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**Thomas Hainscho** is employed at the Karl Popper Archives of the University Library Klagenfurt. He wrote his dissertation in philosophy on the machine model of the human body in early modern philosophy. His research interests are the history of (early modern) philosophy and philosophy of language.

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## On the Ontology of Screens and Screen Creatures

Jon Robson

University of Nottingham, UK  
[jonathan.robson/at/nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:jonathan.robson/at/nottingham.ac.uk)

**> Abstract** • Bin Liu's target article "The World of Screen Creatures" proposes a new constructivist understanding of our relationship to the (apparent) external world. While there is much that is interesting and innovative in Liu's account, I suggest that there are some key points for clarification that would help readers to be better able to weigh the merits of his account against its rivals.

Handling Editor • Alexander Riegler

« 1 » Questions about the nature of the (apparently) external world and how we perceive it are, to risk comical understatement, rather contentious ones within philosophy (and, of course, more broadly). Bin Liu's target article provides an innovative new response to these questions, but, in this commentary, I will suggest that some further clarifications are needed before it is possible for scholars to fully weigh up his proposal against its rivals.

« 2 » Debates about the nature of the world and our perception of it are, of course, ubiquitous within philosophy. On the one hand, there are views that take there to be a reality that is mind independent and which we perceive with at least a reasonable degree of accuracy (either directly or via some intervening medium like sense data). On the other hand, there are those who deny the existence of the mind-independent world altogether or, at least, deny that, were any such world to exist, we could have any knowledge of it. These are, of course, rather over-simplified versions of what are often complex and nuanced positions, and there exist a range of positions between these extremes (for a more developed summary see Lyons 2023 and the references therein).

« 3 » Liu's article proposes and defends a "constructivist worldview" (§1) according to which "there is a *constructive relation* between experience and the purported external world, but there is no *generative relation*

or *perceptual relation* between them." He then goes on to argue that his view compares favourably to constructivist rivals and, in particular, to Jan Westerhoff's (2016, 2020) irrealist virtual world proposal (§§3–9). Key to Liu's account is the idea of screen creatures and the suggestion that the putatively external world is – contrary to what many are mistakenly inclined to think (§§14f) – constituted out of these. However, what exactly should we take these screen creatures (and the screens they appear on) to be once the metaphorical trappings that Liu uses to introduce them are removed? (Q1) Liu (§10) is very clear that these ideas are metaphorical. He talks of analogies with our watching images appearing on videogame screens of characters moving, speaking and so forth, but then quickly clarifies that, for example, "the universe does not contain physical screens, only the content on the screens." I must admit that I find myself struggling here. The kinds of issue Liu is grappling with – concerning the nature of the putative external world and our perception of it – are, as may be expected, very complicated ones and, perhaps, ones that cannot ever be formulated in ways that do not have something of a metaphorical edge to them. However, my concern is that once we are asked to disregard key elements of his central metaphor (concerning the existence of screens and of viewers) it is difficult to understand precisely what literal content is meant to remain. This is particularly the case since some important later discussion of, e.g., the same experiences being "duplicated on several screens" (§13) or the "character's conscious experiences" being "the images on the corresponding screen of the character" (§41) seems to depend on reintroducing these expunged elements.

« 4 » Liu takes himself to be defending (§1) the general view that the world is constructed from experience. Indeed, Liu goes on to clarify (§24) that he is endorsing a form of "eliminative phenomenism" where experiences, and entities constructed from these experiences, are all that exist. Since they are not mere experiences, I take it that screen creatures are meant to be a certain kind of construction from experience. What kind though? And how do they differ from the kinds of construction that rival eliminative phenomenologist views propose? Liu

does provide (§§20–28) some very helpful information about some key similarities and differences between his view and its rivals but, without a deeper understanding of the fundamental picture he is painting, I find myself struggling to fully weigh up these potential costs and benefits. So, in an attempt to find an answer to Q1, more would have to be said on these issues in a way that, as far as it is possible for an issue of this complexity, eschews metaphorical trappings.

« 5 » Another central issue is how conscious beings (and particularly the experiencers themselves) fit in with this picture. Liu is clear that he is not endorsing any account that identifies mental states with behaviour or behavioural dispositions but that the content of his screens can be extended to include, *inter alia*, “auditory experiences, tactile experiences, bodily sensations, conscious thoughts (which can be words or sentences displayed at another additional bottom part of the screen), mental imagery, emotions and so on” (§12). However, what does it mean for such contents to be represented on a screen? Liu, again, includes some tantalising metaphorical suggestions here, talking, for example, of a situation where “a sentence appears at the bottom of the screen associated with a conscious thought: ‘I am turning left’” (§13). Again, though, we clearly are not meant to think that we literally experience the thoughts of others (or indeed our own thoughts) in this way. Given this, I am inclined to wonder what is added to the literal content of, say, talking about someone’s thinking “I hear a bell ringing” by adding talk of screens and their contents. These issues make me wonder what is in Liu’s approach the nature of conscious beings and their mental states (again, with as little metaphorical content as the topic allows)? <sup>12</sup>

« 6 » Related to this last point, it is clear on Liu’s view (Footnote 6) that I am meant to take myself to be constitutively formed from experiences (with other readers doing the same for themselves) just as the putatively external world is. Again, though, this is an area where some of Liu’s metaphors are liable to make the nature of his view a little less clear than it could be. For example, Liu is keen to disavow the idea that there are indeed observers viewing these screens, stressing that “no perceivers are in front of any

screen” (§10). Yet, again, his later discussion kept returning to this metaphor in a way that suggests the traditional (in both philosophy and popular thought) image of the self as something beyond, and independent of, experience, which experiences the experiences without being constituted by them. Liu himself believes that “as these internal entities are constructed, they will not affect the argument in [his] article” (Footnote 6) but, in order to see this point for ourselves, it would need to be explained in greater detail.

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**Jon Robson** received his PhD, examining the ethical implications of metaphysical theories of time and modality, from the University of Leeds. He is currently Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Nottingham, where his main research interests are in aesthetics, epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of religion.

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## Screen Creatures as Subjects?

Sebastian Kletzl

University of Klagenfurt, Austria  
sebastian.kletzl/at/gmail.com

**> Abstract** • Liu proposes that in order to get rid of any representational perceptual relation we should interpret ourselves as screen creatures, i.e., as content that can be displayed on a screen from which we then construct our surroundings. I focus on two topics. The first topic is how exactly to understand the idea of “screen creatures” so that they can be interpreted as functioning human subjects. The second topic is about the whole theoretical setup and how it can be reconciled with Ockham’s razor.

Handling Editor • Alexander Riegler

« 1 » The first topic of my commentary is to get a clearer grasp of the central concept of the target article – that of a “screen creature” as proposed by Bin Liu (§§10f). I will try to do so by asking three questions concerning the concept of “screen creatures” in particular and one more general, underlying question regarding the whole project.

« 2 » In order to get rid of any generative or perceptual relation, Liu expands on the irrealist virtual-world theory (IVW) of Jan Westerhoff. The latter uses the analogy<sup>1</sup> of a sphere that surrounds a subject to explain how such a subject construes the “external world” from a screen on the inside of this sphere that represents elements like a TV screen does.

« 3 » Liu adapts the analogy by reducing elements. He explains how we should interpret the whole universe as consisting of such screens, only with nobody looking at them (§10). Rather, the subjects are the screens themselves (§13). To be more exact, the important part is not the screen and its potential physical structure but the content on the screens is what matters. As the analogy goes, if we play a first-person video game, we see a whole world on the screen in which the subjects are moving around. However, in this case we are not players “behind a screen” but

1 | Liu here uses the term “metaphor,” not “analogy” in §6, but to me it seems that “analogy” is more adequate here, see §4 below.