

Casetti, Francesco. *Screening Fears: On Protective Media*. Zone Books, 2023 (264 pp). ISBN: 9781942130871.

In times like these, we are constantly overexposed to media. We are surrounded by advertising, news, and various forms of audiovisual content: the news of the world is within our grasp.

However, the world itself still scares us: the unstable geopolitical situation, the specter of COVID-19 pandemic, the announced collapse of ecosystems are just a few examples of fears which menace our present and future. In this scenario, people may desire to disconnect from their physical milieu and safely reconnect with the world through other means: in other words, they may switch from immediate encounters with things to a “mediated immediacy” (14).

This is the focus and field of investigation of Francesco Casetti’s latest book *Screening Fears: On Protective Media*, which enriches the author’s longstanding research on cinematic experience while proposing a cutting-edge perspective on the role of media in contemporary society. Casetti, Sterling Professor of Film and Media Studies at Yale University, expands his gaze to modern screen-based media, questioning their function from a novel perspective. Starting from the cinematic experience, the author goes beyond Marshall McLuhan’s famous statement that media are “extensions of man” and affirms the intrinsic protective function of media, which spare individuals’ direct exposure to the world without interrupting their interaction with reality. This novel attribute is well explained by “the projection/protection complex”, which embodies the “mechanism of disconnection and reconnection with reality that emerges thanks to enclosures and screens”, while highlighting “the fear of dealing directly with the world” (16).

Following the structure of the book, the experience of watching a film at the theatre works as a pivotal mechanism, which connects a form of mediation from the past– the Phantasmagoria in late eighteenth century – and a widely-used, contemporary one – digital screen-based bubbles, such as Zoom calls. Through the lens of a media-archeology approach,

Casetti explores how these three dispositifs embody the projection/protection complex. Phantasmagoria gave the audience the opportunity to escape from the pressures of a turbulent age by making people able to explore a threefold universe. Cinema – especially cinema palaces of the twenties – can compensate the weight of existence by offering a comfortable setting. Finally, the contemporary digital bubbles help people isolating from their milieu while engaging them in face-to-face encounters at a distance (15).

This is the magic of screens: they are capable to combine spatial deprivation and sensorial excitation, to prompt both emergence of disciplinary systems that create a well-ordered world and growth of immune procedures against potential threats. According to the author, during the last two centuries, it has become evident that media have acquired the power to defeat death, and to put the threatening world at a tolerable distance. The projection/protection complex, in fact, plays hide-and-seek with reality: individuals are disconnected from their physical milieu and safely reconnected with the world through other means; they switch from immediate encounters with things and events to a mediated immediacy. The ambivalent game played by screens turns modern media into the Freudian “protective shield”, as recalled in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: however – the author points out – this callous membrane is as flexible to external stimuli as the projection/protection complex. “There is no need to consider the environment in which we live as source of menace” – Casetti underlines –; “on the contrary, a better embeddedness in this environment can unearth unthinkable resources [...] what emerges is the need for forms of protection in which fear and the fearsome, instead of being removed, are productively accepted and included in our ways of coping with reality” (170).

Screening Fears is, in this sense, a luminous reflection on the current role of media which tackles the problem of taking screens for granted – assuming the fact that we are overwhelmed by them. This vivid research concerning the function of screens appears not to be closed into the limits of theory, but rather roots in the concreteness of our present. From this

perspective, Casetti casts a new light on mediation across the last two centuries, putting into dialogue different, but extremely similar forms of mediation.

We live in the times of screenscapes, that is, screens which intercept the gaze and at the same time shape the space. However, we live in fearful times: the echoes of Anthropocene consequences are clearly perceived while reading *Screening Fears*. What to do, then? While accepting the protective property of screens, Casetti goes beyond the risk of screens to become a replacement of lost reality. In fact, screens do not simply protect us from the dangers of immediate encounters with threatening entities: like vaccines, they make us aware of the need of overcoming the distance that we have created – and eventually, more human.

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