This is a pre-copyedited version of an article accepted for publication in *Cinema Journal* 51.2 (Winter 2012): pp. 143-146, following peer review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version is available through the University of Texas Press.

**Introduction (In Focus: Screen Technologies)**

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In the midst of cinema’s significant technological and industrial changes of the late 1920s, Sergei Eisenstein delivered a speech to the American film industry.[[1]](#footnote-1) In his address, he advocated a new standard shape for the film screen. A different screen ratio than the one then common would better suit cinema’s unique capacities, he claimed. Rather than support the continuation of the American industry standard, which he referred to as “the static rectangle,” Eisenstein playfully hyped the virtues of the “dynamic square,” a screen that was exactly as high as it was wide. He did so in part because to him the square was modern, charged with productive machine force. This more purely cinematic screen was, according to Eisenstein, necessary for properly showcasing the energies, conflicts, and collisions germane to the moving image arts. It would also, at least in theory, be the most accommodating frame, capable of hosting images composed for planes that were either horizontal or vertical. Eisenstein proclaimed that previous industry standards (4:3), as well as contemporaneous calls for wider screens, were nostalgic, calling forth a dated viewing regime dictated by traditional art forms. Cinema deserved something better and more specific, a screen that could best accommodate its rapidly developing languages and its expanding sociopolitical functions.

In advocating for the dynamic square, Eisenstein confronted the intense technological standardization required for the growing empire of screens, though he sought not to entirely dismantle it, but merely to influence its directions. His call to engage the question of screen dimensions came during a period of intense discussions about technologies of cinema more generally. With the rise of synchronized sound and the media convergences that characterized this period, the whole apparatus of cinema was being unsettled and rearranged. If cinema’s sounds were to become electrical and its spaces highly acoustic, why couldn’t its screen also adapt and transform? And, of course, it did.

We know from Anne Friedberg’s wonderful book *The Virtual Window* that Eisenstein was not entirely alone in his meditations on the film screen.[[2]](#footnote-2) Following her we can observe a persistently transforming screen – Cinerama, drive-ins, and multisurface installation works – which reminds us that even this one piece of the complex technological puzzle that we call “cinema” has not uniformly marched through history, blandly reflecting a singular or simple cinematic ideal. Rather, the film screen has long functioned as a productive technology and site, actively shaping the ways in which all variety of films have been made, presented, and viewed, and then recirculated, presented and viewed again. Discussions about screen size, shape, reflectivity, and function are a persistent thread throughout the twentieth century, long explored by theorists and critics, but also by a tremendous number of engineers, filmmakers, entrepreneurs, institutional authorities, hobbyists, and consumers.

This In Focus charts an emergent thread in film and media research, one that seeks to open up our understanding of cinema’s past, in part by breaking apart the idea of a singular technological apparatus. The essays here are written by scholars working across conventional fields of film and media study: industry, special effects and 3-D, technology, exhibition, film institutions, experimental film, and sound. Yet each contribution is linked by a commitment to highlighting the screen as but one persistent element of cinema’s complex and multifaceted legacy. Each demonstrates that in the digital age, when screens link phones, cameras, televisions, and cinema into an expanded network of display, the film screen, with its seemingly quaint use of projected light, amplified sound, and spatial magnitude, still has something to tell us. The history of the film screen helps to expand histories of cinema; such histories make a case for coming to grips with cinema’s long-standing and persistent links to other media forms, to varied audience, and to a surprising functional diversity. For these authors, the film screen has long been defiantly dynamic. The fact of this dynamic screen improves our understanding of cinema’s place in media cultures past and present.

The essays collected here consider the film screen in its varied permutations throughout the twentieth century. Some authors examine a generalizable film screen, others a particular film screen, with a cluster of essays addressing the American film screen at midcentury, though, it should be said, the questions raised are not necessarily specific to the United States or to this historical period and, indeed, resonate with research being done in other national contexts and other time periods.[[3]](#footnote-3) All authors address, to varying degrees, the history of the film screen, doing so with select case studies of live-performance screens. Screens here are not just sites of automatic or professionalized film performance, exhibition, and display; rather, they are multimedia sites incorporating aesthetic, improvisational, adaptive, and creative practices. These essays supplement existing work on the theatrical screen, inviting readers to consider cinema in its expanded locations, those “beyond the multiplex,” to borrow a phrase from Barbara Klinger.[[4]](#footnote-4) The authors ask us to embrace the dynamics of the film screen as it has long existed, and to consider its supporting cast of integral, cognate technologies.

Complicating the entry points and the methods by which we wade into discussions about what cinema has been and continues to be, the essays show that film is productively understood as a family of technologies, and assemblage of things and systems that are multiply articulated across its history and its context. The film screen is but one part of this shifting assemblage, a telling portal to a range of creative languages, modes of performance and display, contexts of exhibition, and audience formations. Cognate technologies are also key to screen history. For instance, looking at small screens, as Steve Wurtzler and I do, quickly demonstrates the enduring links of consumer film projection technologies to an array of other gadgets: record players, microphones, speakers, and so on. A history of small film technologies, whether in the home or in an institutional setting, necessarily raises new questions about provisional contexts of film presentation, the convergence of exhibition ideals with the contingencies of everyday performance, and the unusual sites for thinking about a cinema predicated on machines designed to be used not by a professionalized entertainment industry but by those more attuned to turning knobs and pushing buttons. While film projectors surely transformed public entertainment, they also transformed personal expression, augmenting the expressive capacities of the human body through projected light and amplified sounds.

Tess Takahashi’s and Julie Turncock’s case studies help us to think about screens as a way to examine what an image is. Takahashi calls for reexamining the history of American experimental film as a creative movement deeply committed to integrating screens, spaces, and audiences into a new kind of film art, one that was live and unfolding around and through the screened image. This new art was not solely dedicated to film’s specificity or to an unchanging idea about a modernist language. Rather, Takahashi emphasizes the deeply intermedial play of the film artist. Working toward a history of “display and circulation” helps to improve our understanding of difficult work, she suggests, allowing that sometimes we are looking the wrong places to understand what we see. Turncock examines a long-standing practice of the American film industry: rear projection as a special effect. For Turncock, the technique points to the ways in which the classical realist text has seams, making the image into a composite, sewn together not just by technical practices but by very particular and sometimes counterintuitive aesthetic imperatives. For both Takahashi and Turncock, screens are not incidental aspects of the show but constitutive elements of the very contours of the image and its event.

While the four essays that constitute the middle of this dossier (my own, as well as those by Wurtzler, Turncock, and Takahashi) examine particular screens at particular moments, the dossier is framed by two deliberately polemical and agenda-setting pieces. In the first, Erkki Huhtamo, a scholar who has long argued for the necessity of Screen Studies, considers the relationship of the film screen to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century practices involving light and sound, moving pictures, and changing audioscapes. Huhtamo’s archaeological approach opens up the history of the film screen to lively, hybrid cultural forms that were public and private, live and recorded, impromptu and scripted. Huhtamo continues his call for a complex and nimble set of tools to account for the variety of moving pictures and their presentation contexts. A history of touch, he declares, is inevitably next.

The final essay is by Charles Acland, who begins with Marshall McLuhan and ends with Roland Barthes, unlikely partners. He does so in order to work through some general questions: What is a screen? Why should we study it? For Acland, screens are, at their most basic, “surfaces for animation.” But they are brought to life by a stunning array of tendencies and technologies. Acland argues that our examination of such things must always be informed by attention to the ways in which technologies are constituted, never forgetting the realities of a “messy humanity,” one subject to organic sensibilities that defy systematization. Equally important are the persistent hierarchies of value that seek to impose order on all practices, including screen practices.

Collectively, these authors address film screens big and small, old and new, concealed and apparent. Such screens have shaped exhibition venues public and private, with audiences of many and of one. While each of these essays approaches the screen somewhat differently, in order to achieve different ends, all demonstrate that the screen itself is a productive entry point into questioning the theory (or the metaphor, if you will) of a singular “cinematic apparatus.” The goal is to complicate cinema now and throughout history, presupposing that the term “cinema” designates not a singular articulation but a multiple and changing one. The challenge is considerable. The more we look back, the more dynamic the screen seems to become.

1. Sergei Eisenstein, “The Dynamic Square,” in *Film Essays and a Lecture*, ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Praeger, 1970), 48-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, e.g., Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, eds. *Films that Work: The Industrial Productivity of Media* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2009); and Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)