

Screening Fears: On Protective Media, **by Francesco Casetti. Zone Books, 2023,** **264 pp.**

Malte Hagener

One of the central tenets of contemporary media theory is encapsulated in Marshall McLuhan’s famous proposition that media are “extensions of man”, that they prolong our senses into the world. In his latest book, Francesco Casetti challenges exactly this assumption by arguing that media just as much protect and enclose, as they extend and protract. He claims that what he calls “the projection/protection complex [...] stands for a set of interrelated processes and components [...] aimed at creating a ‘protected’ confrontation with the world and at the same time at ‘projecting’ individuals beyond the safe space in which they are located” (14). Like Deleuze and Guattari took Freud’s Oedipus theory and turned it on its head (in *Anti-Oedipus*), *Screening Fears* could be read as a kind of “Anti-McLuhan” which acknowledges the significance of the original, but adds important dimensions to it. Through three case studies—the phantasmagoria of the nineteenth century, the cinema of the twentieth century and digital media of the twenty-first century—Casetti stresses the tendency inherent in media to allow people to withdraw from the world and then provide them with a screen that facilitates protected and partial access.

Casetti builds a hybrid theory of sorts that draws intelligently on media archaeology, on the history of film theory, on German media theory as well as on recent environmental media theory. What becomes crucial is the intersection between the environment and the medium, the place in which the content (so to speak, I don’t think Casetti ever uses this term) interfaces with the spectator. This might be part of a broader significance of this approach which gives us pause to reconsider the trading zone between reception and aesthetics. Casetti claims that media allow a venturing into the world, as much as a withdrawal into protected spaces. It enables contact, but it just as much encloses in private spaces.

The book is not only elegantly written, but also argues in a very comprehensible way without ever dumbing down the intricate arguments. Moreover, Casetti’s book is also a claim that film theory—as well as media archaeology—still has a lot to tell about contemporary concerns with the networked algorithmically based media. The cinema, the phantasmagoria, the bubble—all these configurations provide a “mechanism that responds to the challenges of a world that is perceived as increasingly difficult and taxing” (15). Casetti’s method could be described as archeologically – through close readings of historical texts, contemporary to the media developments that are discussed, Casetti teases out the implicit fears and anxieties connected to media.

The book starts with a genealogy of the screen as something that both hides and protects, as well as shows and presents—in the way that the term in many languages hints at a

partition as well as a shielding function. The phantasmagoria as an “*optical-environmental dispositif*” creates “a space split from the external world and yet arranged as a sort of eccentric and exciting microcosm” (48). Casetti isolates three elements as decisive for the medium: the screen, the setting, and the audience. The screen “provided a separation between the site of production and the site of consumption and [...] between the space of technology and the space of imagination” (53). The theatrical space itself works “as recess and as environment” (56)—on the one hand shutting out the outside world, while also inviting it back in especially through the employment of sound. The medium was effective and successful because it dealt with the spectators’ anxieties in a double way—“it offered a place where patrons faced their inner world” (61), but the phantasmagoria also “made this inner world publicly visible” (62). Casetti speaks of a multiverse that allows for the co-presence of different worlds, as it has become popular in recent diegetic worldbuilding.

In the second chapter which concentrates on the cinema, Casetti reminds us that—despite the film-theoretical obsession with the reproduction of reality and the indexical (as well as iconic) nature of film—the spectators are ultimately detached from the spectacle unfolding on the screen. And they are well aware of this fact. In this sense, the cinema is deficient, but to a certain extent this finds its antidote in the comfort of the cinema. For Casetti, the most typical expression of this is to be found in the movie palaces built in the late 1920s. They facilitate “an elegant, pleasurable, and safe environment, a smooth and efficient social gathering, and a functional and sensuous viewing experience” (86). Important elements of this configuration are air-conditioned atmosphere and cleanliness, both implying “a separation between the interior and the exterior in order to avoid the exposure to something that is uncomfortable” (91). Of equal importance are ushers who discipline a crowd into an audience and provide safety and order, while the size and placement of the screen as well as the overall architecture of the film theatre further contribute to the feeling of enclosure. Casetti sees here “a discreet use of technology, forms of regulation of bodies and images, and the creation of a refuge from an uncertain exterior” (99). Casetti introduces the idea of comfort as an antidote, a distinction and reparation from the demands of modernity: “While offering an undoubted relief from the pressures and burdens of everyday existence, cinema keeps spectators in a loop in which pressures and burdens are only reshaped and relocated. Hence new fears—including the fear of cinema itself as a deceiving machine—in which the delights of cinema appear ultimately poisonous” (106).

The third case study is devoted to the digital bubble, more specifically to configurations that emerged during the pandemic. Casetti is not so much interested in “filter bubbles” in a metaphorical sense (in fact, Eli Pariser’s book is not even mentioned), but rather in bubbles in a material sense that enclose spectators and their screens. En passant, Casetti discovers reddit as a source for the anxieties and insecurities that emerged during the pandemic in relation to the etiquette and habits in online video conferences. Here, the stable architectural set-up that was characteristic of the phantasmagoria and the cinema breaks down in favour of more flexible configurations.

In the final chapter, Casetti circles back to some of the concerns raised in earlier chapter and takes up Kracauer’s metaphor of the cinema as akin to Athene’s shield—reflecting reality, but in such a way that it provides a safe distance from reality. What kind of protection do media such as the phantasmagoria, the cinema and the digital offer, and at what cost? These are the questions focused on in the final chapter. Space emerges here again as a crucial category: space as a disciplinary arranging of bodies in orderly fashion that “removes individuals from the risks of conflicts, accidents, and unpredictability” (150).

In between the main chapters we find *intermezzi*, short interventions that mostly open up the ideas of the book towards other case studies that are not fully worked out, but rather hinted at. These *intermezzi* also show how the environmental ideas that Casetti puts forward find their echo not only in the physical set-up of media equipment, but can also be glimpsed through interpretations of aesthetic objects. A reading of *The Most Dangerous Game* (Ernest B. Schoedsack and Irving Pichel, 1932) shows how film deals with questions of visibility, protection and danger, a brief foray into *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998) hints at television as another protective medium, while Andy Warhol's Screen Tests (1964–66) unfolds the dialectics of “seclusion and proximity” (143).

One question that one could potentially take further from Casetti's convincing argument would be the role of sound. The single and the portable record player, the car radio and the Walkman, the MP3-player and the playlist—there are many devices that provide mechanisms for constructing sound bubbles. In fact, since the spatial qualities of sound are different, undirected and enveloping, sound has an even bigger tendency to wrap around persons and objects.

But this is not meant as a criticism, but rather as a call to actively expand on Casetti's productive reconceptualisation of media theory. *Screening Fears* demonstrates the ongoing productivity of media history to understand our digital present, not characterised by relentless novelty and permanent disruption, as the tycoons of the digital age want us to believe, but rather by continuity and transformation.

References

- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus*. Translated by Robert Hurley, et al., Bloomsbury Revelations, 2013.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill, 1964.
- The Most Dangerous Game*. Directed by Ernest B. Schoedsack and Irving Pichel, Merion C. Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, 1932.
- Pariser, Eli. *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*. Penguin Books, 2012.
- Pleasantville*. Directed by Gary Ross, New Line Cinema, 1998.
- Screen Tests*. Created by Andy Warhol, 1964–66.

Suggested Citation

Hagener, Malte. “*Screening Fears: On Protective Media*, by Francesco Casetti.” *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 27, 2024, pp. 265–268. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.27.24>

Malte Hagener is Professor in Media and Film Studies at Philipps-Universität Marburg. He is author of *Moving Forward, Looking Back. The European Avant-garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919–1939* (Amsterdam UP 2007); co-author (with Thomas Elsaesser) of *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (Routledge 2010, 2nd edition 2015), published in twelve languages; co-editor of *How Film Histories Were Made: Materials, Methods, Discourses*, Amsterdam UP 2024 (with Yvonne Zimmermann); *Handbuch Filmanalyse* (Springer 2020, with Volker Pantenburg); and editor of *The Emergence of Film Culture. Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-garde in Europe, 1919–1945* (Berghahn 2014).