Screened Bodies

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Consider two instances of screened bodies.

The first comes from the article published in the *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* where a group of urologists and radiologists attempted to “confirm that it is feasible to take images of the male and female genitals during coitus and to compare this present study with previous theories and recent radiological studies of the anatomy during sexual intercourse” (Faix et al. 2002: 63). In their well-illustrated study of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) screen shots—often simplified and clarified with keyed line drawings—they address the history of trying to imagine and depict heterosexual intercourse, the movement, shape, and position of engaged male and female genitalia, and the factors affecting arousal and orgasm. (The study can only suggest the possibility of two types of vaginal orgasm as the man climaxes once during the experiment while the woman does not. Clitoral stimulation is mentioned but not pursued in the study.) The researchers assert the parameters of “normal” private and sexual lives and echo “natural” expectations with regard to sex, gender, sexuality, and sexual positions and practices. They involve themselves in visual analyses of drawings, sketches, ultrasound displays, and MRI monitors—discussing the details and features of the various technologies and the advantages and drawbacks of the different experimental conditions. They make a special note of “the couple” not experiencing difficulty having intercourse during the four sessions and mention the man’s consumption of Viagra. They conclude:

Initially, the aim of the study was to “copy” the genius of Leonardo da Vinci. We showed that an MRI scan of sexual intercourse in two positions is feasible and artistic but not as artistic as the images drawn by Da Vinci. In our study of one couple, during intercourse, the erect penis takes on the shape of a boomerang and is not straight [as speculated by Da Vinci in 1493 and Zwang in the 1990s] or S shaped [as conceived by Dickinson in 1949]. Depending on the coital position, the preferential impact of the glans seems to differ, as does the behavior of the cervix and the uterus. There is, therefore, a higher probability of a difference in stimulation, thus the pleasure felt as a result may also be different. (Faix et al. 2002: 75)

In the end, they write at the intersection of art and medicine, biology and culture, function and aesthetics. They weigh the successes and failures of their renderings with regard to both scientific accuracy and artistic beauty. Their partially opaque black and white images (not always with clear definition) mostly exceed the clinical accuracy of comparable ultrasound images; yet they pale in comparison with the artistry of da Vinci's drawing. They discuss desire and corporeality, affect and effect, psychology and physiology, the intersection of screens and bodies.

As much as this study is understandably scientific, even clinical in its methodology and stance, though, it also expresses certain social, moral, and ludic affects as well, especially when describing "the two *natural* positions (missionary or rear entry)" (Faix et al. 2002: 65; emphasis added), specifying, "the couple were guaranteed confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity" (ibid.: 66), and summarizing their goal to image sex inside this machine. Something other than only scientific investigation—prurience, humor, pleasure, ethics, politics—comes into play in this experience of screening bodies, something excessive of the primary question of technologically rendering heterosexual sexual intercourse on screen. The setting of the scene and the double screening (revealing/concealing, exposing/sheltering) involved in imaging this act of non-private sexual intercourse is telling:

The couple were invited to come for a scan at night, when the equipment was available. The volunteers were shown the equipment in the two rooms. The experimental procedure was explained and the investigators left the imaging room. The research team sat behind the scanning console and screen. An improvised curtain covered the window between the two rooms; the intercom was the only means of communication. The internal diameter of the tube was 60 cm, which, once in position, leaves a space of only 3 cm between the back of the male and the top of the tube. (Faix et al. 2002: 66)

The researchers note their consideration for the comfort and ease of the "couple"/"volunteers." They also note their concern for the couple's privacy, mentioning that they were left alone in the imaging room and that the researchers positioned themselves behind equipment, putting layers of instruments and architecture between them and the participants. The researchers observed their intercourse only on screen as the live sex act in the extremely confined space was concealed behind an additional improvised barrier. (The intercom remained their only means of communication.) Thus, the researchers express a certain morality or respect for the live, nude bodies of the couple screened from view while observing the very same sex acts on the screens before them. The double screenings (revealing/concealing) alter the valences of the sex act. The couple, screened from view by the curtain, is also screened onto

a monitor and their sex acts recorded by the scanning equipment and reproduced in the images published in the journal. Observing their bodies directly or through the window implies one observational affect while observing their bodies on screen (and listening over the intercom) implies another. In their description of the screening procedure and of the renderings they produced, then, the researchers depict how they engaged in the dynamics between science and morality at play in their experiment—in their concerns for accuracy and dignity. Hence, this article suggests a certain excessive affect circulating through the experiment and its reporting as the double screening (monitor/curtain) alters the significance and affect of the couple's/volunteers' acts and bodies.

The second instance comes from the post-apocalyptic film *Mad Max: Fury Road* (written and directed by George Miller, 2015), where the character Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron), eventually with the help of "Mad" Max Rockatansky (Tom Hardy), attempts to liberate five women held as breeding "wives" from Immortan Joe (Keays-Byrne) and his army of half-life war boys in her armored war-rig tanker truck. The film is set in a post-nuclear wasteland where water, gasoline, and mother's milk are sacred resources, and Furiosa's goal is to transport the women to The Green Place, the matriarchal utopia she was kidnapped from as a child. Reaction to *Fury Road* initially generated a storm of online conversations—critical and otherwise—focused on the question of the gender politics of the film. Is it feminist or not? Is its feminism good or not? For whom? Why? Individuals and groups from many angles regarded the images of Furiosa and Max along a spectrum of interpretations. The debate has already evolved and continues to evolve as critics have begun discussing the effects and affects of the film and its reception across different audiences. (I limit my discussion of the controversy because of space constraints.)

Alongside the gender politics concerns posted on some websites, the film has also provoked a number of blog pieces and other online screened responses questioning the affect not only of Furiosa's gender and sexuality but also of her disability and of disability throughout the film as well as the Mad Max franchise overall. On *Disability Thinking*, apulrang highlights what he calls a theme and a moment. The theme is that almost everyone in the film (except the five "pure wives") is disabled and "In a sense, Joe and his gang are self-hating disabled people who will do *anything* to reach an imagined cure of perfect genetics," he writes. "It's a lot for disabled people to think about." The moment is what apulrang describes as "Furiosa's point of utter despair" when she walks away, drops or sheds nearly everything, including her prosthetic arm, falls to her knees and cries out in anger and frustration. He writes, "I interpret this scene as Furiosa stripping herself down to her essential self, without add-ons, shields, or decorations, and that includes showing her naked, uncovered, unhidden stump." apulrang's argument is that Furiosa does not want to negate her disability, does not see her prosthetic as a burden but a useful tool, and does not see the need

to imitate “a normal arm.” (Her’s is a steam-punk instrument that can double as a steering wheel when needed.) For apulrang, Furiosa’s capability comes from her comfort with her adaptation *and* her comfort in her own skin—two aspects of a film he “enjoyed the hell out of.”

Kat Overland, on the blog *Women Write about Comics*, outlines the complexity of the deployment of disability in all the Mad Max films. Yes, she admits, *Fury Road* and the franchise use disability “to signify evil, a darkness about a character,” to “highlight the grotesque,” and “to horrify or engender pity.” However, at the same time, in these films “disability is normalized.” Almost everyone is physically, emotionally, or cognitively disabled, so disability does not necessarily mark every character as morally corrupt. Max “suffers from something like PTSD. (His leg brace also makes an appearance.),” but “no one ever comments on Max’s bits of lost time.” Furiosa wears a prosthetic arm that serves as a tool as well as an appendage, but no one comments on it or asks her the history of her amputation. In neither case does the film—or the franchise overall—follow the standard rhetoric of revealing the trauma at the origin of disability to make audiences feel sorrow for these characters’ conditions. On the contrary, it is Furiosa’s prosthetic arm that takes on additional significance for Overland as she claims it carries the ethical and political weight of the film, not her residual limb. It is her prosthetic that marks her militarist past, it is her prosthetic arm she sacrifices as she slays Immortan Joe, and it is this device and gesture Overland examines as “a physical representation of the past she wishes to atone from.” In the end, Overland remarks, “Disability is a way of living” in this film. It evokes pity and contempt on one level, but also capability and desire on another. No one is left behind at the end of the film, as Nux (Nicholas Hoult)—the war boy who joins the rebellion—martyrs himself for the benefit of this new social group rather than the glory of serving Immortan Joe, Max leaves quietly of his own volition, and the others ascend to the Citadel together. Thus, here, as with apulrang’s blog, it is the dynamic between prosthetic and stump, between abled and disabled that draws our attention to the screen and our embodied experience of the bodies being screened. With these two blogs, the film, and Faix and colleagues’ article, then, we might begin to consider the history, philosophy, and methodology of studying screened bodies—bodies put on display before and shielded from contact with our bodies, affecting us and being affected by us.

The study of screened bodies might well trace back to Leonardo da Vinci’s 1493 drawing “the copulation” and the questions experiencing it provokes about imaging, rendering, embodiment, disembodiment, corporeality and desire, ambiguous or confusing sex/gender/sexuality, ability/disability/capability, and wholeness. However, only recently has da Vinci’s drawing existed as an electronically screened body; therefore, only these later versions and the reception of them might seem more appropriate. Likewise, the study of screen bod-

ies might have begun with reactions to René Descartes's splitting the mind and body into two. Much of the theoretical/critical/philosophical underpinning of the study of screen bodies involves attempts to resolve Descartes's duality, to rejoin what he ripped asunder. Yet there is little screen theory in Descartes until he is brought into the conversation in the twentieth century.

Although contemplation of rendered bodies has been with us for quite some time, perhaps, it is possible to suggest that the combination of screen studies and body studies as we experience it has only recently begun to take hold. As Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin (2005) writes:

Although the body and its "objects": saliva, urine, hair, nails, and so forth, now have a prominent place in contemporary art and art theory, they are still largely ignored in philosophical aesthetics. This is somewhat surprising, since aesthetics as a discipline was originally conceived by its founder, Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762), as a science of sense perception, to be considered as a source of knowing, a scientia cognitionis sensitivae (a science of knowledge by means of the senses). Indeed, the father of aesthetics was eager to show that such "cognition of the senses" was not, as Spinoza and Leibniz believed, subordinate to logical knowledge, but possessed an autonomy and perfection of its own.

Perhaps such a more complex "cognition of the senses" with regard to the study of screen bodies begins to arise from the evolution of feminist, LGBT, and queer theory in the 1980s. Perhaps, we can trace the percolation of those ideas up through the collection of essays found in *How Do I Look?* (1991), edited by Bad Object-Choices. Perhaps we also can look to Linda Williams's crucial essay, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," in *Film Quarterly* from that same year. Or, perhaps, we can read Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological approach in *The Address of the Eye* (1992) as the accumulative move toward a more complex description and evaluation of the experience of bodies on screen, in relation to the bodies behind and in front of the screens. Perhaps, even, we could turn to W.J.T. Mitchell's *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986) and *Picture Theory* (1994) as crucial moves toward more nuanced descriptions of the complex, dynamic relation between images and observers. As Mitchell recounts in summarizing his own work, what he was asking all along was "What do pictures want?"—a question too little articulated with regard to images and their relations. With these five texts—and many others inspired by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the film theory and philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a renewed engagement with Marshall McLuhan's theories of communicative effects and Guy Debord's writings on the spectacle, the pre-reflexive, non-discursive modes of making and experiencing art and other objects stressed in Paul Crowther, Ellen Dissanayake, and Susan Langer,

and the embodied philosophy of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson—we encounter the movement toward a fuller consideration of screen bodies.

Such an enhanced engagement challenges what it classifies as the static, structural theories based in ideas of the apparatus, ideology, interpolation, semiotics, and identification. It resists or rejects psychoanalytic models that found desire in lack and relate the screen body experience to simplistic sado-masochism. It moves past the gaze and the disembodied eye as the sites of the screen experience toward what Anne Rutherford (2003) describes as the “visceral dimension,” where “the body or embodiment is conceptualized as the existential ground of perception.” As a result, it ascribes a more dynamic view to phenomena such as scopophilia, voyeurism, and fetishization, and adopts a more dialogic stance toward the relation between pleasure and pain. “Perception,” claims Rutherford, “is an environmental process,” and as such involves not just observing images, spectacles, and screen spaces but actually inhabiting them—whether there are bodies on those screens or not. Screens draw us into them, make us feel part of the screened experience, and yet maintain their distance. We may, as Rutherford notes, bring our “culturally or historically-inscribed dispositions ... to the cinema,” but screens act as both contact and boundary sites with regard to those dispositions. Screens invite us, host us, hold us hostage, and deny us entry. Sometimes they oscillate among these options; sometimes they do them all simultaneously. And, in their negotiations of our positions and dispositions, screens stimulate us, provoke us, arouse us, and incite us to respond bodily. It is to exploring how screens affect us in these ways that *Screen Bodies* is dedicated. Rutherford articulates “an erotics of the image” that acknowledges, “Cinema is not only about telling a story; it’s about creating an affect, an event, a moment which lodges itself under the skin of the spectator.” *Screen Bodies* strives to carry this impulse from a concern for the cinema to studies of a much wider variety of screen experiences.

This fleshing out of the screen experience links culture, biology, and embodied experience as it reconnects the mind and body, relocates aesthetic experience throughout the body (and not just in the gaze/look/glance of the eye), and draws out the dynamics between desire and disgust in play in the effects and affects of the screen/body and human/image relation. In other words, the address of screen bodies attempts to put into play the relation among bodies on screens, bodies in front of screens, and bodies behind screens without limiting the excess of any of these bodies and without splitting the mind and body, separating cognition and corporeality. It focuses on the combination of materiality, ideality, and spirituality as it locates the body as the site of sensory experience. Thus, addressing screen bodies engages with analysis of interoception, exteroception, and proprioception while remaining open to the complication of responding to aesthetic (and other) experiences through synesthesia. The theories of screen bodies explored in this journal engage with the body in its frag-

mented and its integral instances. They address screen haptics and palpations, kinesthetic sensitivities, corporeal tensions, tactile stimulation and response, and both the sensation and sensuousness of perception. They address bodily display, interface, flow, and virtuality. They engage with bodies experiencing screens and bodies extended or blocked by screens. Studies of screen bodies are situated, entangled, located, constituted—as are screens and bodies—around and with questions of technology, sex, gender, sexuality, health, beauty, desire, disgust, diagnosis. These studies address the bodies of perceivers, the bodies of images, the bodies of image makers without necessarily applying interpretive or judgmental regimes to these bodies. They consider bodies as natural, physical, cultural, historical, discursive, dynamic, unfinished, circumstantial—as mediums themselves that can be screened in every sense of the word.

In more concrete terms, *Screen Bodies* is a peer-reviewed journal that focuses on the intersection of screen studies and body studies across disciplines, institutions, and media. It is a forum to promote research on various aspects of embodiment behind, on, and in front of screens. The journal considers moving and still images, whether from entertainment industries, information technologies, or news and media outlets, including cinema, television, the Internet, and exhibition spaces. It investigates the private experiences of portable and personal devices and the institutional ones of medical and surveillance imaging. It addresses the portrayal, function, dissemination, affect, and reception of screened bodies from the perspectives of gender and sexuality studies, feminism and masculinity studies, trans* studies, queer theory, critical race theory, class analysis, cyborg studies, and dis/ability studies.

In addition to this introduction to screened bodies, volume 1, issue 1 of the journal features research articles on bodies in relation to screens large and small: “cinemautism” by Steven Eastwood, online revenge pornography by Emma Celeste Bedor, the human body as raw material by John Marmysz, and black women’s digital media by Moya Bailey. It also contains two reports: Jiaying Sim’s on a television/video/installation retrospective of Douglas Gordon’s work and Jessica Cammaert’s on a digital print/video/film/multimedia “end female genital mutilation” campaign from the *Guardian*. Finally, the inaugural issue presents reviews of books on monstrosity in print and non-print media, queer televisuality, Japanese pink films, mediations of the sexual revolution, and one person’s experience of an HIV diagnosis.

Future issues are scheduled to include articles on feminist disability interpretations of films, reading “ruined abjection and allegory” through the zombie body, Hollywood normativity, pain and cinesthetics, disembodying “Guidosexuality” in television, imagery and hypertext fiction, choreography and lesbian possibility, facing and facelessness in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), living in architecture, and performing bodies. Upcoming reports are to include a survey of an African film festival, impressions of

two photography exhibitions, and a conference on queer film in the Middle East. Forthcoming reviews and interviews will focus on new screen interfaces, neo-vitalist film studies, sex and disability, online (anti-)sociality, images from #blacklivesmatter, a series on Chinese cinema, airport body scanners, and intelligent cameras and wide area surveillance.

As the contributors and editors bring the first issue of this journal to completion, three experiences of screened bodies circulate around me. They amplify and alter the first two instances of screened bodies I considered here as they brought my own corporeality and desire more to the surface and reminded me how all these examples embrace the always intersectional aspects of screened bodies. First, I find myself in a heated online debate over images of Caitlyn Jenner on the cover of *Vanity Fair* and the images of others being produced on the tumblr.com project *My Vanity Fair Cover*—"a trans pride blog made to showcase the wonderful variety that exists within the transgender community above and beyond what we're shown in the mainstream media." The debate flows from arguments about trans* presentation to feminist reactions to magazine photojournalism and sartorial effect. The tone shifts rapidly among acceptance, approval, acquiescence, and anger. At the same time, I am entangled in an amicable argument about the prowess of the US women's football team and whether or not they are better than at least half the world's men's teams. Some participants are incredulous; others fantasize about matchups. Emojis abound. I also muse with friends over the effect of those giant pictures of the faces of the individual players waving at them from the crowd. Watching the World Cup matches and listening to streaming broadcasts of the games has a visceral effect on me. Despite being only a sometimes fan of most sports, experiencing this event excites me. It opens my pores and quickens my heart, makes me squeeze and pump my fists and shout. Every shot or close moment makes me tighten my whole body; every beautiful goal lets me exhale. Pauses in the action provoke me to start browsing the Internet for highlight videos of Mia Hamm and Abby Wambach, searching for evidence of which player is the greatest of all time: statistics, still images of their forms, and videos of their most perfect goals. Finally, I open an email from Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul's production company, Kick the Machine, containing permission to use several stills in an article I am writing on disability and desire in his films. The email also contains a half dozen more screen shots, and as I scroll through them, I pause to look at two characters from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000)—a current favorite film of mine. In the two shot are a woman and a man. The woman has long hair and looks worried as she stares past the camera; she extends her left hand, palm up, and gestures "give me." The man to her right holds some papers in his left hand; he wears glasses and has a cigarette centered between his lips. The still draws me back to that scene in the film and, in particular, the man's smoking. I almost did not remember the woman

because I had been obsessed with watching the man smoke as they hurried down the road trying to make arrangements. His hand to his mouth—taking the cigarette—gesturing with it—returning it to his mouth—now gesturing with his whole body. How could he walk and smoke like that? Doesn't he lose his breath or choke on the smoke? Where's the pleasure in smoking and rushing down a hot and humid pathway? I was so transported by this character, this actor's movements and gesticulations, I stopped attending to much else in this filmic experience. Here, then, are three more instances of embodied encounters with screens and with bodies on screens.

In the end, considering all these instances together further affects our reactions to screened bodies overall in unique ways. The fascination with Caitlyn Jenner's body evokes the deeper links between art and medicine, biology and culture, function and aesthetics. As much as MRI images of coitus highlight the junctions between desire and corporeality, affect and effect, psychology and physiology, screens and bodies, they also quicken the debate over the comparative and competitive abilities of male and female athletes—something that eventually turns back to questions of the precise determination of sex, gender, and sexuality. Such athletic and social classifications always conflate science and morality. And such considerations of medicine and ethics often provoke conversations about dissipation, disability, and death—discussions made finer by the image of a man hurriedly rushing to smoke and arrange a film shot at the same time and the framing of a woman removing her prosthetic arm and dropping to the ground in utter frustration at her impeding defeat in an impossible war against the misogynistic leaders of an army of war boys in a post-apocalyptic world. Instances like these of embodied encounters with screens and with bodies on screens are all around us, gesturing toward us from laptops, tablets, smartphones, e-readers, televisions, x-ray devices, security cameras, and other screens and pulling us ecstatically into virtual spaces through the omnipresent devices of the digital age. Screening us from some bodies; screening and streaming us to others. The editors of *Screen Bodies* look forward to the conversation that will grow out of this fine ground for critical inquiry.

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