all evil (Serres 2003, 141), there are also traditions of complexity such as the Greek *xenia*, the providing of hospitality to strangers, and what are consequently called the xenial relations of host and stranger-guest. *Xenia* remained the name for gifts given at New Year until late in the seventeenth century. As explained, 'we renew our correspondencies by presents, as hospitalities were anciently by those which they call'd *Xenia*, which is still the name of our New-years Gifts; since in respect of the great alterations hapning in those years, we may be said

to be new Guests, or Hospites of a New-year' (553). This is why one of the epithets of Zeus was Zeus ξένιος, the protector of the rights of hospitality. The screen brings and holds these alternatives together, in a complex mixture of simplicity and complicity, of *or* and *and*, or *and or* or.

The phrase 'screen test' combines both of these meanings. In chemistry, a screen test means a test that employs screening, sieving or filtering, and so automatically selects out certain elements in a compound. But screen-test also entered English as one of a large number of 'screen-' compounds in the early teens of the twentieth century, to signify the process whereby aspirants or candidates for the movie industry are tested for their adaptability to screens. So a screen test is a test which employs the discriminating effects of screening in order to discriminate those who may then feature on the screen.

Dream Screen

In 1946, the psychoanalyst Bertram Lewin made another suggestion regarding the function of the screen. Where many had seen the cinema screen as a kind of surface for the inscription of dreams, and the provoking of states of hypnagogic suspension, Lewin proposed a much more specific relation between what he called the 'dream screen' and the state of sleep. Citing a patient who described her own state of sleep folding up and then, like a carpet, or, in her own words, 'over and over like two tumblers' (Lewin 1946, 420), Lewin proposed that there was an imaginary screen which had the function of maintaining the continuity of sleep, defending against the potentially disturbing dream-representations projected on to it. So, by providing a venue for dreams to occur, the dream screen both allowed for the impulses producing dreams while also neutralising the dangers they proposed for sleep. The dream screen is the form and function of dream formed into dream content. Lewin assumes, with Fried, that the purpose of the narrative elements of the dream is to smooth out into coherence the jagged interruptions of alarm or bodily need. The rattle of the alarm clock is deflected internally into the dream as some harmlessly intriguing bit of narrative, reassuring the dreamer that it is all just a dream. Or, in my dream I sense my building need to urinate, so I dream up some kind of welcoming receptacle or plumbing arrangement into which I may relieve myself, thereby distracting me from the tiresome need to awaken and find my way to a real bathroom. But I, or my dream, is alert to the danger that imagined urination may in fact induce the real thing, causing a flooding of the bed that will require an even more urgent and abrupt awakening. So it takes care to ensure that there are various inhibitions on urination, often, in my case, in the form of locked or blocked lavatories, defective, or absent plumbing, or censorious and disgusted witnesses. The phenomenon reported by sleep researcher Keith Hearne (1981) of the defective light in dreams serves a similar purpose, avoiding the flooding of the dream-scene with a light that might suggest the end of the play, or the coming of daylight and thus the end of sleep. Light switches that stubbornly refuse to work, and light bulbs that grudgingly fizzle and spark, are designed to keep the dreamer in the dark. Carl Jung

once remarked that it is the function of psychoanalysis, not to uncover the meaning of dreams, thereby dissolving them, but to dream the dream onward. But in this it redoubles the function of dream itself, which is to persist in being, the dream screen being the image and vehicle of this unrolling continuity.

Lewin believed that the screen ultimately derived from the breast at or on which the nurseling may often fall asleep. Lewin therefore found a strong affinity between the flatness of the screen (the breast losing its rotundity as it comes up close) and oral repletion. The dream screen 'is sleep itself; it is not only the breast, but is as well that content of sleep or the dream which fulfils the wish to sleep' (Lewin 1946, 422). And yet 'the dream screen also represents the fulfilment of the wish to sleep' (Lewin 1946, 433). So, in that it is a symbol of what it is, the dream screen screens itself as what it is while also screening itself from what it is. This duality is embodied in what Lewin calls the 'visually blank dream' (Lewin 1946, 422), which he identifies with the 'primal dream', in which 'the ego takes no part and does not exert its distorting influence ... this dream repeats the very young infant's dream after nursing – the dream which is pure breast or dream screen, and which fulfils the wish to sleep' (Lewin 1946, 424). In one sense, this is dream as pure form without content. And yet, in another sense, it is sleep's self-figuring, its image of pure, uninterrupted sleep, or sleep minimally interrupted by the delicious and voluptuously empty thought of the emptiness of thought that it is. It is the container become content, as complete contentment. Its blankness is screened, even as it is pure screen. For Lewin, this screen is the breast, source and vehicle of all satiety. But the breast is itself a kind of self-doubling, that is, self-screening, symbol, a symbol of the opulent blankness of sleep and dream: 'the function of the breast to which the dream screen referred was its sleep-giving power' (174). Sleep represents itself to itself as the breast, which itself represents sleep. That blankness is not just absence, but also a kind of content, a projection on to its own surface of the screen as surface, is suggested by Lewin's discovery, announced in the sequel essay he published in 1953, that 'There seems to be not simply a blank dream but a whole *class* of blank or nearly blank dreams, and the hypothetical pure dark-screen dream is only one variety' (Lewin 1953, 177).

The dream screen is like holding on to the experience of falling asleep in sleep itself, of staying just sufficiently awake to know and enjoy one's state of being asleep. It is the dissolution of the ego made available as a containing or nourishing resource to the ego itself. This may make sense of the connection that Lewin makes between the dream screen and suicide wishes, arguing that '[s]uicide and suicidal fantasies represent a breaking through in a distorted form of the primitive wish for infantile sleep' (Lewin 1946, 431), so that '[t]he person who kills himself does not believe he is entering death, but immortality, the *paradis artificiel* of the addict's imagining' (Lewin 1946, 432-3).

So we have arrived at the idea of a complex lamination of that which averts, disguises, withdraws, impedes or protects, and that which advances, exposes, allows and combines. But there is a further function of the screen. For the screen makes it possible for this complex mixture of the simple and the complex itself to be maintained.

Rage

It has often been said that the principal function of symbolism is to mediate desire, both representing it and mitigating it in substitution, allowing you to have whatever you want on condition that you give up the idea of ever having it for real. But, almost immediately, this false bargain makes for something else, namely a compounding of love for and anger at what mediates and mitigates desire. What screens me off from my desire by giving it a screen on which to be writ large is both my ally and my antagonist, and so my most intimate enemy. And my intimate enmity with the screen expresses itself through a destructive rage at it. Everywhere in the history of writing there is the longing desire for a writing that would bore or burn through the surface on which it is held, in a kind of primary or ultimate violence that, by destroying its ground, ruining the compact of the stylus and its receptive surface, destroys the very act and fact of signification that it is. This is the horrifying collapse of symbolism that is found in Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony'. At the end of the story the exquisite mechanism of the law, which aims to literalise the pronouncement of judicial sentence by literally inscribing it into the body of the condemned man, annihilates its own rationale, by destroying the very capacity of the body to hold suffering and symbolism in suspension:

The Harrow was not writing, it was only jabbing, and the Bed was not turning the body over but only bringing it up quivering against the needles. The explorer wanted to do something, if possible, to bring the whole machine to a standstill, for this was no exquisite torture such as the officer desired, this was plain murder. (Kafka 1993, 157-8)

This dissolution of the inscriptive apparatus also animates the violent prospectus Beckett set out in 1937 in the letter he wrote to Axel Kaun, which represented the act of writing as an act of self-destructive mining: 'Is there any reason why that frightfully arbitrary materiality of the word surface [jene fürchterlich willkürliche Materialität der Wortfläche] should not be dissolved, like, for example, the sound surface, devoured by great black pauses [die von grossen schwarzen Pausen gefressene Tonfläche], of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony' (Beckett 1982, 172). Beckett imagines a kind of excavation that reduces the veil of language to the condition of the 'flitters' that are alluded to throughout his work: 'To drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through – I cannot imagine a higher goal for today's writer' (Beckett 1983, 172).

In both these cases, the word is able to project its own destruction through imagining the materiality of its own inscriptive process, through insinuating the idea of writing as a kind of screen-operation. This kind of ekphrasis has been at the centre of the writing of rage and the rage at and of writing almost from the beginning. The description in the *Iliad* of the Shield of Achilles, forged by Hephaestus to replace the armour that Achilles has lent Patroclus and that has been stripped from his body in battle by Hector, exquisitely interweaves depictions of peace and violence, prosperity and war. The shield is a substitute for Achilles's original armour, and the manner of its evocation doubles that substitution, for the poet's words are a screen-substitute for the object wrought by Hephaestus. The function of the shield in deflecting attack

is reproduced in the images depicted on its surface, in which law, discourse and art must absorb and hold in suspension the rage that threatens to tear them apart. The shield shows two cities, one in which there are ‘marriages and feastings... flutes and lyres sounded continually; and the women stood each at her door and marveled’ (Homer 1925 323), and the other of which is divided between ‘two armies of warriors gleaming in armor’ (Homer 1925, 325). It is not peace which holds war at bay, but the balancing representation within the space of the shield of peace and war: this suspension, which keeps reality and representation themselves in a kind of fragile equilibrium, screens off the destructiveness of war, which latter, in its primary form, is not just the destruction of the body, but more essentially the destruction of any possibility of mediation, or delay. The final detail in the shield is the binding frame given to it by the depiction of the river Oceanus, enclosing the figured scene (Homer 1925, 333). Alexander Pope’s rendering elaborates the paradox of a binding ligature formed from encircling fluidity:

Thus the broad shield complete the artist crown’d
 With his last hand, and pour’d the ocean round:
 In living silver seem’d the waves to roll,
 And beat the buckler’s verge, and bound the whole. (Pope 1902, 470)

Ultimately, of course, in this nesting alternation of exposures and suspensions, it is the *Iliad* itself which is here being adapted for its own internal screen. We might note here that the word screen seems to have some etymological reference in it to the idea of a shield. Screen is cognate with Middle Dutch *scherm*, *schirm*. Though the further etymology of this word is uncertain, the OED speculates that *schirm* may derive from the same Indo-European base as Sanskrit *carman*, Avestan *čarəman* hide, leather, giving the possibility that ‘the Germanic word may have referred originally to a hide-covered shield’.

W.H. Auden’s reworking of Homer’s Shield of Achilles represents the collapse of this distance that is equivalent to the desublimation found in Kafka’s autophagic machinery. Auden’s modern Shield of Achilles offers no mediation of violence, but only featureless, desublimated flatness, in which what is sufficiently and blankly is:

She looked over his shoulder
 For athletes at their games,
 Men and women in a dance
 Moving their sweet limbs
 Quick, quick, to music,
 But there on the shining shield
 His hands had set no dancing-floor
 But a weed-choked field. (Auden 1994, 597-8)

In all these verbal versions, the screen is itself screened off through the mediation of ekphrasis, in the verbal evocation of a visual shield or screen which itself acts as a screen to keep the visual object at a saving distance. This distance allows for the play with the idea of a catastrophic collapse of distance or distinction while keeping it safely projected, on a screen of representation.

It should not be a surprise that the arrival of motion pictures should have been accompanied by a fascination not just with the possibilities of the moving picture screen, but also with its limits, or its jeopardy. There is in particular the singular preoccupation of early cinema with explosion, which I surveyed briefly in my *The Matter of Air* (2010). Not only does explosion feature frequently in early films, as a source of comic excitement, or climactic drama, the technology of film was quickly seized on to investigate the physics of the explosive process (Connor 2010, 304-6). Important here was the use of slow motion, which Walter Benjamin famously characterised as part of the surgical repertoire of film, that meant the world could be not only presented, but anatomised:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. (Benjamin 2007, 236)

Benjamin sees slow motion as a kind of close-up on time, and the cinema's interest in exploding form is apparent, not just in its capacity to display things falling apart or centrifugally bursting asunder, but also in the inward-moving disaggregation of the close-up, in the zoom in to the mouth or eye that anonymises or literally defaces the face. Siegfried Kracauer similarly emphasises the dissective quality of cinematic close-up:

The hunting ground of the motion picture camera is in principle unlimited; it is the external world expanding in all directions ... Any huge close-up reveals new and unsuspected formations of matter; skin textures are reminiscent of aerial photographs, eyes turn into lakes or volcanic craters. Such images blow up our environment in a double sense: they enlarge it literally; and in doing so, they blast the prison of conventional reality, opening up expanses which we have explored at best in dreams before ... In its preoccupation with the small the cinema is comparable to science. Like science, it breaks down material phenomena into tiny particles, thereby sensitizing us to the tremendous energies accumulated in the microscopic configurations of matter. (Kracauer 1997, 41, 48, 50)

In unconscious acknowledgement of the fact that cinematic movement is an effect of failing to see the motes of motion in the individual frames of the filmstrip, or, more recently, the individual pixels of which the image is composed, cinema has an elective affinity with images that threaten to slice, dice or atomise the imaginary matter of the screen, riskily revealing it as the leaky, fly-blown, perforated and particulate thing it is. We may say that the fascination of cinema with effects of physical decomposition (gore flicks) segmentation and bodily partition (*The Invisible Man*, much pornography) and eruption (action films of every kind) is a kind of screen test or trial by ordeal, a probing of the capacity of the screen to maintain its own ideal integrity, even in allowing us to see the spectacle of vision itself seemingly giving way. In an inversion of Freud's 'reality-testing', these assaults are a kind of testing-to-destruction of the powers of fantasy to keep things on the screen, thereby

keeping the screen entire. The assaults, debasements and dissolutions so obsessively visited upon actual bodies are a way of demonstrating again and again the virginal intactness of film's own phantasmal body, the screen's healing and annealing dream of itself.

Saving

An interesting confirmation of the dreamwork attaching to the idea of the screen is the strange institution of what is still known, pregnantly enough for current purposes, as the 'savesaver'. Screensavers replace the ordinary display of a screen with a more or less decorative and absorbing abstract animation. Screensavers can serve various purposes, including saving power and saving your screen from being overlooked by prying eyes when you leave it unattended. In fact, most screen savers don't offer any kind of saving on power or illumination. There is, or was, a practical reason why screensavers took the form of abstract or random-seeming animations. Early display monitors were often cathode ray tubes, which formed images by exciting a coating of phosphor. When the same image was displayed on the screen for long periods, the phosphor coating could be permanently changed, leading to a permanent shadow known as 'screen-burn', or 'burn-in'. ATM machines and other public display devices were particularly at risk from this kind of damage, as it was undesirable for the screen to go blank and therefore the device to seem inoperative during periods of inactivity. In fact, the best way to save the screen from burn-in is simply to have it hibernate or switch off after a certain period of time during which an unchanging image has been displayed. Indeed, the first screen saver was a programme written by John Socha for the IBM PC in 1983 (he also invented the term 'screen saver'), which did just this. But the next best thing is a programme that automatically displays an animation which keeps the screen busy enough to prevent any part of it being exposed for too long to the scorching internal rays. A VDU is thereby able to display the fact that it is not out of order, but simply 'sleeping' – it is a version perhaps of Lewin's dream screen, that keeps the sleeper safely asleep by keeping him distracted with what is going on on the screen. A piece of software designed to allow Windows XP users to adapt bits of video into personalised screensavers was actually called *Dreamscene*.

The animations which are characteristic of screen savers are themselves designed to be, or at least seem, 'trippy' or hypnotically fascinating. Favourite themes are aquarium fish, aurora borealis, flocks of birds (as well as flying toasters), *Matrix*-like showers of code or 'digital rain', fields of stars and slowly-assembled intricate pipework. The logic here seems to be that something that looks like the dream of a sleeping machine should induce a similar kind of drowsiness in its viewer. Such devices have affinity with the animations that used to accompany spacier forms of prog-rock during the 1970s, especially the 'Dreamachine' invented by Bryon Gysin, which allegedly used a pattern of flickers to change brainwaves. The oneiric quality of the screensaver has to do with the fact that it absorbs and fascinates without ever quite cohering into a stable object. What one is shown is a pure showing, the screen, so to speak, showing off its screen function. So here the screen, the primary purpose of which, I began by saying, is to deflect, displays its internal deflectiveness. The fact

that such screensavers seem to conjure, not just an endless capacity to scroll laterally, like Lewin's dream screen, but also an infinity of interiority, moving endlessly inwards like the Stargate sequence of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), offers a kind of deflection of lateral into projective deflection, the point of which is to detain or entertain the eye by never giving it a stable point of view.

We have, it seems, long ago forgotten what screen savers are meant to be protected, or protecting themselves from. But I am interested in the fantasy encouraged by the superseded actuality of the idea that the screen might in some sense pose a risk to itself. (There may be some who will associate this risk with the entertainingly catastrophic sight of an image melting before your eyes when a slide was displayed for too long in front of a hot bulb in a jammed slide carousel.) The auto-immune jeopardy of the screen that sears its own display traumatically into itself, content becoming container, is deflected by a dream-work that immunises against this auto-immune deficiency, by distracting the screen from itself. It is intriguing that the healing or saving blankness of the screen needs to be a busy or noisy blankness, like that of the dream screen, which maintains its status as pure container through its capacity to produce endless varieties of content.

The idea that screen images may constitute other kinds of burn-in effects, as played with in Charlie Brooker's reflections in a column entitled 'Live and Dangerous' first published in *The Guardian* in July 2000, and reprinted in his *Screen Burn* (2005). Brooker imagines what it would be like if a phenomenon similar to screen burn affected TV screens exposed repeatedly to particular media personalities:

[Y]ou could be forgiven for expecting to find your set indelibly stained with Carol Vorderman. Not that you'd notice the change: it feels like she's permanently onscreen anyway. But she isn't the worst offender. In fact, in a list of the most-seen presenters on television in the latest edition of industry magazine *Broadcast*, Vorderman finishes fourth. You're far more likely to end up with Richard Madeley's face burnt across your Trinitron, like some nightmarish twenty-first century Turin Shroud. (Brooker 2005, 6)

Absolute Milan

Much of our thinking about screen-mediated life is still governed by the Platonic objection to the life lived in a cave of illusion, the viewers entranced by their own form of screen saver, in the reflections of the flickering flames on the walls of the cave. One may say that the screen function is at work in all symbolism. The screen is the sign and signs screen: they bring things to us in a way that keeps us screened off from them. But the coming of screens, and the universalisation of screen experience makes for an intensification in this tight spiral of display and deterrence. For the screen constitutes, more than ever before, the promise of immediacy. And immediacy is both the apotheosis and the catastrophe of the screen. Why? Because immediacy means the collapse or catastrophe of the mediation which constitutes the screen, and on which the screen depends. I have focussed on the different ways in which the screen protects itself against various kinds of catastrophe, at times through the

paradoxical display of catastrophe itself, which asserts the screen's immunity from it. But this depends upon the fact the screen is a mediation, or deflection, a partitioning of the world into reality and image. In Book VII of *The Republic*, Socrates urges on his listeners the advantages of walking out of the cave of delusive shadows into the true light of the sun. But the dream of immediacy, in a world in which there is no longer any difference between the world and the screen, since the world is a tessellation of screens, and screens do not simply represent but act directly and instantaneously on the world, is perhaps a different kind of catastrophe, the catastrophe of absoluteness.

Despite being a common term in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the word 'screen' is one of surprisingly many words that appears only once in the work of Shakespeare. Prospero employs it in his narrative to Miranda of how his brother Antonio had grown so used to acting as Prospero's surrogate as Duke of Milan, Prospero having withdrawn from public life into his books, that he sought to collapse the distance between semblance and actuality:

To have no screen between this part he played,
And him he played it for, he needs will be
Absolute Milan (Shakespeare 2002, 104)

There are probably more layers of displacement and substitution in this metaphor than it would be necessary or useful to unpeel here, the essential point being that Antonio wishes to unpeel them all, so that there is no mediation of any kind between himself and himself. This is a circumstance that might remind us of Jacques Lacan's observation, in his 1946 'Presentation on Psychical Causality', that 'if a man who thinks he is a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so (si un homme qui se croit un roi est fou, un roi qui se croit un roi ne l'est pas moins) (Lacan 2006, 139; Lacan 1947, 142). As Lacan goes on to explain, '[t]he turning point here lies in the mediacy or immediacy of the identification and, to be quite explicit, in the subject's infatuation' (Lacan 2006, 140). The essay in which this remark appears is much concerned with the relations between madness and the theatrical properties of screens, veils and curtains (it even ends with an allusion to an optical illusion consisting of a spinning disc in front of a screen; Lacan 2006, 157). A little earlier, Lacan reflects on the screening function of words themselves:

The word is not a sign, but a nodal point [*noeud*] of signification. When I say the word "curtain" [*rideau*], for example, it is not merely to designate by convention an object whose use can be varied in a thousand ways depending on the intentions of the artisan, shopkeeper, painter, or Gestalt psychologist – whether as labor, exchange value, colorful physiognomy, or spatial structure ... By decree, it is the limit of my domain or, on occasion, a screen for my meditation in a room I share with someone else ... Mistakenly, it is Polonius that I stab, shouting, "How now! a rat?" As an interjection, during the tragedy's intermission, it is my cry of impatience or the sign of my boredom: "Curtain!" It is, finally, an image of meaning *qua* meaning, which must be unveiled if it is to reveal itself. (Lacan 2006, 136)

If the point of all forms of symbolism is to hold the world apart from itself, to keep us from being able to believe ourselves identical with our decisions and demands, or, in Peter Sloterdijk's terms (Sloterdijk 2010), to temper and temporise rage (*Zorn*) with time (*Zeit*), if language is, as Derrida once surprisingly remarked, a mechanism for reducing urgency, then the contemporary morphological dispersion of the screen, in which the screen seems to have evaporated into ubiquity, as every surface may apparently melt into a scene of display, may be agony rather than apotheosis. For a world without mediations, without withdrawals, without hesitations, is ultimately a world of rage. This is a point surprisingly acknowledged in the course of Walter Ong's meditations on the power of the spoken word in an oral culture to embody the sense of immediate presence, the word as action and event, rather than sign. There is often something Edenic in Ong's evocations of oral culture; but he also makes it clear that oral cultures are prone to extreme and uncontrollable violence, precisely because they lack the screening or mediating function of a written language, autonomous of its particular occasions of use, that interposes itself between being and being, and enters also into individual being, making it possible to be a subject in the very fact that the subject is screened to and from itself. Ong sees the prospect of a reduction in hostility in the move away from 'the old verbomotor culture of overt personal polemics' (Ong 1967, 256), believing that 'the technological style of life discourages publicly verbalized strife ... the bragging and boasting and verbal muscle flexing one finds from the *Iliad* through *Beowulf* and later' (Ong 1967, 259). Ong accepts McLuhan's suggestions that electronically-mediated culture seems to make possible a return of orality, but trusts that '[b]eneath the oral-aural mentality today, a visualist, objective, neutral structure remains, no longer in complete control, but there' (Ong 1967, 260). It is hard to know how one might be sure about this. The ubiquity of screens may suggest that the screen function can no longer be guaranteed to supply that space of reflective apartness, but to be a means of giving way, to the immediacy of the rat-stabbing act.

References

- Auden, W.H. (1994). *Collected Poems*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. London: Faber and Faber.
- Bataille, Georges (1992). *Theory of Religion*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books.
- Beckett, Samuel (1983). *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. Ed. Ruby Cohn. London: John Calder.
- Benjamin, Walter (2007). 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.' In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken). 217-52.
- Brooker, Charlie (2005). *Charlie Brooker's Screen Burn*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Bureau d'adresse et de rencontre (Théophraste, Eusèbe and Isaac Renaudot). (1664). *A General Collection of Discourses of the Virtuosi of France, Upon Questions of All Sorts of Philosophy*. Trans. G. Havers. London: Thomas Dring and John Starkey.

Connor, Steven (2010). *The Matter of Air: Science and Art of the Ethereal*. London: Reaktion.

Hearne, Keith. 1981. 'A "Light-Switch Phenomenon" in Lucid Dreams'. *Journal of Mental Imagery*, 5, 97-100.

Homer (1925). *Iliad, Volume II: Books 13-24*. Trans. A. T. Murray. Revised by William F. Wyatt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jakobson, Roman (1960). 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics.' In *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge MA: MIT Press), 350-77.

Kafka, Franz (1993). *Collected Stories*. Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Kracauer, Siegfried (1997). *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lacan, Jacques (1947). 'Propos sur la causalité psychique.' *L'évolution psychiatrique*, 1, 123-65.

----- (2006). *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Trans. Bruce Fink, Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg. New York and London: W.W. Norton.

Lewin, Bertram D. (1946). 'Sleep, the Mouth, and the Dream Screen.' *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 15, 419-34.

----- (1953). 'Reconsideration of the Dream Screen.' *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 22, 174-99.

Mallarmé, Stéphane (1969). *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*. Paris: Gallimard.

Pope, Alexander (1902). *Complete Poetical Works*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Serres, Michel (2003). *L'Incandescent*. Paris: Le Pommier.

Shakespeare, William (2002). *The Tempest*. Ed. David Lindley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sloterdijk, Peter (2010). *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation*. Trans. Mario Wenning. New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press.

----- (2013). *You Must Change Your Life*. Trans. Wieland Hoban. Cambridge and Malden MA: Polity.