

Screens of Fire: Surviving the End of the World

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The growing of complexity inevitably leads to catastrophe; this is evident enough. Human beings have for long adapted to a chaotic world: language, culture, science and technology are developments appropriately described under this perspective. Either by simplification or description the complexity of a world already there is reduced. The path of information and communication technology, of digital screens, however, might embody a new strategy for surviving: substitution, protection, that is, screening. Human life nowadays happens behind the screens (Introna and Ilharco 2011, 2006; Ilharco 2008).

All philosophies and social theories fundamentally, explicitly or implicitly, deal with the question of death, referred Schopenhauer; and digital screens deal with the question of death, too. TV, computer, mobile phone screens are focal points of human attention. In the semiotic contemporary culture of abundance, the complexity of the world is back as a message. Ted Turner, the founder of CNN, warned us in the 1980's: "The CNN will broadcast live the end of the world." The dominant red colour of the CNN logo and indeed of TV images is an attractor that captures attention, an evocation of the epical fires that wrote History. For long red means attention, fire, change, accident.

The deeper message of TV, of live TV and Internet, is the final catastrophe that complexity leads to. The digital screen is a showcase of catastrophes. Staring at the images, watching the screens, the viewers are outside the real world, protected by a screen. Living in a screened cultural landscape, watching the catastrophes, viewers are separated, protected, excluded by the screens. The screen is the distinction that draws contemporary times. This side of screens (where we talk and write papers), men experience the feeling of the survivor, living while others die. Immersed in a hiper-real world, a reality made of images, immateriality and change, the screen-watcher is drawn into the final paradoxical show: the end of the world, and surviving it.

A Screen of Life

What do screens screen? What does a screen do? Obviously, it screens. Screens what? A screen in screening gathers the attention of the people that surround it. In screening it acts as the location where what is supposedly relevant will be seen. When we consider the screen, as it appears in its world, it seems to appear as something that calls for, or grabs our attention. Without this already calling for our attention screens would no longer be screens. The description of a screen points to the notions of presenting, making present, gathering attention, suggesting relevance and acting as a medium. These ideas emerge in and through our involvement in particular ongoing activities.

Screens flow along by making evident our involvement in-the-world. They present an already screened world to us which are already consistent with our ongoing involvement in that world. As screens we look at them but also simultaneously, immediately, and more fundamentally, we look through them to encounter our way of being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962).

Hence, screens are not mirrors in that they do not reflect whatever they face. They are rather surfaces that present what is already relevant within the flow of our purposeful action. However, it must also be noted that in presenting or displaying—in making relevant or evident—other possibilities are simultaneously excluded. This is precisely one of the central common meanings of the word screening today (as selecting or choosing).

Screening, as inclusion and exclusion, is therefore also a framing process. For this screening – including and excluding – to make sense there is the necessity of some previously agreed ground on the basis of which something can be screened. This agreement for screening, as in including and excluding, is not about the content of this or that screen but rather an already agreement about a particular way of living, or form of life (Wittgenstein 1967). This way of living, that is the implied criteria of agreement, addresses something even more fundamental, namely the realm of truth. Heidegger (1977) noted in his investigation of the Greek concept of truth that the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, meant the simultaneous revealing and concealing of something.

We might suggest that screens, as focal surfaces that grab and hold our attention, may indeed also appear to us as ‘mirrors’ of truth—not reflecting that which is before them but reflecting a way of living already implied in their screening. As the grounding context of truth screens conditions that which can legitimately be asserted. This is an important conclusion if we

consider the primacy of seeing in the Western way of thinking and living, often expressed through the saying “seeing is believing”.

In Heidegger’s terminology we can say that the screen is a kind of Ge-stell, or ‘enframing’ (Heidegger, 1977). The screening of screens is a kind of framework or frame at work, in which the possibilities for truth, our mostly implicitly agreed way of living and doing, is the background that makes relevance appears.

Screening the Screen

The word screen is both a noun and a verb. Its contemporary plurality of meanings can be collected along three main themes: projecting/showing (TV screen), hiding/protecting (fireplace screen), and testing/selecting (screening the candidates) (The Oxford Paperback Dictionary & Thesaurus 1997:681-2).

The origins of the word screen go back to the 14th century. According to the Webster Dictionary (1999) the contemporary English word ‘screen’ evolved from the Middle English word ‘screne’, from the Middle French ‘escren’, and from the Middle Dutch ‘scherm’. It is a word akin to the Old High German (8th century) words ‘skirm’, which meant shield, and ‘skrank’, which meant a ‘barrier’ of some kind.

The word ‘screen’ still suggests another interesting signification, further away from us in history. It is a word “probably akin” (WB) to the Sanskrit (1000 BC) words ‘carman’, which meant skin, and ‘krānti’, which signifies ‘he injures’. These meanings, possibly, are the ones from which the Middle Age words evolved. The Sanskrit origins suggest that the notions of protection, shield, barrier, separation, arose as metaphors of the concept of skin, possible of human or animal skin.

This etymological analysis indicates that the word ‘screen’ moved from the Sanskrit meaning of skin and injury, along protecting, sheltering and covering, to the modern day projecting, showing, revealing, as well as electing, detecting and testing. Now we may ask the following: is there any central intent, distinction or feature common to all these specific meanings of the word screen? We believe the answer is yes; after all, that is the same word. To defend such an assertion we will take up a different but related route, that of the analysis of sound, a practice known as sound symbolism or phonosemantics (e.g., Jakobson and Waugh 2002; Magnus, M. 1999).

The word ‘screen’ is pronounced ‘skri:n’ . It is very close in its sound to the word ‘scream’, pronounced ‘skri:m’. It is just a final sound that distinguishes both words. The core sound of both words is the same – skri. Do both point to something beyond themselves? Does that common sound have a meaning on its own?

The correspondence between sounds and meanings remains to a great extent an enigma. One should remember that in 1866 the Linguistic Society of Paris banned discussions on the origins of language. That prohibition remained influential across much of the western world until the second half of the twentieth century (Stem 1976); indeed, in a way, up to now. Thus, the relationship between meanings and sounds is for long an issue that approaches the contours of a taboo. In spite of several attempts have been made to find specific accords between sounds and meanings, there is only “limited evidence on a few broad sound/meaning correspondences in language” (Crystal 1987:175). More correctly, one would say that the issue obviously is pertinent because that there are too many clues, coincidences and indications for the question to be meaningless. Yet, up to now researchers in the field have been incapable of progressing in a recognized way in this manifestly difficult area.

However this state of affairs does not mean that this kind of sound analysis is senseless. Quite the contrary, that in some cases “speakers feel (that certain forms in language) do have a close relationship to objects or states in the outside world [means that] individual sounds are thought to reflect, or symbolise, properties of the world, and thus to ‘have meaning’ ” (Crystal 1987:174).

When we look carefully at those words – screen and scream – in the English and the Portuguese languages we can discern some interesting insights. Other languages, such as French (*cri*), Czech (*vykrik*), Danish (*skrig*), German (*schrei*) or Italian – *grido* or *urlo*, which is close to the Portuguese *urro*, means roar –, and others would be of use as well. The Portuguese word for screen is ‘*écrã*’ (pronounced ‘*Ekrã*’), and for scream is ‘*grito*’ (pronounced ‘*gri’tu*’). Quite different words at a first glance. However these two Portuguese words, as it is the case for the two English words referred above, have a common core sound. ‘*kr*’ and ‘*gr*’ are the same sound but for a very minor variation – the sound ‘*gr*’ is almost the same of the sound ‘*kr*’, only with a not so stressed ‘*k*’. In Portuguese it is possible to pronounce ‘*grito*’ as ‘*kri:’tu*’ without being misunderstood or incurring a worth mentioning mistake.

Thus, the question one needs to consider is if there is any meaning attached to the core sound ‘kr/kri’? That this questioning is not senseless is shown in the fact that, most possibly, for the reader this sound actually recalls something.

By now, taking into account the analysis so far performed on ‘screen’, and the common meaning of ‘scream’, the answer appears intuitively: ‘to call for attention’. ‘To call for attention’ seems to be the meaning attached to the sound ‘kr/kri’ for both words in both languages. The animal clue in the scream, in the Italian urlo is indeed intriguing; what does gr mean? What gr, as a scream, perhaps grrrrrrrr means? Perhaps a roaring. A roaring, for long, is for us humans a call for attention. As McLuhan (1994) refers, long before the alphabet, that introduced the primacy of vision, ‘hearing was believing’ And it is quite elucidative that for many years one the major Hollywood movies corporation, MGM, opened its movie sessions with the roaring of a lion... attention, the movie, action on the screen, is about to begin.

A further scrutiny of the sounds in question strengthens this path. The Portuguese word ‘écrã’, a quite recent word coming from the French language, is close to the Middle French word ‘escren’, referred to above. The corresponding actual French word is ‘écran’. Is it the case that this initial ‘e’ – sound ‘e’ –, which the word screen does not have, points to any specific, old, primordial, meaning?

At a first glance the meaning of the ‘e’ may seem a worthless question as it is a widely recognized principle of phonetic “that individual sounds do not have meaning: it does not make sense to ask what ‘p’ or ‘a’ [or ‘e’] mean” (Crystal 1987:174).

The ‘e’ we are addressing is the sound ‘e’. So the appropriate question is: “what does this ‘e’ sound mean?” The answer is an intriguing one. The letter ‘e’, that represents the sound in question, is widely used in Portuguese as a prefix. Yet, as we further inquire into the sound ‘e’ we note there is indeed a Portuguese word that only has that sound: the word “eh!” (Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa 1989:580). This word is a grammatical interjection, a “designate of surprise, admiration, and calling” (DLP:580; translation of ours). Of course, we are referring words on the one hand and sounds on the other hand. Yet, the widely accepted the position of the arbitrariness of sounds is more a dogma than an evidence. Because language, for being what it is, obviously is shared, its path most possibly was – as is – one of conventionalisation. Hundreds of thousands or millions of years gone it would be sensible to accept the loss of clues on the dawn of language, humanity, civilization. In fact, it is not an argument of ours that sounds do have relationships to meaning; in dense, complex, intricate ways of course; perhaps

difficult or even impossible to distinguish. There is a whole tradition on this approach. From Plato's *Cratylus* (Plato 2008) to Merritt Ruhlen (1997), Corballis (2003) and others' contemporary work, many authors do acknowledge intriguing connections between sound and meaning. Thus, recalling the necessary falsificability of scientific positions, we think appropriate to leave a door open to some enigmatic clues we point out in this paper.

The Portuguese word 'eh!' is commonly used in situations where someone wants to call the attention of someone else. Let us consider an example and the respective English translation: "Eh! Anda cá" means in English "Hey! Come here." We evidently note that in both languages the first word 'eh'/'hey' is pronounced, that is, is destined, to call the attention of the one we want to "come here". The English word 'hey', the most common translation of the Portuguese word 'eh' (Michaelis Illustrated Dictionary, Vol. I, English-Portuguese, 1958:502), means exactly "calling attention" (OPDT:349).

If this is so, one may ask what about the word 'screen', it has no 'e' sound? Maybe the word screen never had an initial 'e', because the English language, as it evolved from the Middle Ages to the present day, seems to have had other solutions to emphasize the meanings at stake: the sounds 'scr' and 'i' instead of the sound 'é' in Portuguese, French and other languages.

Thus, we would conclude that from the Middle Ages to the present day the evolution of the Middle French word 'escren' and of the Middle English word 'screne' seems to have followed the same path. Escren became écran, screne became screen, that is, in both evolutions, each according to its own context, the words moved towards stressing the 'call for attention'. Screen is attention. Essentially it is attention.

A Screen Against the End

In a screened world, in an attention society, in a cultural space where everything is calling our attention, that is, where attention is the scarcest resource, catastrophes are the most promising spectacle, call for attention – red, flames, fire.

In hyper-reality, in the third order of simulacra (Baudrillard 2004), fires on television are just information. We question: what does the fire on the screens inform us about?

Fire is both the symbol that always has been and a medium of a screened hyper-reality, contextualized by abundance, the world of mobile phones, MTV, the Internet and advertising. Fires on television screens are both cause and consequence of the hyper-real regime in which

we live, as well as a paradoxical symbolic exchange that re-feeds this same hyper-real framework.

Calling for attention, stressing red, fires on the screen fuels the drama. The drama on the screens essentially is the drama of the announcement of the end. All the rest, everything on the surface, are just details, some kind of a communicational varnish, a skin that covers reality – a screen over the real, a screen against the world, against the end.

It is suspected from the beginning of the century – what is all this, airplanes, embassies, trains, cars, flags, people on fire every day in our home? “The end will be broadcasted live”, Ted Turner told us 30 years ago, when he founded the CNN. It is no coincidence that the key colour of CNN is red. All that a TV channel broadcasts nowadays is a second choice, a minor variation, compared to the first and most desirable issue of all: the last show, the end of times.

The ‘end’, promised by Ted Turner, is a word on the cover of dozens of bestsellers; from the humanity, mortality and work, to the State, science and many other subjects. The end was early on our epoch staged on the beaches of Vietnam, rearticulating history under the sound of Wagner, “The Doors”, and the fire of napalm. If indeed America lost that war – Vietnam is today an emerging market economy – the United States won a global industry, the movies, the screens, the hyper-real. More, they lead reality as screen. As Baudrillard said: “we enter our life as we walk into a screen.”

In hyper-reality the signifier is always a sign. Reality is semiotics. And nature is a strange fiction. For us, the hostages of the screen (Baudrillard 2002), slaves of advertising, television and the Internet, prisoners of the third order of simulacra, the final myth that establishes a sense of substance is found in the thousands of cars torched in Paris in November 2005, in the bombs on trains in the centre of Madrid, in the embassies on fire in the cartoon war, in the giant fires in the Summer in Portuguese forests, in the fires on the television screens. This myth is the Armageddon, the ultimate and monstrous battle between good and evil, surrounded by the fires of hell. “Witnesses of universal apocalyptic events”, in the words of Habermas (2003:101-2) referring to the Sept. 11, “we are assailed by biblical images as we watch television again and again, something a masochistic attitude, showing the images of the towers of Manhattan to crumble. The very language of retaliation has an aura of the Old Testament.”

The power of fire is the power of history. The power of fire is the power of real time, creation, the future, transformation. The control of fire by man, ultimately is an extension of the creative act, the generation of whatever arises – the most powerful media in the history of mankind, as

McLuhan referred to. Fire is a strange attractor, drawing, manipulating, attracting media attention because, burning, destroying, obliterating, murdering, exterminating, and overturning fire brings fear, anxiety and terror to anyone but the media, whom it brings audiences.

Being in itself change, fire is used as seduction by the media. The message of fire on television screens is the end of times, here and now. Fire absorbs everything, like as black hole. On the screen, we watch it.

Fire is the power of change, it is change, right in front of us, recalling Heraclitus (c. 540 BC - c. 480 BC). The final change, the deeper meaning of fire, is the essence of television, of the media. For long time the media, because of its immense power of destruction, are identified with the forces of evil. The British magazine *The Economist* considered the Internet as the most powerful weapon of the new terrorism ... and that is so; so much so that we would find that the most effective strategy to end global terrorism would be simply to close the Internet, and CNN...

Perhaps accurate, is the ancient belief that fire is a messenger between the worlds of the living and the dead. After all is not coincidence that weapons are precisely fire weapons.

Fire is the colour change. It is the colour of blood. Revolutions are made with firearms. Red is for stop. Red is to fear and to protect. It is the highest alert level colour of the alert scale anti-terrorist of the U.S. Homeland Security Department, indicating the near certainty of a terrorist attack and its high gravity. "Red means run son, numbers add up to nothing", sings Neil Young. Cause and consequence, red is the colour of fire. Again, it is no coincidence that the colours of CNN are the colours of fire: red, orange, black, gray and its many variations. In general, in the Western world red means the most danger. Emergency exits are red. The traffic lights are to stop. In a race car, the red flag means that all cars must stop immediately. In the global game of football the red card is the expulsion of the player. In exact sciences, the 'red line' means the maximum that can be developed in certain operations.

This symbolism goes back to the mythology of the imperial Rome, in which red was associated with the god of war, Mars; Mars today, the red planet. In the science fiction television series 'Star Trek', the professionals of security, who regularly suffer casualties in outside missions, wear red uniforms. In film and television industries, the redshirt means a character-type whose main feature is to die violently soon after being introduced into the story.

The colours of fire are the colours of catastrophe, the colours of news because all are change. With flames on TV screens it is as the fire of Heraclitus were back for revenge, because we

have taken the side of Parmenides, the repetition, the cause and effect assumption upon which science is based.

News is what changes the course of the day, people's lives and times, and catastrophe is the biggest news of all. Thus, red, the colour of fire, blood, life, strength, power and attention, is also the colour of news. The contemporary media world is now a supercool environment, exerting upon us a tremendous fascination and seduction, which is not easy to resist. It is precisely this supercool seduction, advertising, MTV, millions of dollars, rock music, mobile phones, cars, the fashion of clothing, of instant millionaires, that at any moment can turn into fire – in the Manhattan fire towers, in the heart of Paris, in the luxury resorts in Bali, or hidden away, deep in the tunnels of the London Underground.

The Final Screen

All these meanings, literally and metaphorically, are relevant to try better to understand how to describe fire and red on screens – growing in the streets of Europe and America, as the show central to television; the riots of November 2005 in Paris, in the ongoing massive fires Summer forests in Portugal in the last decade, in Madrid in the train bombs of March 11, in the embassies in the war cartoons, and in the more strange of all events of our era, the blasting of two U.S. planes into the twin towers of Manhattan. The fire provides access to the screen.

The background narrative that is part of the apocalyptic destruction of the hurricane Katrina, global terrorism, the war in Iraq, the explosion of the space shuttle, the bird flu, all are global crises of control systems, the emergence of an empire, not of Washington but of accidents. It is the final catastrophe that is the essence of global television. In an instant, a city was destroyed. Not just war on the screens, but in the promised land, in the heart of the new Rome. In a second, suddenly, a massive crash took the world's attention. In our era, where “television is the museum of accidents” (Virilio 1994), the successes and failures, the difference that counts, reaches us by surprise. This pattern of immediacy is related to the speed of electronic technologies as well as to the way nature builds tensions and suddenly releases them, purging impurities and excess.

On the one hand, it is easy to conclude that September 11, Iraq, Katrina, the London bombings, March 11 in Madrid, the Portuguese summer's fires, etc. weaken the systems of power, of control. On the other hand, from a systemic point of view, taking long-term survival as the ultimate criterion, any failure as long as not being fatal, is an enhancement, an additional

motivation – “what does not kill me, makes me stronger”, wrote Nietzsche. But, as Joker, the bad guy of Batman the movie tells us: “What does not kill me, makes me stranger...” Yet, obviously, what kills, really kills. What destroys, destroys. Or as Baudrillard writes (2005:193) “too much is too much.”

Nonetheless, as Baudrillard (2002) advised us, all catastrophes protect us from something worse. He refers to neurosis, which protects us from the most complete madness, or AIDS, which protects us from the most complete promiscuity.

What, then, can catastrophes on the screens protect us from? As neurosis or AIDS protect us against the excesses they prevent, the final catastrophe in the media, the promise of Ted Turner, protects us from a major catastrophe. What may be even a greater catastrophe than the screened final show? Surely, material and symbolical, it would be the final catastrophe in the real world. The end of the world on the television, making us play the role of the survivor, is a final warning. It is a screen, a shield, a protection against the end of the world, the Armageddon, not on screens but in the real world.

Remembering Marcel Proust’s final twist in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, after re-living, capturing all his life, Marcel begins the writing of the novel we are then reading. Just as Proust, making justice to Ted Turner’s prophecy, the end would come on television. As Saddam, Milosevich, Bin Laden or Kaddafi, the screen watcher will see the final shadow coming over him as on television, indeed on television. Deeply involved, the end would be all around, he will be in the centre, watched by all the screens of the world, and then it will be the end.

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