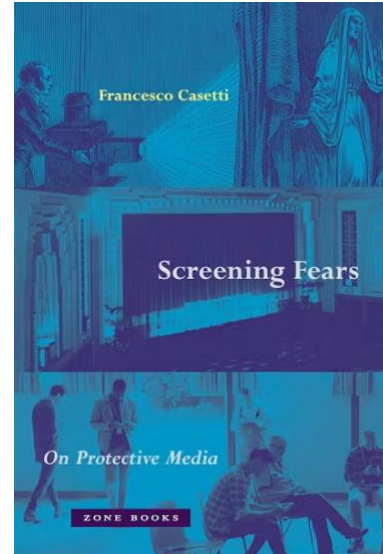


Francesco Casetti, **Screening Fears: On Protective Media**, Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2023, 272 pp., \$29.95 (hardcover).

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In **Screening Fears: On Protective Media**, Francesco Casetti presents the projection/protection complex as a tool for approaching media history and applies the complex to three media forms: the phantasmagoria, cinema, and digital “bubbles.” Casetti draws on archives and cultural analysis to demonstrate how media forms permit viewers to confront reality and move forward despite increasing ontological terrors in the modern world. While Casetti’s projection/protection complex offers a compelling framework for understanding cinema as a protective medium, its extension to phantasmagoria and, especially, to digital media is less convincing. Nevertheless, the engaging prose and exploratory depth into the historical record reveal the strengths of his media-archaeological approach, and the book offers a powerful thesis to explain our persistent desires to direct and redirect our attentions toward screened images and away from the dangerous world around us.



One of Casetti’s contributions to film theory lies in his ability to bridge classical accounts of spectatorship with more modern concerns about mediated enclosure: a synthesis that underpins the central argument of *Screening Fears*. The book has a broad appeal across media and cultural studies. With a sophisticated yet comprehensible writing style, Casetti effectively guides the readers through the theory and history of the projection/protection complex. Casetti divides the book into five chapters—introduction, conclusion, and a chapter for each of the three forms of protective media—with a brief “intermezzo” between each case study chapter. Structurally, the book is easy to follow and moves chronologically from one media to the next without implying a narrative of technological progress or growth. The interstitial intermezzos provide relief from the case study chapters, which often include detailed close readings of historical documents and discourse analysis in service of the large genealogy.

The projection/protection complex is Casetti’s central theoretical intervention in the text. Early on, Casetti establishes cinema as a “dispositif of protection” rather than as an “extension of man” in McLuhan’s classic formulation (p. 13). Cinema falls within a tradition of media forms that rely on “the association of screened images and sounds and physical or psychological enclosures” that include the phantasmagoria and the digital bubbles of the 21st century (p. 14). Each form provides specific kinds of protection: The phantasmagoria allows visitors to explore a “threefold universe, the natural, the spiritual, and the inner;” cinema provides a “comfortable setting and pleasurable images and sounds”; and the digital bubble can “isolate individuals from their milieu and engage them in a face-to-face encounter at a distance” (p. 15). For Casetti, “the key element of the complex is the fear of immediate reality,” and the alternate realities that appear on screens allow a comforting degree of distance from encroaching dangers of the real world

(p. 59). The specific fears that individuals attempt to escape through the screens are contingent and conjunctural, just like the screened media forms themselves (p. 24).

Protection that arises in the cinema derives from the sense of comfort and pleasure in large, air-conditioned, and clean auditorium spaces. These conditions create a clear sense of separation with the potential dangers of the outside world, and Casetti highlights "chronicles, reviews, and advertisements" that directly reference theaters as "shelters" (p. 91). Orderliness and cleanliness in the theater reflect film, which attempts "to tame the flow of the images and convert it into a coherent story" (p. 95). For Casetti, this illustrates the "task of the projection/protection complex, whose imperative is to substitute for a risky and fearsome exposure to the world new and safer forms of mediation with it" (p. 99). However, the comforts of the cinema are illusory and "insubstantial" because of that mediation: "People no longer cope with reality, but only with appearances of reality" (p. 108). This recalls Georg Lukács's (1971) notion of a second nature under the reified world of commodities, and Casetti acknowledges cinema's protective capabilities can serve the "practices of expropriation of a technocapitalistic society" (p. 108).

A historical lineage of the projection/protection paradox makes the complex more compelling, but the tenuousness of a digital or electronic bubble compared with the materiality and comprehensibility of the cinema screen places the final case study on shakier conceptual ground. While the three media forms do not perfectly correspond, Casetti does recognize that the digital bubble does have "significant differences" from cinema and the phantasmagoria but suggests that the digital bubble relies on the "intentional severance from reality and on screened images and sounds that at once accentuate and compensate for such severance" like the other two forms and therefore warrants inclusion in the book (p. 14). However, the idea of a psychological rather than physical enclosure challenges the potential safety and distancing from the world. As Casetti notes, "screen-based bubbles" are "individual, contingent, and immaterial," and they "support a space that is modular and internalized" (p. 131). Screens in the digital bubble separate individuals from their immediate reality, which suggests that the digital bubble does not sustain enclosure so much as constantly negotiate and destabilize it. Moreover, digital screens, like a smartphone or smartwatch, invade the protection of contemporary cinema and could prevent viewers in this older form from feeling totally separated from reality.

Published in 2023 in Zone Books, *Screening Fears* appears in the post-cinema academic landscape inflected by the COVID-19 pandemic. He opens the chapter on "Digitally Networked Bubbles" with an incontestable statement: "Mobile screens triumph" (p. 115). Screens proliferate around us and lead to the "bubbles [that] create a safe zone in which we can stay fully tuned into the world without exposing ourselves to it directly" (p. 116). This is evidently applicable to the pandemic, and Casetti does devote a portion of the chapter to it; however, the book does not attend to the disparities in who had access to these screens or the divergence of fears that occur when access to the screens is not guaranteed. Moreover, unlike cinema, which offers a bounded and collective experience, digital media operate through dispersed, individualized, and continuous engagement, so their characterization as protective enclosures is more conceptually unstable. For online meetings in the digital bubble, like those on Zoom, Casetti claims the "small cells visible on the screen . . . recall a Panopticon-like arrangement" wherein "every participant has their own space equal to those of the others" (p. 151). But the number of screens available to a user, the quality of the camera, and the relative size of the cells, depending on the type of screen, make these arrangements

inherently unequal. These types of disparities are underexplored throughout the text.

While Casetti's framework is most effective at the level of affect and spatial experience, its limitations become visible when considered in relation to contemporary digital media. The projection/protection complex emphasizes how screens shield individuals from the anxieties of modern life, but it does not fully account for how contemporary digital media actively produce and monetize those anxieties. The "digital bubble" is therefore not merely a site of insulation but also a site of capture, structured by algorithmic systems that prioritize engagement and profitability over protection. In this sense, the protective function of screens may be less about shielding users from the world than about mediating their exposure in ways that sustain platform capitalism. By foregrounding enclosure without fully addressing the economic infrastructures that sustain it, Casetti risks reproducing a phenomenological account of media that abstracts from the material conditions of their production and circulation. A more sustained engagement with political economy would strengthen the argument by situating the projection/protection complex within the logics of capital that shape not only what we see, but how and why we see it.

Toward the end of the Introduction, Casetti provides a succinct reason for the book and his analysis of the projection/protection complex: "In a world that is rapidly changing and that prefigures its and our extinction, the projection/protection complex enables us to grasp what ultimately is at stake and to imagine alternate ways of confronting reality" (p. 16). It is evidently absurd that we are facing the realities of living under late-stage capitalism, rising authoritarianism within democratic societies, and inescapable climate catastrophe, but screens still demand our attention and perhaps "spare individuals direct exposure to the world" (p. 13). *Screening Fears* is most compelling when it historicizes cinema as a protective apparatus within modernity, but less persuasive when extending this framework to contemporary digital media without fully accounting for their economic, technological, and social differences. Nevertheless, the book offers a valuable and provocative contribution to media theory, inviting readers to reconsider not only how screens mediate reality but also why we increasingly turn to shield ourselves from it.

Reference

Lukács, G. (1971). *History and class consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.