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She Crawls Out of the TV, or On the Gendered Screen via *Ringu*

Jenna Ng

> We must abandon received definitions and categorizations of what constitutes a screen.
>
> —Erkki Huhtamo[1]

Introduction

Screens not only show us things; they also protect us from things. Gunther Kress has explored the definitions of *screen* and related words in three languages: English, German, and French. In English, Kress discovers, the word *screen* gives rise to two meanings: sheltering and partitioning, such as to shelter from "a too intense heat,"[2] or in reference to "something on one side that does not get through, is prevented from getting through, to the other side."[3] In French, the word for screen is *écran*, which Kress describes as "a *protective* barrier, 'to protect from sight or view' . . . at a further metaphorical level, *écran* can also mean to protect someone from, say, criticism."[4] In German, the word *bildschirm* (picture-shield) denotes the screen for the computer or TV, but the etymology of *schirm* itself "comes from a much older Germanic *skermi-*, the animal hide stretched across the shield used in fighting (as a protection for the surface of the shield); in this there is also a sense of the militaristic, of warlike defense against aggression. The verb *schirmen* means *to (safe)guard, protect, defend.*"[5] Wanda Strauven comments that "a trace of the Old German *skirm* is still visible in the English expression *skirmish*."[6] Erkki Huhtamo similarly points out how the word in sixteenth century usage "was used to refer to a 'contrivance for warding off the heat of fire or a draught of air.'"[7] Strauven adds, "The connotation [of *screen*] is that of a barrier, of an object that is placed in-between, to protect or to separate."[8]

The edge of the screen, then, is not only a threshold over which to cross for acquisition (of pleasure, of knowledge) from what it displays or reveals but also a bulwark for guarding against harm, like walls and fences.[9] In this article, I focus on how our understanding of the screen as an oscillation between revelation and protection can be framed in gendered terms, leading to interpretations of violation and transgression, but also, in a twist, feminist empowerment. In the process, this reading will pave the way for rethinking the screen and its edges as more than an Albertian window presenting the world in perspectival terms.[10] Rather, screen edges signify more violent kinds of encroachment and, in turn, a more intrusive blurring of demarcations of reality. This gendered framework is simply one lens with which to illustrate these larger dynamics.

The Gendered Screen

The screen as a protective covering attracts its own metaphors, such as the notion of skin, as mentioned above, in the etymology of "screen" in terms of the Old German *skermi-*, referring to animal hide stretched across a shield. Perhaps the most graphic iteration of this metaphor of skin lies in Serge Daney's comparison of the screen to "the skin, the transparent": "The transparent continuum that clings to the real takes its form, the bandages that preserve for us the mummy of reality, its still living corpse, its eternal presentness: that which allows us to see and protects us from what is seen: *the screen*."[11]

Skin is a paradox of permeability and impermeability. On one hand, it is a barrier, protecting the body from water loss as well as the entry of harmful microorganisms or irritants; on the other, it is porous, absorbing elements such as air and, less benignly, toxins and chemicals.[12] The skin is delicate and vulnerable to bruising, penetration, and other violent force. As both film theorists think through the screen in relation to the virtual reality it holds or contains (against the actual), Daney takes on André Bazin's idea of reality as the essence of cinema.[13] He writes of the screen as both an outer barrier against reality as well as a membrane sliver on which reality imprints itself, so delicate that it risks being penetrated at any moment: "The screen, the skin, the celluloid, the surface of the pan, exposed to the fire of the real and on which is going to be inscribed metaphorically and figuratively—everything that could burst them."[14] Daney contrasts this against Bazin's notions of capturing reality in cinema, which he characterizes as a "Bazinian fantasy": "a comical vision of the screen as the surface of a Teflon saucepan (in glass), capable of 'sealing' [in the culinary sense] (*saisir*) the signifier."[15] To Daney, the

screen is not an all-protective covering—like a Teflon saucepan—to barricade against reality on the other side of the screen. Rather, it is a covering that, even while critical as a protective cover, is so breakable it can be taken to the point of fetishism akin to a fixation with virginity, where that skin of the screen is, naturally, the hymen, and the breaking of it—the breach of reality through the screen—is a violent, almost profane, assault, as in rape: "That tiny difference, the screen: 'Of course,' says Bazin, 'a woman who has been raped is still beautiful but she is no longer the same woman.' *The obscenity perpetrated by the rape of reality* cannot fail to send us back to the rape of the woman *and the screen, the hymen.*"[16]

In the characterization of such delicateness and violence, the screen is thus not only a paradoxically fragile protective surface but also becomes a gendered one. Daney's interpretation of the screen (as against Bazin's film theory) is not the only example of such a reading. Writing on screens and haptics, Strauven draws similarly woman-unfriendly connections between the screen and the female body, where she points out, via readings of early filmmaker Georges Méliès's work, how female bodies are often "put on display."[17] One example is *Le merveilleux éventail vivant* (*The Wonderful Living Fan*, France, 1904), where display panels reminiscent of fire screens are magicked into, and thus equated to, living women.

Figure 1. Still from *The Wonderful Living Fan* (dir. Georges Méliès, France, 1904).

Méliès's oeuvre of films frequently presented magic tricks, with women's bodies also often co-opted into the trickery, where they are "treated as concrete barriers in the execution of magic (and filmic) tricks" and "constantly covered and uncovered by Méliès by means of screens, cloths, curtains, and so on, to eventually be turned into a screen itself—that is, a screen *for* and *on* display."[18] While Méliès's presentation of infringement or breach of screens/bodies in his films is not set in overtly violent terms, the same tone of transgression applies. In *L'illusionniste double et la tête vivante* (*The Triple Conjurer and the Living Head*, France, 1900), a living woman's head is first placed on a small table before being eventually magicked into a full body, upright woman. The two magicians standing on either side of her (played by Méliès himself, duplicated) are amazed and triumphant in their conjuring, and they try to kiss and touch her. As it becomes clear that she is a superimposed image, one of them, with facial expressions of registered astonishment thinly hiding his leers, passes his hands several times through the image of her body. His groping of her virtual body is barely short of an actual assault. If we can read the woman's body here—itself a displayed virtual reality—as a screen, this breach of the screen-as-female-body is at best a comical play between virtuality and corporeality and at worst carries the same connotations of rape alluded to by Daney as a metaphor for the interplay between reality and virtuality, literalized here as the reality of a man's body transgressing the virtuality of a woman's body.

Figure 2. Still from *The Triple Conjurer and the Living Head* (dir. Georges Méliès, France, 1900).

The screen, and the edges which confine it, thus not only extends an ambiguous line between defense and revelation but, in the theory and readings recounted above, also demarcates gendered spaces, the breaching of which inevitably signifies gendered violence. While Daney and Strauven have construed this violence to be assaults against women, a more modern take that twists this on its head can be read in *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, Japan, 1998), a text we turn to in the next section.

She Crawls Out of the TV: Breaching Screen Boundaries in *Ringu*

A Japanese horror thriller film which performed to great success at the box office and spawned a Japanese franchise as well as a number of Hollywood remakes, *Ringu* centers on a cursed videotape that will kill anyone who has watched it after one week. The story follows an investigative reporter, Reiko (Nanako Matsushima), who, having inadvertently watched the tape, sets out to save herself from its curse with the help of her ex-husband, Ryuji (Hiroyuki Sanada). Reiko traces the curse to its original location: a well on Izu Oshima Island in which Sadako, the girl-spirit who had created the curse, was ostensibly murdered by her father.[19]

In the film's climactic end, after the audience has been led to believe that Ryuji and Reiko have broken the curse, Ryuji's television set turns on by itself and shows the Izu Oshima Island well. A figure dressed in white climbs out of the well, its face covered entirely with long black hair: it is Sadako, who proceeds to lurch towards the diegetic camera in front of her. The film cuts frequently between the television image and Ryuji's face, still relatively composed: after all, the threat is on the other side of the screen. Per the nature of screen boundaries and the virtual reality of the image against his own diegetic actual reality, the screen partitions and protects him from this menace. Yet the screen's defensive barrier is undone as, in the most memorable shot of the film, Sadako approaches the presumed camera and, by first pushing her head out of the screen, crawls from the television into Ryuji's diegetic world (fig. 2). She drags herself on her hands and knees over the physical and virtual boundaries of the screen before standing upright in Ryuji's living room.[20] Ryuji stumbles around the room in horror as she walks over to him; he then dies of a heart attack, fulfilling the curse.

Figure 3. Sadako crawling out of the TV in *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, Japan, 1998).

This scene also represents the first time the audience sees the direct effect of the curse, which has thus far been represented as a series of incoherent images on the videotape. Notably, the curse-as-videotape is at first contained behind the boundaries of the screen, which acts as a protective shield against the malevolence. When the curse kills its victim after the seven days, it is thus appropriate that its horror should be visualized not only in terms of Sadako's ominous form (terrifying as it is), but more significantly in terms of the violation of screen edges: a literal breach of what had seemed to be a protective partition and the encroachment of what has been a safe space from Sadako, namely, Ryuji's world on his side of the screen. Here, the virtual reality behind the television screen boundary is the female space, occupied first by Sadako's evil powers via the cursed videotape and later by her humanized form as she emerges from the well. Her transgression of the protective screen boundary takes the form of her body encroaching into Ryuji's space on the other side of the screen; she does not touch Ryuji but directly causes his death. Taking up Daney again to read the screen as a fragile covering exposed to the fire of the real, there is here a literal bursting of that real as Sadako crawls over the boundaries of Ryuji's television screen.

However, I also read this breach of the screen not as sexual assault, but as Sadako's empowerment to unleash her malevolence. The interplay between screens and the female body in *Ringu* is thus not about the latter's vulnerability, where the transgression of the screen is about the breach and violation of the woman's body, mostly in sexual terms, but

rather it is about the woman gaining power in her capability to fulfill the promise of the curse. By literally pushing through the television screen with her head and climbing across on her hands and knees, Sadako breaks a different kind of glass ceiling. If we think back to Daney's metaphor of the screen as hymen, Sadako's (her name in Japanese meaning "chaste child," *sada*: chaste and *ko*: child) penetration reaches even greater ironic depths: a charged piercing to shatter any ideas of virtue or innocence.

Sadako's move out of the television screen thus roundly subverts the theme of male violence on female bodies as played out across the use of screens in films such as Méliès's. Instead, Sadako crosses screen boundaries to exact her revenge for the apparent violence inflicted on her by her father, inflicting her own attack on another man. Where film theory is often concerned with the suppression of women, such as the controlling force of the male gaze and the gendered pleasure of looking, the representation of Sadako crawling across screen boundaries offers a more radical feminist empowerment.[21] Beyond calling out the ideological biases of patriarchy and their values, beyond having women's voices heard, this image literalizes the boundaries at stake, takes determined action in overcoming them, and manifests its own kinds of power, authority, and agency.

Conclusion

These iterations of screen edges and their violations thus present different demonstrations of power, argued here to appear along gendered lines. However, these gendered violations also portend the more widespread manifestation of breached screen barriers. Spurred by contemporary media culture such as reality TV, the found-footage genre, and augmented and virtual reality applications, screen edges are under constant erosion. While on one hand the aggressive breach of screen boundaries in *Ringu* is a sign of upending images of gendered control and dominance, on the other hand it also signals something more ominous: the privileging of the virtual at the cost of oblivion to the actual. As the demarcations of screen edges become increasingly blurred, we as audiences correspondingly become inured to the boundaries between the virtual and the actual, between the simulacrum and the real. How we identify and interrogate what belongs to the worlds of actual reality and fiction, respectively, will become an increasingly complex task.

Notes

1 Erkki Huhtamo, "Screen Tests: Why Do We Need an Archaeology of the Screen?" *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2 (2012): 148.

2 Gunther Kress, "'Screen': Metaphors of Display, Partition, Concealment and Defence," *Visual Communication* 5, no. 2 (2006): 200. Kress cites two example-meanings to illustrate these meanings: "a screen to set between one and the fire" and "a screen for gravel or corn is a grating which wards off the coarser particles and prevents them from coming through." The *Oxford English Dictionary* similarly sets out a screen as "a contrivance for warding off the heat of a fire or a draught of air."
3 Kress, "Screen": 201.
4 Kress, "Screen": 201–2.
5 Kress, "Screen": 202.
6 Wanda Strauven, "Early Cinema's Touch(able) Screens: From Uncle Josh to Ali Barbouyou," *Necsus*, (Autumn 2012), necsus-ejms.org/early-cinemas-touchable-screens-from-uncle-josh-to-ali-barbouyou/.
7 Erkki Huhtamo, "Elements of Screenology," *ICONICS: International Studies of the Modern Image* 7 (2004): 35.
8 Strauven, "Early Cinema's Touch(able) Screens."
9 See also David Theo Goldberg, "Wallcraft: The Politics of Walling," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27 February 2015, www.theoryculturesociety.org/david-theo-goldberg-on-wallcraft-the-politics-of-walling/.
10 See Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2009).
11 Serge Daney, "The Screen of Fantasy (Bazin and Animals)," trans. Mark A. Cohen, in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 34. Emphasis in the original.
12 Indeed, the skin has been described as a barrier in various models, such as the Elias model of the skin barrier, or "the domain mosaic model of the human skin barrier": see, for example, Bo Forslind, "A Domain Mosaic Model of the Skin Barrier," *Acta Derm Venereol (Stockh)*, 74 (1994): 1–6.
13 See André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?: Vol. 1*, 2nd ed., trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
14 Daney, 34–35. This tension in the screen between barrier and penetrable lamina is used to endearing effect in *Paddington* (2014) when the eponymous bear, homesick in London, is shown a video of his homeland of "darkest Peru." He steps up to the screen displaying the black-and-white footage and first pauses before it—here the screen is a physical barrier, a hurdle of the vast distance from London to Peru. Paddington then walks through the screen and emerges on the other side into his homeland, awash in color and sights—here the screen is a penetrable lamina, bringing virtual reality within such tangible and sensorial proximity that one need simply reach through for it.
15 Daney, 34.
16 Daney, 35. Emphasis added.
17 Strauven, "Early Cinema's Touch(able) Screens."
18 Strauven, "Early Cinema's Touch(able) Screens." Emphasis in original. In relation to screens for display, Strauven also describes an instructive text by way of American Mutoscope and Biograph's *A Midnight Fantasy* (1899), "where Rose Sydell appears framed as a (living) billboard among three other life-sized vaudeville posters on the street."
19 The story of Sadako's murder by her father is revealed to be false in later sequels.
20 This image is so memorable that it is used as a visual trope to advertise the film's sequel. See Emily Balistrieri, "Sadako Mob Terrorizes Tokyo to Promote *Ringu* Sequel," *Crunchyroll*, 6 May 2012, www.crunchyroll.com/anime-news/2012/05/06-1/sadako-mob-terrorizes-shibuya-to-promote-ringu-sequel.
21 See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 16.

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