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Pandemic Media

Configurations of Film Series

Editorial Board

Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by
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Configurations of Film: Series Foreword

Scalable across a variety of formats and standardized in view of global circulation, the moving image has always been both an image of movement and an image on the move. Over the last three decades, digital production technologies, communication networks and distribution platforms have taken the scalability and mobility of film to a new level. Beyond the classical *dispositif* of the cinema, new forms and knowledges of cinema and film have emerged, challenging the established approaches to the study of film. The conceptual framework of index, *dispositif* and canon, which defined cinema as photochemical image technology with a privileged bond to reality, a site of public projection, and a set of works from auteurs from specific national origins, can no longer account for the current multitude of moving images and the trajectories of their global movements. The term "post-cinema condition," which was first proposed by film theorists more than a decade ago to describe the new cultural and technological order of moving images, retained an almost melancholic attachment to that which the cinema no longer was. Moving beyond such attachments, the concept of "configurations of film" aims to account for moving images in terms of their operations, forms and formats, locations and infrastructures, expanding the field of cinematic knowledges beyond the arts and the aesthetic, while retaining a focus on film as privileged site for the production of cultural meaning, for social action and for political conflict.

The series "Configurations of Film" presents pointed interventions in this field of debate by emerging and established international scholars associated with the DFG-funded Graduate Research Training Program (Graduiertenkolleg) "Konfigurationen des Films" at Goethe University Frankfurt. The contributions to the series aim to explore and expand our understanding of configurations of film in both a contemporary and historical perspective, combining film and media theory with media history to address key problems in the development of new analytical frameworks for the moving image on the move.

Pandemic Media: Introduction

Laliv Melamed and Philipp Dominik Keidl

Media have played a crucial role during the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shutdowns in 2020. News channels and programs kept viewers constantly updated about the spread of the virus, providing explanations about how it operates and showing graphs and maps about infection rates. Broadcast media featured interviews with virologists and other health experts, and programmed press conferences with politicians announcing new policies to contain the crisis. Likewise, social media fed information about the latest developments to their users who, in turn, used the platforms to document and share their own experiences of the crisis in the form of opinion pieces, memes, or humorous advice on how to practice social distancing. Videoconferencing software enabled white-collar workers to work from home and students to continue their education. After work, the same technologies provided alternatives to all the closed leisure activities by hosting workout sessions, wine tastings, book clubs, dance parties, or just chats with friends and family. Online retailers lured and catered to stay-at-home consumers, while television, streaming services, film festivals, porn websites, and online museum exhibitions provided distraction from fears and sorrows caused by disturbing updates. And although face-to-face dating was out of question for many, dating and hook-up apps provided the interface for online dating and sex. Media also served as the foundation for managing the crisis. Special apps were used to track routes of infection and for governments to control and surveil the movement of their own citizens. Infrared detectors embedded in specialized lenses helped measure and visualize body temperature, alerting a potentially infected carrier. Drones were used to scan urban spaces under closure, guard those who were locked down, and deliver goods to people's homes. Not all aspects of media consumption, however, revolved around the accessibility and elasticity afforded by digital media. With cinemas closed and distribution companies building new on-demand offers, another round of debates about the approaching "death of cinema" came to life. VHS collections were rediscovered, and drive-in theaters became a popular alternative to watch movies on the big screen and among a group of strangers beyond one's own home, showing the longevity of analogue media. In containing the virus and orchestrating new modes of social behavior, media were ubiquitous, whether functioning as an instrument of population control and mass surveillance, or as one of care and relief.

Recognizing the omnipresence of media and screens has become a commonplace notion in film and media studies. Yet, as widely stated and accepted as

the ubiquity of media and screens now is, the mediation of the pandemic and the variety of new media configurations brought forward by the pandemic have opened up new paths of investigation for film and media studies. As with so many other aspects in life that the coronavirus and its consequences put in jeopardy, media are actively shaping these changes as much as they are affected by them. At a time when nearly all of the world has been, and still is, living under some form of shutdown or increased prevention and control measures, media have become even more important for governments, institutions, companies, retailers, and regular citizens to organize, manage, work, educate, entertain, and communicate. Media afforded processes of informing or misinforming, keeping people safe or unsafe, generating hopes or fears, leading to support or sabotage, causing understanding or incomprehension. The results are gestures of solidarity or egoism, calls for changing corrupted social structures or gatekeeping those existing disadvantageous systems, utopian visions for a better future or dystopian narratives about the end of the world. At the same time, the eruption of the pandemic as a global biological and social condition accentuated the constant proliferation and state of media transformation (Parks and Walker 2020). The altered realities of living in a pandemic and post-pandemic time respectively require media to adapt themselves to new conditions of producing, accessing, consuming, sharing, and deploying media for the flow of information, labor, goods, policies, and culture. The proliferation of media and screens as a means of crisis management confronted film and media scholars once again with their own object of research, calling on them to track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change under the altered condition of a global event.

Pandemic Media

The pandemic was a heavily mediated event, if not a media event in itself. Experts such as virologists, public health specialists, politicians, and economists were recruited as spokespeople during the crisis. In these public debates, however, media operations or their instrumentality were deemed invisible or neutralized. The very conditions of conveying information, forging expertise, and representing the virus or the damage it inflicted on bodies, environments, and societies demand equal attention. A film and media studies perspective is needed to unpack the technological and discursive formations through which media channeled the crisis. The theoretical and methodological tools that define the discipline afford new insights into the communication, circulation, and consumption of media during the pandemic by asking: How do media render an invisible virus and its threats visible? What form and format do graphs take to inform policy makers and the public about the crisis? How and why do amateur media get distributed transnationally and win transnational popularity? Where and in which socio-economic contexts do small

cultural institutions fight for their existence while large online corporations expand their dominance? How does the pandemic change how people practice and talk about sex when they are urged not to hook up in person? How are previous viruses and their victims remembered across media? To whom do populists address their demagogic philosophies? When do images of protests and riots revive political movements? How can we mobilize media theories to understand the new pervasiveness of objects such as masks and plastic as media?

In this volume we seek to track the way the pandemic affected media forms, usages, and locations. Approaching the role of media during the pandemic one can note historical links to former pandemics in how they reorganize media settings and consumption (Napper 2020) or order social narratives.[1] A different strand probes pandemic media through the notion of contagion, highlighting the role of both media and the virus as carriers, their infecting circulation, and their transformation of their hosts (Parikka 2016; Sampson 2012). The concept of media event, an event formed through its mediation, is particularly apt for describing the ubiquity and instrumentality of media during the pandemic. Here we draw on a major thread within film and media studies that explores the interconnection between media and the historical event, its orchestration and management, the narratives or genres it engenders, and its shaping of public as well as domestic spheres. From the explosion of the Discovery to the war in the Balkans, September 11, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and the Arab Spring (Katz and Dayan 1994; White 1999; Keenan 2004; Schuppli 2015; Snowdon 2014): in these events, despite their different scale, media are not merely a vessel of information but the very conditions that shaped their cultural, political, and economic footprint. Media are a factor of directing global attention, of visibility and recognition, of connecting spaces, pacing temporalities, and generating narratives. Thinking of the various media operations that are characteristic of the current pandemic moment, media is instrumental in synchronizing and cohering the multiplicity of data, images, opinions, and happenings. As a pattern, the media event frames our reading of media ubiquity and their forming of a crisis mode, yet the radical and unprecedented scale of global reaction and measures of distancing prompted new manifestations, termed here "pandemic media."

Questions of formation, format, usages, and locations of media have been central to the work of the DFG-funded research collective "Configurations of Film" based at the Goethe University in Frankfurt. As part of the research collective's book series, this volume reflects on these questions. Highlighting media's adaptability, malleability, and scalability, "pandemic media" refers to media forms and formats, content and narratives, exhibition and distribution,

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1   For example, the vacillation between utopian and dystopian narratives brought by former pandemics, for example in Camus's *The Plague* or Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

locations and settings, practices and uses, as well as analogies and metaphors that have made the invisible virus and its consequences perceptible. The concept captures media operating under pandemic conditions in sectors ranging from leisure to education, medicine, economy, politics, experimental art, and popular culture. "Pandemic media" represent a specific attitude toward media in a moment of transition and uncertainty at a time of a global health crisis. As a means to analyze and communicate the pandemic and its internal logic and logistics, this volume captures the discursive and temporal construction of the current crisis through various media configurations. These configurations have reordered social spaces, rhythms, and temporalities through calls for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, as well as the reconfiguration of media technologies and cultures themselves.

"Pandemic media" have collided and approximated public and private and institutional and non-conformist spaces respectively. They have reordered the domestic space as a sort of headquarters, a screened space that had to cater to and regulate all everyday activities during the lockdown. While being in quarantine at home, one still had to remain open to various transmissions summoning each and every person to put their individuality behind the imaginary global collective. Additionally "pandemic media" have transformed notions of temporality by interconnecting the velocities of the crisis: the immediacy or latency of the authorities' reactions, the real time tracking of the event unfolding, the anticipation of new measurements to be expressed in the graphs and charts depicting the infection rates. They produced a feeling of urgency that oscillated between an unpredictable spectacularity and the sustaining of everyday routines, a simultaneous communication of rupture and continuity. Considering these media operations, pandemic media needs to be thought of in the context of a wider understanding of the way media functions under crisis (Doan 1990; Chun 2011; Parks and Walker 2020). Here, crisis is not only a condition that invites certain spatio-temporal formations like the ones mentioned above, but is itself a construction mediated and produced by media. As the above analysis maintains, a pre-existing media convention of crisis forged the pandemic as an event, in as much as it invited new forms and conventions.

Transformations of space and time intersect with manifestations of social conditions and social malfunctioning. The pandemic crystalized inequality and injustice, exposing uneven access to resources, intentional neglect of infrastructures, privatization of social services at the expense of the "greater good." It furthered the exploitation and exhaustion of laborers, debilitation, poverty, hunger, as well as racial, colonial, and gendered systemic violence. The imaginary global community was first shattered a few weeks into the pandemic when images of institutional unresponsiveness and social indifference toward discrimination and harassment became visible yet again. Pandemic

media contributed to these dynamics through the circulation of gifs, memes, videos, and news reports, whose content either sanctioned and reinforced systematic discrimination and oppression or bluntly exposed its brutal outcomes. Thinking through and with pandemic media, a public health state of emergency provoked by contagion necessitates a reflection on larger social, economic, political, and cultural systems that formed the crisis and were reformed by it.

Pandemic Scholarship

This volume highlights that this very sense of rupture and its mediation summons a particular form of writing. Early on in the crisis, magazines, podcasts, online lectures, as well as academic journals, blogs, and print publications called for expert analysis.[2] They created an urgency for scholars and public intellectuals to reflect on the ways the pandemic traverses our world, contextualizing the spread of the virus and institutional responses according to their expertise. As editors of this volume, we are aware that it is equally important to pause and reflect on how the rhetoric of urgency itself shapes the way we approach knowledge and critique. Throughout the process of bringing this collection to life, we felt that in its disastrous totality and its global scale the pandemic is threatening to absorb all forms of knowledge. Responding to the urgencies of the now might yield to popular demand while rushing the process of analysis, deliberation, and evaluation, which are unwaivable aspects of scholarship.

Yet we perceive it as a necessary momentum to employ film and media studies as a critical tool to deliberate and even dismantle the mechanisms that are used to attend to the crisis. Spotlighting media operations exposes the very means and narratives through which expertise is presented as such, and this volume is in dialogue with other scholarly interventions on the impact of the pandemic from the field of film and media studies specifically, and the humanities and social science more generally (Baer and Hanich 2020; Bronfen 2020; Gessmann, Halfwassen, and Stekeler-Weithofer 2020; Hennefeld and Cahill 2020; Jones 2020; Newiak 2020; Volkmer and Werner 2020; Walker 2020). Moreover, it allows us to question the very temporal motors for scholarly reflection. Do scholars need to reply to the moment's crisis, or alternately, does informed reflection necessarily demand distance and time? As a matter of fact, many of the questions discussed in this volume have occupied the discipline of film and media studies before. With this we assert that the foundations for the

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2   See for example: Critical Inquiry Blog "Posts from the Pandemic" https://criticalinquiry. uchicago.edu/posts_from_the_pandemic/, a special project of *The European Journal of Psychoanalysis* https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/ *The New York Review of Books*'s Dispatches from the Covid-19 Crisis https://www.nybooks. com/topics/coronavirus/.

pandemic media mechanisms were already laid, yet the crisis formation provides them with a new visibility.

Two objectives were particularly important to us in putting together this volume. First, to probe the many media configurations that played into the social, economic, cultural, and political manifestations of the pandemic. Second, to collect and register these configurations and expressions. Whilst the pandemic enabled the emergence of ephemeral and inchoate expressions, an outcome of a mode of transition that the crisis mobilizes, their ephemerality became evident while we were working on the volume between April and September 2020. Between the process of reviewing the essays throughout the summer and writing the introduction in early fall, some amateur videos have already disappeared from the virtual sphere, comments have been deleted from social media, new technologies designed to contain the virus have evolved, social responses have shifted from comprehension to anger, and conspiracy theories have questioned the validity of science and expert opinions. As such, this volume is the outcome of a form of "pandemic scholarship," representing a certain moment of change as much as it is aware of the effects of the crisis on its own operations.

The Inventory

We invited the authors in this volume to reflect on a specific phenomenon that is part of pandemic media, drawing on their specialized interests and expertise. The result is an inventory of pandemic media, an indefinite sum of the many forms, formats, usages, practices, platforms, functions, and conventions through which media manifest themselves in this demarcated, yet ongoing, event.

Time/Temporality

This section brings together different considerations of the pandemic's rhythms and temporal distributions—past, present, and future. Neta Alexander explores modes of waiting as a predominant experience in an age of on-demand culture, refuting its myth of immediacy, whereas Malte Hagener highlights parallelism and synchronicity in his study of the split-screen, a common image in the days of the pandemic that goes back to early cinema. In contrast to these either latent or accelerated tempos, time, as a sensation of contemporaneousness, informs Ulrike Bergermann's analysis of a short film that was swiftly produced for the online edition of a film festival. Jaap Verheul's critique of a renewed interest in the film vault concerns the valorization of past cinematic treasures by industry powers; scholarly interests are reoriented to address current affairs in Felix M. Simon's conception of

"pivoting"; and modes of cinema viewing are adjusted to the time's necessities while imbued with nostalgia in Karin Fleck's study of the drive-in.

Space/Scale

Media alter perception of space and scale, and with it how we relate to ourselves and others. The section opens with two essays addressing different media representations of urban spaces. Teresa Castro criticizes drone images of empty cities as an "aestheticization of politics" and victory of spectacle over critical distance. In turn, Alice Leroy shows that the appropriation of surveillance military technologies can also be used to document otherwise invisible moments of care and solidarity. The subsequent three essays engage with issues pertaining to self-isolation through the lens of platforms. According to Yvonne Zimmermann, videoconferencing creates a relationship of closeness and distance of self and/as other that opens up new modes of self-reflexivity. Joshua Neves and Marc Steinberg probe how platform economies take over most in-person activities, providing customers with the experience of convenience at the cost of putting laborers at risk. Juan Llamas-Rodriguez's analysis of an animated short depicting the different experience of the rich and poor stresses the expanding rift between cosmopolitan elites and the millions that inhabit the Global South. The last two essays examine the consequences of closed media spaces for visitors and scholars. Distinguishing between film-driven and festival-driven events, Marijke de Valck proposes combining case study-based scholarship with large-scale data projects to theorize the changing festival eco-system. Exploring the rupture COVID-19 has caused for theme park fans and researchers, Rebecca Willliams maintains that digital media may become more central for fans and fan scholars when the physical spaces are inaccessible.

Technologies/Materialities

Taken together, the essays in this section manifest a variety of interfaces, platforms, modes of production, views, and medium through which the pandemic was rendered visible, felt, controlled, or inhabited. Offering a long history of machine vision, Antonio Somaini sheds light on the current proliferation of technologies of distance; Alexandra Schneider probes the pandemic media space by looking at a particular interface, the car's camera-imbedded rear mirror, and its measures of displacement; whereas Ada Ackerman's analysis of drone-produced images of empty urban spaces explores the spectacle of scale and emptiness. Essays by Bishnupriya Ghosh, Christoph Engemann, and Guilherme da Silva Machado address media logics of close scrutiny. Ghosh dissects the synthetic scientific process of visualizing the virus; Engemann investigates corona tracing apps and the public debates they provoke in Europe;

and, studying telecommunication technologies in the workplace, da Silva Machado situates contemporary production labor in the facial close-up. Lastly, traversing our access to spaces and bodies, the pandemic has brought about new materialities. Diego Semerene argues for the erotic discharge of words on sex platforms, in lieu of the affordability of bodies; Marie-Aude Baronian explores the omnipresence of masks, both as a material object and a medium; and Marek Jancovic tracks an archeology of three conspicuous objects in the urban space: gaffer tape, glass, and boom microphones.

Education/Instruction

A didactic display, a form of authority or its tool, a space to exercise prudence or trust are linked to media instructional and educational imperatives. Florian Hoof observes the different formats through which information about the virus was conveyed as a means to establish trust in a time of growing uncertainty; in Benjamín Schultz-Figueroa and Sophia Gräfe's essay animals are put forward as a medium through which the pandemic was introduced and studied, either as a cultural or scientific signifier. Leonie Zilch understands pandemic porn as a way to enhance moralistic values; while the impact of media on children was also reconsidered by scholars and pedagogues, as contended by Meredith A. Bak in her essay on children's screen time and her proposal of a "stretchy time." John Mowitt's essay thinks through the imperative, often made in teleconferencing teaching, "mute your sound." The proposition of canceling sound, signaled by the icon of microphone with a red strikethrough, leads Mowitt beyond the engineered hearing of the telephone, potentially altering our techno-pedagogical scene. Essays by Kerim Dogruel and Wanda Strauven likewise meditate on the ways the pandemic redesigns pedagogic interactions. Dogruel expands on how online teaching was perceived differently among different groups, borrowing from media and social theories. Strauven reflects on a class excursion to an online film festival, recounting how the mixing of everyday routine and the online platform leads to feelings of exhaustion.

Activism/Sociability

Exacerbating and intensifying existing social conflicts, media was instrumental in forming and keeping alive communities and realizing new activist strategies. The first three essays offer insights into the promise of digital technologies to provide sociability while social distancing. Abby S. Waysdorf analyses fans' use of archives to maintain their fan identity by staging online alternatives for canceled events. Stefanie Duguay investigates dating apps' repositioning as facilitators of (self-)care while corresponding with the commercialization of health and well-being by digital technologies. Shane Denson stresses that

the paradoxes of screen-mediated life during the pandemic are that media serve at once to connect and to isolate, carrying the potential for passive alienation but also active resistance. The next three essays focus on how, and against what, such active resistance materializes. Amrita Biswas examines the formation of solidarity networks in India to create awareness about the severity of the crisis for migrants across the country. Michelle Cho traces anti-racist protests by K-pop fans against the intertwined conditions of police violence and the intensification of structural and environmental racism in North America and Europe. As Vinzenz Hediger demonstrates, these protests are also directed at a US president whose governance is characterized by the presentational modes of home shopping television. The final two essays of this volume encourage new viewpoints and epistemologies to overcome systematic oppression. Didi Cheeka calls for the decolonizing of film archives in the time of pandemic capitalism, and Kester Dyer shows how long-standing Indigenous viewpoints have anticipated the tensions concerning systemic racism magnified by the pandemic.

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TIME / TEMPORALITY

BUFFERING

LATENCY

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

TEMPORALITY

The Waiting Room: Rethinking Latency after COVID-19

Neta Alexander

Building on the recent literature on waiting and "temporal inequality," this essay studies three categories of latency laid bare by the coronavirus pandemic: photogenic, infrastructural, and emotional. This triad analysis dismantles the myth that on-demand culture enables seamless, global access to information and that therefore our lives could be easily moved online. Pushing against this technological solutionism, it posits the waiting room as a timely metaphor for corona-capitalism.

> *Absolute power is the power to place other people in total uncertainty by offering no scope to their capacity to predict… The all-powerful is he who does not wait but who makes others wait.*
> *Pierre Bourdieu*

Zoom's "waiting room"—where users patiently wait to join a meeting or a webinar—is a perfect metaphor for corona-capitalism. We anxiously wait for a job interview in a time of crippling recession; for an elementary school teacher

with no formal training in remote teaching to babysit our child; for a video conversation with our elderly parents who we might kill IRL. We are confronted with an uncanny degree of self-awareness as we stare at ourselves through our webcams. Desperately trying to direct the mise-en-scene, we rearrange books on the shelf behind us to make our bedroom-turned-office look more professional.

The coronavirus pandemic transformed Zoom—a videoconferencing platform established in 2011 and initially marketed to global businesses—into a heaven-sent solution for quarantine anxiety. This "Zoomtopia," to use company parlance, ignores the limitations of the digital infrastructure, the ubiquity of internet trolls, and the unexpected disruptions that pop into the frame in the form of pets, children, or partners. The company's ability to provide seamless video is now doubtful as an exponential influx of users encounter buffering issues, frozen screens, and any other digital noise once mocked by Zoom in its commercial from 2015.[1] While Zoom has promoted a discourse of seamlessness, it is latency and waiting that have come to define our pandemic lives.

Building on my previous work on buffering as producing and sustaining "perpetual anxiety"—the oft-denied realization that we increasingly rely on machines and infrastructures whose logic is not clear or accessible to us (Alexander 2017)—I wish to explore three categories of buffering laid bare during the pandemic: pathogenic, infrastructural, and emotional. Informed by the recent interest in the history and regimes of waiting as an antidote to business models that hail speed and instant gratification (Tawil-Souri 2017; Farman 2018; Janeja and Bandak 2018), this triad analysis demonstrates why the study of latency regains a new urgency in a post-COVID world.

The Buffering Pathogen

Buffering, as I argued elsewhere, is a digital specter: it is a moment of lag and disconnect whose length is unknown (Alexander 2017). As such, it opens up a liminal space of activity and passivity, where users are unsure how to react. Since digital technology is based on black box design, proprietary algorithms, and opaque infrastructure, internet users tend to blame themselves for any encounter with technical friction. In the case of buffering, this can take the form of frantically restarting the router, shouting at your flatmate to stop "stealing bandwidth," or upgrading your device or data package.

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1   Available on YouTube, the commercial tellingly features a conference meeting of four suited executives and one woman, all of whom are white, as they encounter a series of technological glitches while trying to use non-Zoom video services. See https://www. youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=JMOOG7rWTPg&feature=emb_logo.

The ways in which the unknown length of the encounter produces anxiety and helplessness, alongside the tendency to recast structural failure as a personal failure, make buffering a productive metaphor for the study of the coronavirus, the pathogen causing *COVID-19*. This pathogen is not only contagious and hard to detect, it also manifests itself differently in every human body: asymptomatic patients might never know they contracted the virus, while "long haulers" suffer from a wide range of debilitating symptoms for weeks or even months (Yong 2020).

Reporting on the differences between SARS and the new coronavirus, *The New York Times* explains that, "SARS Classic settled quickly into human lung cells, causing a person to cough but also announcing its presence. In contrast, its successor tends to colonize first the nose and throat, sometimes causing few initial symptoms… The virus replicates quietly, and quietly spreads" (Burdick 2020). Combined with the relatively high percentage of asymptomatic carriers, this pattern enabled the global spread of the coronavirus.

This pathogenic buffering—an inherent delay between exposure and traceable symptoms—turned public health policy into a frustrating, costly game of waiting: "sheltering in place" or strictly imposed lockdowns can only show results after two or three weeks; "super-spreaders" could only be detected a week or so after the initial encounter. In the US, the UK, and many other countries, this pattern of delay was worsened by a belated response to the outbreak. Despite early warning from China, where the pandemic first broke, the Trump administration failed to order and manufacture ventilators, protective gear, or testing kits.

The pandemic necessitates waiting: for new guidelines, for testing, for "reopening." Much like buffering, whose ubiquity and unknown length are being denied by using graphic tools like a colorful spinning wheel, the deadliness of the virus was quickly reframed as data visualizations. These "flattening the curve" graphics played a crucial role in convincing millions to stay at home. Anxiety inducing as they may be, they also allay our fear by transforming uncertainty into two familiar narratives: linear progression from "bad" to "good," and a three-act structure consisting of outbreak, peak, and decline.

We thus anticipate and deploy traditional narrative structures whereas the pandemic's progress has a different, prolonged structure. The virus (at least in the early stages) was seen as a sudden, unexplained break from reality, forcing millions to ask when can they finally "return to normal." It was quickly recast as a digression, a once-in-a-century event that, once resolved, will leave no trace. Flocking to streaming services, millions were re-watching Hollywood pandemic films such as *12 Monkeys* (1995) or *Contagion* (2011). In lieu of happy endings, viewers found solace in these familiar detective stories, where the

protagonists expose the chain of events leading to the deadly outbreaks. When uncertainty reigns, causality is an antidote.

Both on-demand culture and data visualization helped belittle the ongoing, devastating toll of COVID-19. New quarantine-based podcasts, columns, and lifestyle sections sprouted tips for gardening, sourdough bread baking, home schooling, or exercising ("your books could be your yoga blocks!" announces a suspiciously joyful instructor in a fitness app).

Waiting, however, is never equally dispersed. In her study of "temporal ine-quality," Helga Tawil-Souri (2017) alerts us to the ways in which waiting under conditions of uncertainty can invoke anxiety, depression, and a paralyzing notion of precarity—the kind of emotional states needed to support existing systems of power and prevent acts of resistance. This uncertainty, which buffering and COVID-19 have in common, replaces political rage with a con-stant state of alertness. If we're unsure when a technology, or a human body, might collapse, we must protect ourselves by endlessly upgrading both. A more expensive data package, a daily capsule of vitamin C—we are eager to solve problems caused by a series of structural failures by changing our own behavior.

Infrastructural Latency

We might think about the anxiety-inducing pandemic time as the antithesis of on-demand culture and its allure of instant gratification. But my goal is to show that there is more in common between these temporalities than we might imagine.

While we were asked to divide the world into "home" and "non-home," creating "isolation bubbles" and recasting the public sphere as potentially deadly, our tech-driven society has increasingly shifted online. The demand for remote work ignores the struggle of those who either have fallen sick or had to care for their loved ones. It also downplays the extent of the digital divide: limited access to high-speed internet; lack of digital literacy; and inability to pay for data packages or premium services, to name but few examples.

Much like it exposed the fragility of the American health system, the coronavirus has put the idea of seamless internet to the test. In March 2020, the European Union Commissioner Thierry Breton requested that streaming platforms change their default setting to "standard definition" in order to trim bitrates. In response, both YouTube and Netflix announced that they would automatically adjust their systems to use less network capacity by switching from high definition to standard definition.[2]

2   In March 2020, Netflix issued a statement saying: "Following the discussions between commissioner Thierry Breton and Reed Hastings—and given the extraordinary

Outsourcing this responsibility to tech conglomerates, however, was not sufficient. In the US, rural towns suffered from lack of broadband that, amid the spread of the virus, limited their ability to remain informed. Even tech workers in urban centers experienced more buffering: "As people have hunkered down to contain the spread of the coronavirus, average internet speeds all over the world have slowed. Some broadband providers are feeling crushed by the heavy traffic. And dated internet equipment can create a bottleneck for our speeds," reported *The New York Times* (Chen 2020). With the shift to telehealth services, buffering and disconnections exacerbate feelings of isolation and, worse still, might delay medical treatment when patients are unable to effectively communicate with their remote providers.

Even with access to high-speed internet, the fantasy of online life denies the extent to which the digital ecosystem relies on Big Tech and its five mammoths: Apple, Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Microsoft. While I cannot provide an analysis of net neutrality in such a short essay, it is crucial to remember that all of these companies monetize slowness in a plethora of ways by asking their designers to incorporate waiting into their gadgets and applications. As Jason Farman (2018) demonstrates, "false latency" is a prevalent business model used by tech companies to establish trust or maximize profits. This commodification of waiting is part of, for example, Apple's annual launch of the latest version of its iPhone, or Facebook's decision to slow down a "security check" feature to convince users that it is thorough and therefore trustworthy. False latency is therefore a feature, rather than a bug, of the digital infrastructure.

Emotional Buffering

Pathogenic and infrastructural latency laid the ground for emotional buffering. While essential workers such as nurses and doctors suffered from burnout, those working from home encountered "zoom fatigue." In an interview with *BBC*, Gianpiero Petriglieri explained that being on a video call requires more focus than a face-to-face chat: "Video chats mean we need to work harder to process non-verbal cues like facial expressions, the tone and pitch of the voice, and body language; paying more attention to these consumes a lot of energy. Our minds are together when our bodies feel we're not. That dissonance, which causes people to have conflicting feelings, is exhausting" (Jiang 2020).

Technical desynchronization between video and audio breeds a deeper sense of psychological and cognitive desynchronization. While the world became

challenges raised by the coronavirus—Netflix has decided to begin reducing bit rates across all our streams in Europe for 30 days. We estimate that this will reduce Netflix traffic on European networks by around 25% while also ensuring a good quality service for our members" (Bannerman 2020).

unprecedentedly synchronized—fighting a similar health crisis with a limited set of tools—class and racial disparities created entirely different realities for those asked to shelter in place or report to their "essential work" (while others escaped to their vacation houses).

Zoom fatigue might be mitigated by taking breaks, limiting our screen time, and switching to phone conversations. These tips, however, ignore the other manifestations of emotional buffering during the lockdown. First, it took days, weeks, or months to come to terms with the severity and scale of the global crisis. China detected its first COVID-19 case in December 2019. Yet, Americans were shocked to discover they were asked to "shelter in place" once the virus hit the coasts in early March. Second, natural processes of grieving and healing have been put on hold as a result of travel bans and social distancing. While thousands died in isolation units, funerals and memorials were either postponed or took place on zoom. Third, the frustration and rage induced by delay in testing and ventilator manufacturing in the US and the racial disparities shaping the toll of the virus in different communities were mostly denied by its administration (and, eventually, fed the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted across the world).

These different forms of buffering birthed a reality in which white-collar workers cannot idly wait for improvement (or vaccine); instead, they were asked to remain on their toes, ready to spring into action once a colleague appears on Zoom's screen or the economy can "reopen." This perpetual waiting room requires workers or workers-to-be to become not only alert but evermore "flexible," as became clear once colleges started preaching to their faculty about the need for "hybrid teaching."

Much like a patient awaiting a doctor, corona-capitalism has forced us to maintain a high level of alert for an unknown length of time. If, and when, we fail, this structural failure will be quickly recast as a personal one. To resist this, we must study how the nascent "pandemic time" shapes our ability to grieve amidst the aftershocks of the coronavirus. The pathogen itself presents us with the challenge of a gap between exposure and sickness, yet it is also crucial to understand the infrastructural and emotional latencies it exposes.

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SPLIT SCREEN

VIDEOCONFERENCING

SOUND

MODULARITY

Divided, Together, Apart: How Split Screen Became Our Everyday Reality

Malte Hagener

The article looks at the history of the use of split screen in the cinema in order to provide a historical perspective to the proliferation of videoconferencing software during the COVID-19 pandemic. It argues that the specific configuration of the videoconference owes much to larger transformation of the media ecology—towards modularity, flexibility, relationality, and real-time feedback.

Zoom, Jitsi, Google Meet, WebEx, Skype, Microsoft Teams, BigBlueButton, FaceTime, DFNconf—the videoconferencing tools that we have learnt to use in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic are numerous, and their cluster-like appearance is often seen as proof of their novelty. But as film history and media archaeology has taught us incessantly, such ideas of innovation and newness have to be taken with a grain of salt. This is also the case when we think about the videoconference, which usually comes in the graphical con-figuration of the co-presence of talking heads in one larger frame. Film—and other (audio-)visual media—have a long history of imagining, depicting, negotiating, and presenting this dispositif, which has been given a lot of names: video call, image telephony, visual telegraph.[1] Casting a glance back

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1   For this rich prehistory see Uricchio 2004.

at ways in which films have depicted this configuration, I am concerned in this essay with what we can learn from the cinema as an institution in which the social imaginary of this technology is presented.

Archaeology of the Divided and Mobile Screen

Images that show other images within a depicted space, frames that contain other frames are nothing new. Yet again, if we follow art historian Victor Stoichita (1997) we have a lead that helps us understand the situation we are facing. Stoichita has argued that the tableau is a relatively recent invention that came about in the seventeenth century; before that, the image was bound to liturgical situations and to specific, fixed sites of exhibition such as churches. When the painting became autonomous and mobile, the image itself reacted with a discourse about this process which reflexively contributed to a cultural and social self-positioning. The image, so to speak, actively contributed to a theorization of its own function and ontology.

With moving images, we might be seeing a similar development at the moment. For the longest time, they were to be seen in specific spaces and circumstances like the cinema hall or they were connected to specific devices like the television set, which used to be a large and immobile piece of furniture.[2] With the mobilization of the computer, with the proliferation of hand-held devices such as the smart phone and the tablet, with the ubiquity of screens and terminals in public space, with the anticipation of holograms and data glasses, we live in a different environment characterized by images that behave very differently from the static arrangements that Stoichita was dealing with. The image has become autonomous and it has proliferated in ways that were unthinkable in the twentieth century.

Split Screen in the Cinema

The use of split screen in the cinema is more than a mere technical gimmick; it often shows how new technological developments have shaped our lives. Split screens in the cinema have typically been used to illustrate mediality— the transmission of signals over time and space. Consequently, the device has been employed to present media innovations that were new at the time. The telephone conversation, the live transmission of images on television, and later the decentralized direct transfer of data through digital networks were key domains for the use of split screen. The cinema—with its aesthetic means like mise-en-scène, editing, and sound design—reflects the world we inhabit, which is by now thoroughly saturated with media. The split screen has

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2   On the intersection of interior design and the television apparatus see McCarthy 2001 and Spigel 2008.

a specific graphical composition that predestines it for the display of mediality. It shows two (or more) spaces that are visibly distinct, yet presented in direct proximity within the image. It therefore mirrors the paradoxical configuration so typical of media: (spatial or temporal) distance is overcome through technological means, resulting in visual and/or aural closeness with the suppression of other sense perceptions.

In the early years of the cinematograph, all of cinema was a special effect, so synthetic images like the split screen were much more common than they would later become. The assumption that a film image would show a seamless and navigable space in which human characters took physically possible actions was not yet the undisputed standard, as it would become in the classical paradigm. In early cinema, therefore, films would blend imaginary with real places and form complex arrangements of overlapping and morphing spaces. A good case to study the effects of normalization is Lois Weber's film *Suspense* (US 1913), based on the same source material as D.W. Griffith's *The Loney Villa* (US 1910), a melodramatic story of a housewife and her toddler trapped in their house, while a burglar stalks the premises and the husband listens in via the telephone. Whereas Weber uses a split screen to present the situation (fig. 1), Griffith opts for his signature parallel editing. Tom Gunning has shown how Griffith builds more tension through the simultaneously retarding and accelerating movement of parallel editing (Gunning 1991). While one might think that the presentation of simultaneous actions in one frame at the same time is more economical, it is in fact the concentration on specific aspect, as well as the acceleration possible through editing that proved to provide the model for decades to come. The split screen became an exception that was mainly used as an "invisible effect," as in *A Stolen Life* (US 1948, Curtis Bernhardt) or *The Parent Trap* (US 1961, David Swift) in which the main actress plays a double role, masked by lines that are made invisible through décor and lighting.

[Figure 1] *Suspense* (US 1913, Lois Weber)

In the classical paradigm, the split screen went underground, only to reemerge at the tail end of classicism in comedies and thrillers. A number of films from the late 1950s onwards show a great innovative energy and a joy in trying out new techniques and technologies. At the same time, they invite the audience not just to mourn the situation or passively lean back, but they demonstrate ways to become creative with new media configurations. In the late classical period, there are films that suggest that the split screen is something temporary that needs to be overcome and left behind in favor of a shared physical and haptic space. The comedy *Pillow Talk* (US 1959, Michael Gordon) starts off with many scenes using the device, but as the film goes on—and the couple played by Doris Day and Rock Hudson increasingly occupies the same physical space—the split screen is used progressively less. The last 30 minutes of the film show the two protagonists constantly in the same room, making the technique superfluous. In fact, one scene shows an imaginary touch across the split screen in a kind of literalization of the dividing line between the two images—as the feet are in visual proximity, they appear to be touching each other and react accordingly (fig. 2), whereas in fact this haptic contact is but an epiphenomenon of the visual configuration.

This joke works on a double level: on the one hand, the graphical composition plays with the fact that we see the two spaces as adjacent on the screen, even though we know they cannot be so close that their feet could really touch. Our perceptual and epistemological registers process differently and they remain in tension. On the other hand, it evokes the knowledge of the spectator that censorship practices did not allow a tame Hollywood mainstream comedy to show the two (as of yet, unmarried) protagonists without clothes in the same bathtub (Hagener 2008). The mind can process this structural ambiguity between proximity and distance, between absence and presence that is the hallmark of mediality.

[Figure 2] *Pillow Talk* (US 1959, Michael Gordon)

Modular Aesthetics

If the split screen discussed so far has been bound up with the fixed-site image (in the cinema, on the television set), development since the late twentieth century has put the moving image in motion. Whereas before it was either the spectators that moved (as tourists, passengers, attraction visitors) or the images that showed movement (see Friedberg 1993), now both have been put into motion. Following Stoichita we could claim that today's multiplied frames within frames contribute to a discourse that reflects on the proliferation, miniaturization, mobilization, and modularization of visuality.

For roughly 20 to 30 years then, we have come to understand images as flexible. We are no longer an external observer of images that are watched from a distance as in Renaissance one-point perspective. What is typical of our situation is that the image is no longer absolutely fixed and stable in its aesthetic composition, in its use and context, or even in its manners of circulation. Images are stable neither in their form nor in their location; someone else might have produced an image, but still we can interact with it in real time, modify it and pass it along. Mike Figgis's *Timecode* (US 1999) was one of the first films to address the simultaneity and complex layering of actions in real time. Today's images are modular: we can use the text chat while in a videoconference, open additional windows and show them to others when we share our screen, we can enter text or transform sound into text. Children are now used to the fact that images are potentially scalable in every dimension (such as in Google Maps); the split screen presents a symbolic dimension of this modular and interactive nature of images as something we can act on and with.

The closest thing that the current aesthetics of videoconferencing resembles is indeed the quintessential post-9/11 TV series, *24* (US 2001–2010, Fox), in which Kiefer Sutherland plays the secret (or renegade) agent Jack Bauer who singlehandedly saves our civilization (or rather: the US of A) over and over again. Indeed, if we abstract from the reactionary politics of the series, the show turns into a family melodrama of paranoid dimensions in which literally everyone can betray anyone else. The hysterical storylines find their visual expression in complex split screen arrangements in which everything is connected with everything else—by media, by emotion, or by dependency (fig. 3). In fact, many of the acts of empathy and love, of hatred and betrayal cannot be disentangled from the media arrangements in which they happen. In this way, the extensions of man—to use a famous phrase from Marshall McLuhan—are body and language as much as databases and mobile phones, gestures and voices as much as networks and infrastructures. As much as we use these technologies, they also shape us and our lives.

Figure 3: *24* (US 2001–10, Fox), season 3, episode 17

Our monitors and displays are mostly mobile and they are connected to cameras and other tracking devices, therefore what we see continually changes: things enter the frame and leave it again. Sometimes, the members of a videoconference walk through their flats and perform mundane tasks, we see other members of the household or we spot their pets. The off-screen space, the hors-champ, what normally stays outside and invisible enters the frame more frequently. At the same time some people seem to be meticulously planning how they stage their surroundings; the most frequent example during the COVID-19 pandemic was the use of background photographs in programs like Zoom, which many people used as acts of self-expression or ironic commentary. In this way, the videoconferences during the lockdowns and stay-at-home orders intensified a trend in social media: the private becomes increasingly public, but often in a staged and curtailed form. Videoconferences allow the constant controlling gaze at the self—if the hair is right, at what angle the chin looks best, what is visible in the background. This trend from social media of the careful visual management of the self is put into constant display through video calls.

Videoconferences are often rather audioconferences with an addition of images; we are asked to turn the video off, when the connection becomes unstable and we turn our microphones off, when we are not speaking—sounds are actually the central element of videoconferences and they are characterized by feedback effects and acoustic interferences. Do we hear a voice or just noise? Often, we cannot clearly identify sounds, an effect which can be puzzling or even uncanny. The cinema, by contrast, usually carefully orchestrates attention: image and sound work together, reinforce each other and collaborate in complex ways in order to make the image audible, the sound visible (Chion 2004). Coherent sound guides our attention, but in case

of breakdown we revert to the chat, the image where we gesticulate or even write words on a slip of paper and present them to the camera.

One thing we can learn from the historical examples of split screen is how important sound is in understanding multiple images. In a three-dimensional room, we can locate the origin of a sound; in a two-dimensional image we need something visual to cue us to the source. Often, videoconference software includes tools that foreground the speaker by showing the video prominently or illuminating the frame—sometimes wrongly so, if one particular space is noisy. The conventionalized reaction is the muting of the microphones of the listeners. Speaking in a conversation becomes less a spontaneous reaction to something that has been said, than a carefully orchestrated intervention that needs to be planned and performed. The spontaneity of real interactions is turned into a scripted situation. To return once more to *Timecode*: the film in its initial release had a carefully orchestrated soundtrack which constantly cues the viewer to notice important narrative details that might otherwise go unnoticed. The DVD of the film allows the option to remix the four different soundtracks of the continuous 90-minute camera takes. And after the release of the film, Figgis toured international film festivals at which he would present "live remixes" of the soundtrack like a DJ.

If we survey the rich history of the split screen, we realize that we can—and should—deal creatively and productively with situations of novelty and constraint. There are countless possibilities in the affordances and limitations of videoconferences: from absurd theater and romantic comedies all the way to thrillers and horror films where participants of a call vanish one by one. A new form might be the desktop documentary, which found early incarnations in *Noah* (CA 2013, Walter Woodman/Patrick Cederberg) and *Transformers Premake* (US 2014, Kevin B. Lee). Film is part of a media ecosystem in which we can hardly distinguish in any clear way between cinema, television, streaming, and videoconferences. These forms continually mix and mingle, often merge and morph in unexpected ways.

Conclusion

Looking back at the *longue durée* of media history, the purported novelty of the videoconference gives way to a more nuanced and complicated picture. Many of the observations that are currently being made in relation to videoconferences—about the interaction between different frames, about the role of sound, about privacy and the performance of the self—can already be found in connection with the split screen. Beyond the concrete functionality of videoconferences, these images demonstrate how mediated visuality has transformed into a domain in which images are characterized by modularity,

relationality, flexibility, and real-time interactivity. In this respect, the trans-
formations of media from fixed and stable dispositifs to more flexible and
open configurations find an exemplary case in the development from split
screen to the videoconference. Not only in this respect, film history still offers
a rich and dense history that can be mined in relation to our current media
environments.

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WRITING

INVISIBILITY

TOUCH

QUEER CINEMA

CODE

CONTAGION

Pass This On! How to Copy the Pandemic with Alex Gerbaulet

Ulrike Bergermann

In May 2020, filmmaker Alex Gerbaulet delivered a short film to a festival asking if one could and should make films in pandemic times. The answer assembles a very special use of various media, and a very special choice of quotes, conceiving visuals for a contagion through being touched.

"If anyone speaks, it gets light" (Freud 2001 [1905], 223). The famous quote of a child passed on by Sigmund Freud renders the double meaning of the German word both in terms of the opposite of darkness (like in German "*hell*") and of weight (like in "hard times," or "times of a pandemic"). As long as there is light, we are alive, and talking is even able to replace the light. This holds true both for cinematic projection, for digital screens, and for writing and reading words.

Coming together in a dark place, though, is one of the attractions and unique experiences a film festival used to offer. Lars Henrik Gass, director of the 66th International Short Film Festival Oberhausen 2020,[1] has warned convincingly

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1   The festival took place online between the 13th and 18th of May 2020, showing 350 films; instead of the expected 1,000 tickets, 2,500 were sold in 60 countries, and more than 1,000 special visitors from 70 countries joined online too. The symbolic price of 9.99 Euros came with a wink to the streaming portal's fees, raising 23,000 Euros as a donation to the social foundation of VG Bild, the association for the rights of creators of visual art. About half of the audience from the previous year was considered "lost," and new audiences "came" (overseas viewers, schools, self-organized groups, etc.)

that the praise of the "real experience," along with a (digital) media pessimism and a bit of elitism, lacks complexity in addressing the multi-layered task of transferring a festival into an online format.[2] Referring to Walter Benjamin's concept of film and the public, where dispersion, not melting gives way to a radical collective experience, and to Deleuze's attack on bourgeois cinema, Gass rejected a call for "false proximity" (2020).

Gass passed the question "Can and should we make films now?" on to the filmmakers he had been cooperating with, and asked them for contributions made in less than one hour's time.[3] Filmmaker Brenda Lien let us know that the fee offered was 100 euros. "The eleven contributions," said Gass, "were 'rewarded with the fee usually paid in Germany for a psychotherapeutic setting,'" observed film critic Philipp Stadelmaier: "In times of COVID-19, the festival becomes the patient, who lets himself be cured by filmmakers he needs to continue existing" (2020). The transmission chain of *talking cures* and *filming cures* does not break.[4] What is the talking mode of German filmmaker Alex Gerbaulet?

Her short film, like the others, does not have a title of its own; there are no opening or end credits, just an announcement at the festival's website, giving its own question in quotation marks like a film title: "Can and should we make films now?" (https://vimeo.com/422485870). Gerbaulet's answer of two minutes and ten seconds is quick and bare, featuring white letters on a black setting, no sound. Immediately, we fenter into the beginning of a story, while we read: "A / picture. / Two girls lay on the bed. / Eyes closed. / Holding hands. / Fingers folded into each other. / Their fingertips / tap / messages / on the back / of each other's hands. / Speaking / of / everything." The words blink like tapping on the eyes. The scene can unfold in the mind, and it represents people not seeing images themselves, but talking in the tactile mode about

See www.kurzfilmtage.de/en and Gass 2020. See also New York film curator Jared Rapfogel's report on the labor around and the great success of the festival as well as the "bittersweet" viewing experience, and some beautiful film reviews of Vika Kirchenbauer's or Thirza Cuthand's contributions, among others (Rapfogel 2020).

2   Gass gives a sensible and nuanced elaboration on the temporal and fragile nature of online festival formats, responsibilities towards the filmmakers, the festival staff, and the audience, as well as on collective learning and doing, or on possibilities (democra-tizing access) and pitfalls (commercialization, lack of live events, etc.) (the climate crisis applies to both sides). He criticizes the media pessimism in Bachmann et al. 2020, Heide Schlüpmann 2020, and others.

3   Contributers to this short film slot included Korpys/Löffler, Jens Pecho, Franz Müller, Andreas Reihse/Zaza Rusadze, Max Linz with his film class at the University of the Arts Berlin UdK, Jovana Reisinger, Kerstin Honeit, Kristina Kilian, Dietrich Brüggemann, Brenda Lien, and Alex Gerbaulet (see http://www.alexgerbaulet.de).

4   Other critics would have preferred a halting of the transmission, like Jonas Nestroy, who perceived all films as subjected to the theme of COVID-19, but at the same time wanted to get away from the never-ending contamination of politics and the art of film (Nestroy 2020).

"everything." Gerbaulet questions the making of images as well as of sound.[5] Maybe this is a hint to the invisibility of the pandemic, to a lack of imagery regarding the virus or the act of contagion. No pictorial metaphors, no graphic abstractions of a virus, no charts of dissemination transfers are given as a supplement. Can and should we make films now? Or just tap on each other's hands? But what if we got infected? For Gerbaulet, "feeling contagious is a fundamental queer experience."[6]

"A / code / that / gets / under / the / skin. / Contamination / means / pollution, / but also contact. / Pollution through contact," the film continues. The queer twist gives the formal experiment a special spin. Reminiscent of vampire stories' homoerotic streak, its lesbian *Carmilla*s, Catherine Deneuve eating Susan Sarandon in Tony Scott's lesbian vampire classic *The Hunger* (UK 1983), or Keanu Reeves getting weak from the bite of Gary Oldman's brides in *Dracula* (USA 1992), this contagion is imagined as one between two girls lying on a bed. Relations between the COVID-19 and the HIV pandemics may be scarce, as the first is not transmitted sexually or through shared use of needles, did not start with gay men, etc., but topics like *invisibility*, *globality*, or the contested *research for a cure* come to mind. The code gets under the skin and infects somebody (while being touched in cinema remains a metaphor); since the HIV pandemic, the association between contagion and contamination or pollution is, as they say, virulent. In just one step between textual "shots," the line "under the skin" mutated from love to illness, like in Neneh Cherry's song *I've Got You Under My Skin*. In 1990, this music video superimposed the song text in typeface near the singer and denounced, in a rap about HIV and AIDS, a society without empathy, stigmatizing contagion as a marker of a "false love."[7]

Alex Gerbaulet invites us to join the chain of proliferation. The white letters on black background remain the same in size and position,[8] shown in mostly constant speed—with the exception of one line, which not only points to the acoustic side of language, but is a gesture out of the screen or monitor: "Hello,

5   Brigitta Kuster's short film *Erase them! The image as it is falling apart into looks* (D 2012, 8:50 min.) also gives only the written words of the demands of refugees occupying a church in Vienna white on black (while we hear their voices) in order to protect the protestors—and to problematize visuality as a policing method of European border management; Kuster inserts still images with printed hands on walls as a reference to Marguerite Duras's film *Les mains négatifs*—leaving human traces and leaving fingerprints as highly ambivalent operations of touch.

6   Personal message, June 30, 2020.

7   Remakes or quotes from older media also could be considered as a passing on of something contagious, like the song entitled *I've Got You Under My Skin*, recorded by Cole Porter in 1936, then taken up by Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra.

8   Florian Krautkrämer lists various examples of *Schriftfilm* in experimental films and their various functions of letters, words, and textual images, especially Michael Snow's *So Is This* (Canada 1983, 45 min.), showing words white-on-black, which add up to sentences and encompass multiple media reflective elements. See Krautkrämer 2013, 229–71, esp. 244f.; see Scheffer et al. 2014.

hello, hello, how low?" highlights one word after the other in pink instead of white, like on a karaoke machine playing Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, the famous anthem of 1991[9]—a request to sing the words out loud, echoing the call. What kind of contagion would that be—would we be touched by the arbitrary code, the written words, in a queer manner, at a time of social distancing, while we cannot gather in dark halls like the cinema auditorium or concert halls to dive into moving images or sound together? Touched, if the story was transmitted digitally into single computers and households, read and sung aloud?

Close up. The following words address different elements of the medium film, including the depiction of a scene, stage directions for the camera man, and filmic materialities. The film reads: "Close up. / Skin. / A scratch / on / the cell / u / loit. / Self / inflammable / light. / Translated / into / ones and zeros. / Lightning. / A close up face. / The eyelids flutter. / Red. / Red. / White." Even after digitization (from celluloid film to digital numbers), and with a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the importance of the acoustic to combine the letters to make sense, it is all about the visual, about light. Because the lines "Red. / Red. / White." depict an opening of the eyes from the perspective of the person who conceives the light through closed eyelids (maybe it's blood vessels) as red first, then as white light after opening the eyes. "This / is / a scene / from / a film / life / dream / film/ life / dream," chants the next line, rhythmically switching from closing to opening, from light to dark, and in between stages of consciousness like being awake, asleep, or immersed in a film. And then, at the very end at min. 2:05, a radical change of the film mode happens. For less than one second each, three pictures are inserted, at first a part of a black-and-white photograph, enlarged, grainy, probably showing a person seeing through a looking glass; then a photograph of a person in a rumpled bed (the site of dreaming/sleeping/dreaming) hugging a pillow, without the head being seen; and finally a printed graphic representation of a person with a gas mask and a bottle carrying a nuclear radiation label. The speed and rhythm of the images echo the speed and rhythm of the last three words, "film / life / dream," so that we are tempted to read the images in correspondence to the script (like: the first being a *film* still blown up, like in Michelangelo Antonioni's sequence of black-and-white photos of a hidden deadly threat in *Blow up*[10]; the second a photorealistic picture, *life*; the third, the most "unrealistic," stylized, but colored *dream* picture). As has been said about the video recorder's impact on film analysis and film studies, it is now also groundbreaking for film

9   This song also contains the motifs of light and contagion: "With the lights out, It's less dangerous / Here we are now, entertain us / I feel stupid and contagious / Here we are now, entertain us."

10   … or James Stewart's looking glass in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, another icon of immobilized watching and possible unseen death, 1954… the split of a second opens up multiple concatenations through one flash of a picture.

reception in a digital manner that we are able to rewind, to halt, and to play again, so that these tiny bits and pieces can be contemplated.

The sudden change of media formats conjures up another famous one, which was in Gerbaulet's mind from the very beginning: The opening words, "a / picture," already alluded to Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (F 1962), because its protagonist was capable of time travel only because he had a picture of the desired woman in his mind.[11] In between the series of hundreds of black-and-white photographs that make up *La Jetée*, for three seconds we see a sequence where the beloved woman, sleeping, looking like (in) a photograph, opens her eyes and looks into the camera, into the eyes of the viewer, thus proving the image to be always potentially moving, the linchpin for Marker's philosophy of love and time in 1962. *La Jetée* did not display writing on or between the photographs (the film calls itself a "photo-roman," a photo-novel), narrating with a voice-over the story of a future loop in time, where a dreaming time traveler is sent back before World War III in order to call for help in the future afterwards. But Gerbaulet's short film and *La Jetée* do have some motifs in common: no moving images try to catch what is invisible (neither a world war nor a pandemic); the love of a woman is a focal point; the stories hint at the relations of the individual and the collective, maybe to humanity and survival, and to filmmaking as such.[12]

Marker's film oftentimes has been read as a parable of cinema. Reinhold Görling reminded us that the time traveler is the cinemagoer, that the researchers in the film act like cameramen, and that like in cinema, the protagonist has no attachment in time. Language is always image, Görling continues with regard to Marker, insofar as there is no meaning attached to words without memories (Görling 2014, 99)—and this holds true for Gerbaulet's film as well. But Marker's film insert stages awakening and animation (like in the history of film, where "Bio-Skope" is translated as "living pictures"), while the inserts in a time of pandemic show images of sleep and life-threats. The old media analogues between light and animation and life give way to those between the digital code, video platforms, and the pandemic. The virus has no life of its own, but copies its code into living beings in order to reproduce, so that the host's cells are programmed to pass on a code that was not theirs. In order to reproduce, this being does not need two sexes.

11   Gerbaulet, personal communication, June 30, 2020.
12   Chris Marker called *La Jetée* a remake of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*; and he had been an assistant in Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard* (1955), which combined archival footage of Nazi concentration camps with color film... all of which opens up new paths of transfers (like one picture passing on "contagions" along a line of transmissions). Marker stated that he would have discovered the Cinéma vérité more or less unconsciously when strolling through Paris on a day off from shooting a picture about the colonial war in Algeria (a suppressed, traumatic memory) and intuitively photographing what came to be the story of *La Jetée*. Lipton 2008; see also Harbord 2009. The film is a daydream of the filmmaker.

The first century of homosexuality in the movies has been called "a century of *sin*ema" (Griffiths 2006, 1). There is quite a history of interlocking queer love and death, or of "Lethal Lesbians: The Cinematic Inscription of Murderous Desire," as B. Ruby Rich put it (2013, 103). A bit later, in most cases, the New Queer Cinema of the 1980s and 1990s was also HIV/AIDS cinema. And more recently, the concept of trans cinema has also been related to light and life. Reflecting not only on the picturing of (maybe queer) bodies, but even more so on the film modality of visualization, Eliza Steinbock refers to the animation of images and the blackness in between as a connection of life and death:

> Our attachment to the (non)human life of a film—neither dead nor alive, both dead and alive, confounding all either/or –isms—ruptures the proper hierarchies of intimacy. Film's shimmering pulses, flickering from dark to image to dark, death to life to death, bring us to the affective core of ontological enquiry. If film operates as an apparatus for the animation of the body, cinema itself seems inversely to be animated by the morphing qualities of bodies. For trans subjectivities, film's challenge to bodily autonomy and affective sovereignty has special valence. The ability to animate and become reanimated lies at the heart of transition narratives that follow a trajectory of dying and being reborn... (2019, 15)

Interestingly, the topic of "light" changes from the "shining," "reflecting," or "projecting" characteristics formerly addressed in film writing to "shimmering pulses." This is not about the full image, a bright or colorful screen, but about the effects of difference, a gentle staccato, reminiscent of the rhythm of fingers tapping a code, favoring the tactile senses of finger and eye, (contagious) proximity over (safer) distance. Queer and trans cinema share these figures with film festivals in pandemic times. We, the audience of the film festival, might not be in the cinematic cave together, but we connect through shimmers, and maybe touchscreens. This does not make cis people trans. Not "everything non-normative" is queer, and not every "transition" equals a trans life. But who knows, if your vampire is not waiting around the corner. Read: Black. White. Black (fig. 1).

[Figure 1] Filmstill (Source: Alex Gerbaulet, untitled, 2020)

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FILM LIBRARY

HOME VIDEO

STREAMING

VAULT

GATEKEEPER

PANDEMIC CONTENT

[4]

Opening the Vault: Streaming the Film Library in the Age of Pandemic Content

Jaap Verheul

"Opening the Vault" examines the renewed currency of the film library—or a catalog of existing content—during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the production of new motion pictures came to a halt, and subscription-based streaming services such as Netflix, Disney+, and Mubi unleashed a copyright war to obtain the licensing of film titles which they subsequently reissued on their home video platforms. In the process, these non-theatrical distributors and exhibitors augmented the value of their vaults while solidifying their position as principal gatekeepers of the circulation of moving images. This chapter reorients the study of global screen cultures away from the production of new content or its exhibition in theatrical screening spaces and toward an understanding of the film library as a significant site of our engagement with pandemic media.

For inside him there are spirits, or at least little
genii, which have seen to it that for a collector—
and I mean a real collector, a collector as he
ought to be—ownership is the most intimate
relationship that one can have to objects. Not that
they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.
Walter Benjamin (1968, 67)—"Unpacking My
Library: A Talk about Book Collecting"

The film library shapes the lives and afterlives of motion pictures, and has been doing so since the genesis of moving image culture. Between 1896 and 1923, manufacturers in the United States, Europe, and the United Kingdom designed more than twenty portable projectors for non-theatrical screening venues such as homes, schools, social clubs, churches, and railway stations. By 1906, the Ikonograph emulated the quality and design of professional projectors in theatrical exhibition spaces, and its New York-based man- ufacturer began to buy the rights to films from producers while subsequently cutting the 35mm stock in half (i.e. 17.5mm) in order to bring down the costs. Indeed, non-theatrical exhibition remained a privilege for the happy few who could afford to buy the projector and the reels, both of which exceeded the cost of admission to a nickelodeon show. By the end of the decade, most man- ufacturers had lost faith in the commercial viability of a commercial market for non-theatrical film screenings (Singer 1988, 37–42).

A significant shift occurred in 1912, when multiple manufacturers entered the home cinema market while developing new projectors that were on par with the quality and single-reel-length of features shown in theaters. Four factors contributed to this revival. First, the base for home cinema consumption had been expanded by professionalization of commercial exhibition into a full-fledged industry. This transition coincided, second, with a predilection for vertical integration as two leading production companies entered the market for home projection. In 1912, Pathé developed its first home cinema projector, Pathé Kok, which ran on a unique, non-flammable 28mm film stock. At the same time, Edison released its Home Projecting Kinetoscope in the United States, introducing a 22mm substandard gauge film to the non-the- atrical screening market. A key asset of both systems was their innovative distribution system, which made it easier and cheaper to circulate films from their catalogs. Edison, for example, established a distribution-by-mail exchange service that circulated the Kinetoscope films in a metal container, which the consumer could return by mail in exchange for another film in the same category (Singer 1988, 42–46). Third, business buyers like motion picture exhibitors—then referred to as "exchanges"—began to cement their position

as gatekeepers, entering into agreements with amateur exhibitors who rented their titles. This practice was facilitated, fourth, by the regulation of patents and the formation of a national distributor, the General Film Company (GFC), which introduced a pricing system based on a film's release date and flat rental fees. This legislative framework necessitated the standardization of film distribution and exhibition, which in turn enhanced the value of film negatives (Hoyt 2014, 23–24).

It is at this point that the film library began to consolidate its position as a gatekeeper of the circulation of moving images. Eric Hoyt (2014, 11) identifies four developments which contributed to this evolution between 1903 and 1915: the introduction of copyright laws, a star system, feature films, and distribution and exhibition infrastructures. By 1917, the profits of film distributors surpassed those of producers while pirated prints circulated widely, thereby undermining the value of film collections. Studios and manufacturers such as the Triangle Film Corporation accordingly began to institutionalize their film libraries. The appeal of these vaults broadened after 1923, when small-gauge film collections were introduced in France and the United States. The French 9.5mm small-gauge system called "Pathé-Baby" fared well in Europe and Latin America in the 1920s, aided by its cheaper, smaller 9.5mm film stock on the one hand, and Pathé's extensive film library on the other. Charles Pathé actively pursued the inclusion of well-known films in his "*filmathèques*," which were available for sale or on a rental basis, and ranged from silent shorts to animated features such as *Félix the Cat* (1925–36), popular comedies with movie stars like Max Linder and Charlie Chaplin, and European classics such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) (Schneider 2007).

In the United States, meanwhile, the introduction of the 16mm gauge in 1923 reduced the cost of previous formats while enhancing the portability of both the reels and the projector. The 16mm gauge emanated from an agreement between three pioneers in the motion picture industry, who had established their reputation as the manufacturers of cameras, projectors, and film stock: Bell and Howell, Victor-Animatograph, and Eastman Kodak. This consortium designed the new gauge as an American response to Pathé's sway over the non-theatrical screening market, tapping into the international distribution and rental system which Kodak had established for its photography outlets. By the 1930s, the cartel had institutionalized their film libraries: Bell and Howell's Filmo Library and Kodak's Kodascope Library, supplemented by Pathé's Pathéscope Library and a range of smaller agencies, created a network of film circulation and exchange via stand-alone rental agencies and distribution in department stores, drug stores, camera shops, and mail-order systems. Their catalogs were comprised of entries produced by companies that had gone out of business, or new features that had already gone through their first release window. Meanwhile, Hollywood studios such as Universal—which,

unlike the vertically-integrated majors, did not own a significant distribution network—firmly embraced these small-gauge film collections in order to solidify their position on the market for home movie entertainment. As a result, by the 1930s, Haidee Wasson (2007, 21) has demonstrated, "the commercial film library was the imagined and material stage on which the cinematic world came together and was stored, reorganized, and redistributed along specific logics to newly atomized film audiences."

While it is tempting to understand these shifts exclusively in terms of innovations in technology or infrastructure, Hoyt reminds us that the film library also flourished in the wake of the emergence and growth of specific markets, such as business buyers like motion picture exhibitors and, later, television stations. It is not so much that these intermediaries tapped into a cinephile sensitivity for older films; rather, the exploitation of the film library signified a conservative business strategy that enabled these distributors and exhibitors to reissue older films at a fraction of the cost of a new film, while these features were also predictable in their marketability because of their proven star power, popularity, and artistic merit. In other words, Hoyt (2014, 6) argues, "What constitutes a library use depends on the subject's position in the marketplace. A studio that owns a library considers different uses than an exhibitor that is considering buying (or, more accurately, renting) films from a library." In the early 1930s, for example, the film library gained in value as studios began to produce derivatives—such as remakes, shorts, and cartoons—of their copyrighted originals, but by the late 1940s they had turned to their vaults to distribute reissues at a relatively low cost but high profit margin.

It is at this moment that the vault emerges as a principal gatekeeper of moving image culture, enabling manufacturers, production companies, and movie studios to augment the value of their libraries. In the 1930s, Warner Bros. systematically began to survey its existing collection of silent films in order to identify those titles with limited reissue value, and to extract stock footage from those films which it could monetize in the future. The surplus of remaining silent footage was intentionally destroyed. Copyright anxiety was a key driver for doing so, as Warner annihilated the silent films it completely owned while saving the films from independent producers to which it was no longer entitled. Copyright in the age of film (and later, video) carefully coordinated the relationship between public interest and private property, safeguarding the owner's right to exploit the work while granting the public access to these commodities (Hilderbrand 2009, 80). The standardization of sound film in the 1930s encouraged Warner in its pursuit of such planned obsolescence (Hediger 2005, 138). As with television in the 1950s, VHS in the 1980s, DVD in the 1990s, Blu-ray in the 2000s, and Video on Demand in the 2010s, such an economy of scarcity allowed content producers, as Caetlin Benson-Allott (2013, 7) contends, "to increase profits by multiplying exhibition platforms" while

animating them "to develop and cater to new media platforms even while venerating older technologies." Akin to the first decades of moving image culture, however, film studios, movie theaters, and streaming platforms remain at the service of the production of desirable new content in order to maintain if not augment the market value of their existing collections and staying competitive by doing so. Reminiscent of the block booking practices in the age of vertical integration, digital content producers still acquire most of their revenue from the sales of packages (mostly for television) and thus require fresh commodities in order to stimulate those sales (Hoyt 2014, 12–13, 196).

What, then, happens to content when it is stored in a vault in the midst of a pandemic? At a time when the production of new motion pictures has come to a halt, we might contend, firstly, that a film library increases in market value and, secondly, that this added value cements the position of the gatekeeper who circulates this archived content between producers and audiences. For content producers such as movie studios, the film library has historically been comprised of a catalog of films that have already gone through their first cycle of distribution and exhibition, usually as an exclusive release in theaters or on home video, video on demand, pay television, or syndicated television—or, increasingly, a combination of two or more of these release windows. For the users of this content, meanwhile, the film library traditionally operates as a personal archive which remodels the audience into a collector who is at liberty to curate their own catalog. At both ends of this "flow" (Williams 2003, 77–120), home video platforms are increasingly adjusting their film libraries to the operative logic of the vault, transforming streaming services into gatekeepers who regulate the relationship between producers, texts, and users.

The Corona crisis brought these shifts to the fore. For movie studios whose distribution network does not yet include a home video platform, such as Warner Bros., Universal, or Paramount, the pandemic restores their control over the circulation of vaulted content to levels unseen since the heyday of vertical integration. On the other hand, for home delivery platforms such as Netflix or Mubi, who do not have much of a vault to guard or who have only recently started to produce their own features, it becomes imperative to license existing content from these vaults in order to maintain the currency of their own, subscription-based catalogs—usually a curated library which, for the time being, cannot be amplified by the production of new content. In this media landscape, the convergence of the vault, content producer, and platform distributor gains currency. The launch of Disney+ in November 2019 attests to this heightened significance.

The COVID-19 pandemic expedited this modus operandi. In March 2020, when the production of new film and television content was halted in the wake of the virus's global spread, film studios, video platforms, and content producers such as Netflix, Amazon, Apple, and Disney faced a conundrum. On the one

hand, they sought to maintain their competitive standing by postponing the theatrical release of new features to a post-viral future, as was the case with the twenty-fifth James Bond film, *No Time to Die* (Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2020). On the other hand, these companies became the key providers of new content by releasing some of their new films exclusively and instantaneously on their streaming platforms, as evinced by the release of Spike Lee's *Da 5 Bloods* (2020), a Netflix original which, akin to Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* (2019), was scheduled to have a limited run in theaters before being dropped on the video platform (Smits 2020).

At the same time, however, the film library has solidified its standing in this pandemic media landscape. With a business model that thrives on the streaming of archived content from the vault (Crisp 2015, 62–67) and, as we have seen, on the production of new, exclusive content in order to maintain the market value of that archive, companies were compelled to extract the collections from their vaults, and to unleash a copyright war to obtain the licensing of existing film and television content in order to augment competitive standing of their libraries. In April 2020, at the height of the pandemic, Netflix accordingly teamed-up with the French distributor MK2 and licensed part of its catalog for the French market, thereby offering its subscribers access to such classics as François Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* (1959) and Jacques Demy's *Les parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964). Disney, meanwhile, declared that its vault had now been "opened" in an attempt to promote its new, subscription-based video platform Disney+, awarding its subscribers with access to a deluge of titles which had been buried in its archive for decades.

Indeed, it was Disney who first understood the strategic importance of the vault in an increasingly converged and conglomerated media landscape in which content would migrate across technologies, platforms, formats, circuits, and borders. Since the re-release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) in 1944, Disney began to store its films in a vault—the infamous "Disney Vault"—and would, for a moratorium period, not make them available again in either movie theaters or on home media delivery circuits—a practice it maintained during the heyday of VHS in the 1980s and DVD in the 2000s. The idea was that this economy of scarcity would augment the market value of the Disney library while enabling the media behemoth to strictly regulate the circulation of its catalog on legal or illegal distribution circuits. The arrival of Disney+ in the midst of a pandemic, in other words, seemingly retired the concept of the vault because it strengthened the competitive standing of the home video platform in the streaming wars while granting Disney even greater control over the distribution and exhibition of its collection. Some of its more controversial animated features, however, such as the blatantly racist *Songs From the South* (1946), remain buried in its vault indefinitely in the hope that they will eventually be forgotten.

The film library, then, reorients our understanding of pandemic media away from the production studio or the movie theater and toward a conceptualization of the vault as a significant site of our engagement with pandemic screen cultures. Now a meticulously guarded if no longer a material vault, the film library has become a gatekeeper which governs the lives and afterlives of film. In this closed circuit, the public's access to the vault—or the lack thereof—is translated into economic and cultural currency. In economic terms, subscription-based video platforms such as Netflix rely on the shrewd design of their interface in order to create an illusion of choice and textual abundance in what ultimately remains a finite catalog. In other words, as Ramon Lobato (2019, 37) elucidates, the home video platform is "closed, library-like, professional; a portal rather than a platform; a walled garden rather than an open marketplace." Such a business model thrives in pandemic times, when the scarcity of content is simultaneously programmed and inadvertent. Indeed, during the COVID-19 lockdown, Netflix emerged as a chief beneficiary of the pandemic, attracting millions of new subscribers worldwide as an unprecedented 15.8 million new connections were added to its existing user-base. Meanwhile, the value of its shares skyrocketed by almost 40 percent, revamping the streaming service into one of the high performing tech-stocks of 2020.

If the vault generates profit, it also governs our cultural and affective engagement with pandemic media. This is in itself nothing new. If, as Walter Benjamin (1968, 67) already noted, libraries shape our subjectivity, the streaming of the fim library in pandemic times similarly topples our liaison with film. At the level of nationhood, geoblocking protocols ensure that digital content providers operate mostly as "territorial catalog systems" (Lobato 2019, 179). In spite of the pretense that video platforms such as Netflix or Amazon provide instant and absolute access to their subscribers in all four hemispheres, IP (internet protocol) addresses nonetheless restrict the infinity of the vault by geographical location and thus control which titles users may have access to. Netflix's "reliance on territorial copyright licensing," Lobato (2019, 70) elucidates, "means that it may be best understood as a series of national media services stitched together into a single platform."

In this geoblocked screen world, the pandemic vault monitors our cinephilia. The advent of the digitized library in the twenty-first century facilitated the gradual erosion of the personal, domestic archive which had demarcated the first hundred years of moving image culture. As Erkki Huhtamo (2013, 50–51) notes, pre-cinematic projection and optical toys, such as the Thaumatrope (1824) and the Phenakistoscope (1833), were already available for purchase in the early nineteenth century, engendering a proto-cinephile culture that introduced a "persistence of vision" which would come to define a century of celluloid, magnetic, and digital cinephilia. This material economy of cinephilia lingered well into the era of VHS and DVD, when home video formats enabled

the film library to realize its democratic potential (Greenberg 2010; Klinger 2006), and "a specific topology and materiality would support and determine cinephile practices" (Hagener 2016, 184). The digital vault, in contrast, dematerializes our affective cinephilia while eroding its democratic potential in the process. As evinced by the COVID-19 lockdown, it is the pandemic content provider who determines what we are able to watch, when we are able to do so, and at what cost. Pandemic cinephilia thus marks a modality of signal traffic that flows through interfaces, algorithms, protocols, formats, technologies, and infrastructures. Subscription-based video platforms such as MUBI or Netflix now operate as gatekeepers of access and curators of taste, circumventing the principles of excessive user-choice and consumer autonomy which these streaming services sell to their user-base. In the process, the home video platform consolidates its "binary role as tastemaker and educator" (Smits and Nikdel 2019, 29).

Indeed, the pandemic film library has begun to mold the university in its own image. At a time when higher education is under pressure to evolve into a dislocated and disembodied protocol in which learning occurs online and at distance, lecturers and students are at the mercy of the operative logic of the vault. While in-class screenings become ephemeral as social distancing can no longer be maintained, the teaching of film will be organized in terms of what will be available for streaming online. As Lucas Hilderbrand (2009, 231) reminds us, however, such "convergence usually means content redundancy across platforms," which will have profound implications for how our pedagogy will engage with global screen cultures. What will remain in our curricula? Hollywood fare? Cheap content—the "fillers"—that has been licensed to promote the release of Netflix originals or Disney classics? A much-needed activist alternative is provided by Leshu Torchin (2020) and the Centre for Screen Cultures at the University of St Andrews. In the wake of the worldwide closures of cinemas, festivals, galleries, and collectives, the Centre curates an online collection of video resources that connects the audience-in-lockdown to independent films, documentaries, and avant-garde works which have managed to escape the all-consuming vortex of the vault. Perhaps, then, it is up to the media scholar to preserve, study, deconstruct, and shape our pandemic screen cultures of the twenty-first century.

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PIVOTING

INCENTIVES

JOURNALISM STUDIES

COMMUNICATION STUDIES

RESEARCH DYNAMICS

[5]

Pivoting in Times of the Coronavirus

Felix M. Simon

Despite the disruption the coronavirus pandemic has caused in academia, research has not ground to a halt. On the contrary, the early months of the pandemic saw a real boost in productivity in many scientific fields, with many researchers starting to work on COVID-related projects. This essay addresses this "pivot to COVID" in the fields of journalism and communication studies. Interrogating potential reasons for this shift to coronavirus-related research, it identifies four concurrent push and pull factors that co-determine how research agendas are being set in these fields. It ends by outlining some of the potential implications of such a pivot for the quality and long-term direction of research in journalism and communication scholarship.

"History never waits for us to get ready" writes French author Laurent Gaudé in his poem-cum-essay "Our Europe: Banquet of Nations." Of course, this is a truism—profoundly meaningful and banal at the same time. Most quotations

lifted from texts of famous authors and intellectuals are. But thinking of the COVID-19 pandemic it is hard to argue that Gaudé does not have a point. This time, history really did not wait for us to get ready. In just a few short months, a virus listening to the charming name SARS-CoV-2 has unleashed an international public health crisis and brought along economic and political upheaval unlike anything most of us have seen in our lifetimes. States around the world in quick succession introduced measures that most of us would have deemed draconian just half a year ago. Some of us still think that way even though a majority has—at times grudgingly—come to accept their necessity. When and how (let alone if) all of these will be rolled back probably exceeds the imagination of even those who introduced them in the first place. Ultimately, to claim that most of us "got ready" in time for what awaited us also flies in the face of entire governments and societies (with some notable exceptions) simply winging their response to the situation. Some still do so, against better judgment.

Just as the coronavirus has disrupted the world as we knew it, mercilessly laying bare its fragility, the pandemic has also wrought havoc on the academe. In my own case, it not only forced me to temporarily leave behind the current epicentre of my academic life, it has also profoundly rattled the fields I work in. And while there are more aspects to this than I can cover within the scope of this essay, one of them—what I have come to call the "pivot to COVID"—is worth briefly reflecting upon at this critical inflection point. Why? Well, for one because that is essentially what we get paid for as academics. Reflecting on things is in essence the core of our job. Second, because thinking about this particular development can be food for thought when it comes to the dynamics governing our research and fields of study before—and in all likelihood beyond—the COVID era.

Thoughts on Pivoting

What do I mean by "pivot to COVID"? In a nutshell, it serves to describe the ways in which my field—best summarised as journalism and communication studies in the social science tradition—has adapted to the pandemic in terms of what it researches and the questions it asks. Following the outbreak and the subsequent lockdown measures in countries outside of China, many communication scholars have tried to retrofit their research agenda to COVID-19 (Cornwall 2020). I would, by no means, exclude myself here. But why is that so? Why are "we" pivoting?[1] And how should one judge this development?

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[1]   It should be noted that by "we," "our," or "our field" I broadly refer here to the fields of journalism and communication studies in the social science tradition of which I am a part, with an emphasis on the US, the UK, and the wider English-speaking world (as opposed to the "relatives" of these fields in other countries, for instance in Germany, who often approach these subjects from a humanities, or cultural studies perspective).

Let us start with the personal, individual reasons. Scholars are humans too—with the same set of emotions as everyone else. Speaking from personal experience and that of friends and colleagues, the rush to start working on COVID-related projects can at least partially be described as a coping strategy, an attempt to mentally process a deeply traumatic event through one's work. While doctors save lives in hospitals and medical experts work on ways to get a handle on the pandemic, including finding a vaccine, it is also easy—and this was the case especially in the early days of the pandemic—to feel useless and powerless as an academic who is not involved in these efforts. While I am not saying that such personal crises generally should be solved through (more) work, for some it is an effective remedy.[2] The expression "working things out" exists for a reason.

A second personal motivation can be found in what might best be described as an activist impetus. Aware of the cumulative effects of the pandemic, particularly in unstable, unjust, or unequal socio-economic and political structures (arguably these attributes often intersect), some academics found themselves compelled to think about the pandemic as part of larger social and political crises (Neff 2020), some of them pivoting to COVID-related work out of a sense of urgency and emergency in order to call attention to the pandemic's role as a catalyst for long-standing structural problems.

Yet, I would submit that the current rush in pivoting to Corona-related research, especially in US and UK-centric journalism and communications research, is mainly the result of several concurrent push and pull factors that largely determine how we operate as fields. By push factors I refer here to the internal dynamics of our fields: the norms and (in)formal logics we have some control over and which characterise our work. Pull factors, on the other hand, are external dynamics: the demands and interests of the media, policymakers, funders, and the public at large, which we cannot control but which to a certain extent shape our work—for good and for ill (Nielsen 2020). So what are some of these?

The first (push) factor is, I would argue, a legitimate claim of expertise. Some of the conundrums and social phenomena thrown into sharp relief by the pandemic—e.g. people's trust in the media (Nielsen et al. 2020), how information flows affect behaviour, false information (Brennen et al. 2020), or the affordances of virtual environments—yield themselves quite well to topics

2   In fact, there are several inherent risks and problems in such an approach which should not go unacknowledged, in particular the risk to one's mental health. In addition, such behaviour is part and parcel of a system which incentivises but seldom rewards over-time work and unequally distributes opportunities. To put it differently: Not everyone currently has the luxury to drop everything and get started on new projects. Rather than rushing to the keyboards, we would be well-advised to take this moment as an opportunity to think about and change some of the structural problems academia undeniably has.

and questions scholars from the humanities and social sciences interested in communication have been studying for decades. Hence, it is only natural that we would take an interest in them and have something to say about them (and feel an urge to do so).

Second, and following from the first point, is that many scholars seem to see the pandemic as an opportunity for (post-hoc) legitimisation, a chance to prove one's discipline's value vis-à-vis other disciplines and areas of research. While we have studied many of the abovementioned phenomena in great depth, this has not always translated into greater (external) recognition of our expertise in these areas (Nielsen 2020; Lewis 2020). One only needs to consult a handful of the many essays and op-eds that are currently being published around COVID-19 on some of the topics that fall within our area of work to find that a lot of them seem to care little for what we as a community of scholars know—and if they care, then often with a too strong emphasis on some topics at the expense of others. It is often "sexier" to report on bots, the so-called "infodemic," or propaganda than it is, for instance, to think about the long-term implications of trust, the communication strategies and narratives woven around the pandemic, and the long-term structural damage COVID-19 is inflicting on the business of the news (to name just a few).

A third factor is arguably a hybrid between push and pull. As Ruth Falkenberg contends, modern academia is suffused with an epistemic capitalist logic of neoliberal valuation schemes (see also Hicks et al. 2015) where researchers are "drilled to become rapid response experts" and forced to "follow the money while sacrificing long-term epistemic agendas to the needs of short-term productivity" (Fochler 2016; Falkenberg 2020). While I slightly disagree with Falkenberg's all too bleak assessment of the situation, especially regarding the sacrifice of long-term agendas, she makes a critical point that has become vis-ible in the pace with which some scholars have turned on the spot to address the pandemic.

A fourth—and closely linked to the third—pull factor is the demand from funders, policymakers, the media, and the public for answers and more information on phenomena relating to the pandemic. Especially in the first weeks after the outbreak, the available knowledge about its character-istics and effects was as thin as the caramel crust on a crème brûlée. And where there is demand, there will always be people who will try to meet it. It is not an exaggeration to say that demand for information has been over-whelming (Fletcher et al. 2020), not least evidenced by the staggering rise in viewer and readership numbers witnessed by many outlets in the early days. Similarly, many researchers, at least in the UK, have been inundated with money, with funding announcements for COVID-19 related research flooding people's inboxes in the days and weeks following the first lockdown. Likewise,

researchers working on areas related to the topic have been in high-demand, with some of them reaching superstar status within weeks.

Ground Gives, Capstones Shift

Of course, this list is far from exhaustive, but all this begs a second question: Is all this pivoting a good or a bad thing? The answer, I suggest, lies in the past.

In a way, we have all been here before. The last major disruption to the fields of journalism and communication research in recent years has arguably been the Brexit referendum, followed by the election of Donald Trump and the concomitant rise of right-wing populism in various parts of the world. In the wake of these, a flurry of activity ensued and scholars of all backgrounds and research traditions rushed to the case. Everyone suddenly seemed to be working on so-called "fake news" (Nielsen and Graves 2017), the dark arts of the supposedly all-powerful political data analytics industry (Simon 2019), or nefarious bots and other influence campaigns (Karpf 2019). Grant applications were re-written, new grants announced, research agendas re-defined, expertise from other contexts applied to the new paradigm, and so on. In a word: The fields pivoted.

The motivations of scholars at the time to jump on the bandwagon were eerily similar to what we see playing out in front of our eyes at this very moment. For some, it was a way to cope with events that more than a handful of us experienced as deeply disturbing. Some were well-meaning and wanted to help, or hoped to achieve change. For others it was the promise of funding and/or fame and the felt necessity to pursue these lines of research to survive in a hyper-competitive, neo-liberalised academic market. The group dynamics and peer pressure were there, too: everyone else seemed to be doing it. And some truly wanted to understand what was happening and create new knowledge in the process. In many cases, it was a mix of all these. I could go on, but again, the scope of this essay is limited.

This is not to say that the research resulting from these efforts—or research resulting from similar "pivots" more broadly—has been bad or low in quality across the board. Some of it has been excellent. A lot of it fell somewhere in between. Unfortunately, some of it has been poor and lacking nuance (and one could probably make a claim that this is often what gained wider traction), with the conceptual work focusing on a supposed "infodemic"—defined by the WHO as an over-abundance of information that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance—providing a pertinent example. Research addressing this "concept" has exploded in recent months (Simon and Camargo 2020). While drawing analogies to epidemiology when it comes to the existence and spread of (mis)information might be intuitive, it is also misleading and fundamentally misunderstands how information is being

produced, shared, and consumed in modern, high-choice media environments. Describing the complex communicative phenomena around the COVID-19 pandemic as an "infodemic" or calling for the establishment of a new field of "infodemiology" is merely giving new names to something we have other names for, without adding additional explanatory power.

Ultimately, the question remains if the current pivot to Corona-related research in the broad fields of journalism, media, and communication is something to cherish or to curse. As with most things in life the answer probably lies somewhere in the middle. These fields are shaped by macro-trends which cage us (Schroeder, 2018), but within that metaphorical cage we have a surprising amount of flexibility to run after the latest fad. To put it differently, trends come and go but some underlying topics and questions remain broadly the same and will continue to matter in the future. As journalism scholar Seth Lewis has argued elsewhere, if history is any guide, "no matter how disruptive this pandemic proves to be, there will be many enduring tensions and tendencies that matter greatly" (Lewis 2020). From this point of view, the rush to Corona-related research is just another trend that will rise, peak, and subside (hopefully like the virus)—at least in the grand scheme of things. Undoubtedly, it will create academic "losers" and "winners" along the way (most likely at greater speed than usual) and crowd out other topics and agendas for some time, before interest and attention will inevitably fade and move on. With any luck and with science in general under more public scrutiny than usual, it might also push these fields towards more open and rigorous research practices, as some have demanded for a long time. But at least for now, the rush to and demand for Corona-related research is here to stay, with all its positive and negative effects.

"Capstones shift, nothing resettles right" writes Seamus Heaney in "Anything Can Happen". I'm sympathetic to Heaney's sentiment in this poem, but I am not quite sure if I agree with him. Yes, nothing resettles right, right away. But eventually it will.

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DRIVE-IN

NOSTALGIA

MOVIES

AUDIENCE

"If You Say You Watch the Movie, You're a Couple o' Liars": In Search of the Missing Audience at the Drive-In

Karin Fleck

This short piece deals with the 2020 resurgence of the marginal *dispositif* of drive-in theaters by focusing on the (dis)placement of the audience, nostalgia, and its modes of movie and music experience, which anticipates that of pandemic media.

> *Jenny was sweet. Show a smile for the people she needs. I'm trouble, let's drive. I don't know the way you came alive.*
> *Sniff 'n' the Tears*

On May 12, 2020, German comedian and musician Helge Schneider released a short video message for his fans:

> In the near future, I won't be able to perform. I would thus like to clarify that I don't perform in front of cars, I don't perform in front of people who have to sit 1.5m apart from each other and wear a face mask and I also don't perform on the internet via streaming programs. To be honest, I also don't want to familiarize myself with that because in streaming services, a crucial part of my work is missing, which is you! If things continue as they are, that's it. (2020)

Helge Schneider misses his audience, but what he states actually refers to a live audience at a concert venue, neglecting the fact that within a month his video message had already clocked up almost 800,000 views. The audience had shifted elsewhere a long time ago but Helge refused to follow.[1] His nostalgia is clearly bound to a place shared with many concert venues and currently endangered due to the pandemic, but also to a state, which is the collective ecstasy of being part of a live-audience: the collective singing, clapping, swaying, dancing, cheering, and sometimes even the shabby band shirt that fans wear even many years after the concerts—a material souvenir of the experience.

But a closer look reveals that his statement is about more than his music and concert experiences. It is about audience experience and spectatorship, which also makes it relevant to think about another currently endangered institutional form, namely the cinema. Since there is no material proof that can be taken home as a souvenir from the cinema (except the ticket), it is the memory of the collective experience that persists: the laughter, the chat afterwards, the annoying couple sitting next to you, and the taste of the popcorn on that day. What is thus missed in these pandemic times is not the movies as such but a certain place to experience them in, especially new theatrical releases. The idea of consuming movies from home was embraced by streaming services such as Netflix, Prime, and Mubi that extended their range. Movies available at the touch of a button are today's more comfortable alternative with no greater risks involved.

Cinema releases, however, were postponed. Time froze. If you walked past your favorite cinema, the film ads hanging above the entrance were still those from mid-March at the moment of their closure. So venues in which to experience music and movies were closed, enabling two different ways of responding, and in turn conjuring up the Schneider conflict: mourning or moving? The movies have moved since their early days at the end of the nineteenth century, along with the music and the audience. Compared to Schneider, movies like to play at different places and find new niches. Lately, they even like to resurrect old places they formerly inhabited: because movies don't mind playing in front of cars! The sudden, drastic lockdown of the cinema and its spectators in its classical *dispositif* as analyzed by Jean-Louis Baudry and Jean-Louis Comolli at the end of the 1960s has given rise to the resurgence of a marginal *dispositif* during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020: an extremely American invention called the drive-in. Understanding its socio-cultural implications means returning to the prosperous post-war America of the 1950s.

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1 He is 65 years old and likes to experience music the way he used to as a teenager: via records and gigs.

The first drive-in was patented in 1933 by Richard M. Hollingshead on a seven-acre field near New Jersey as an outdoor theater with automobiles parked on inclined ramps. However, they did not reach their economic breakthrough until they peaked in the late 1950s, when there were over 4,000 drive-ins in the US alone (Fox and Black 2011, 272). The reasons for this cinematic configuration's success were the country's prosperity, the availability of vacant, accessible, and cheap land, and the rise of a car culture that established American's "emotional relationship with their cars" (Segrave 1992, vii). Part of the baby boom and the concomitant suburbanization while also part of an attempt to cushion the rapid spread of TVs in households, drive-ins (or ozoners) developed as "focal points of local communities" and as a "midpoint between domestic and public spheres" (Goldsmith 1999, 158–59). Combining a family-friendly environment with an occasion to live out obsessive car love,[2] drive-ins became the comparatively cheap and comfortable alternative[3] to urban theaters and solved the truly American dilemma of "deciding which he likes better, the movies or automobile riding" (Valentine 1994, 160). Additional services and facilities such as diaper machines, bottle warmers, playgrounds, petting zoos, swimming pools, and flea markets clearly situated movies as just one part of the overall experience: a cinema where the attraction is the distraction.[4] Technological aspects (apart from seasonal and temporal constraints) in drive-ins were always imperfect compared to their indoor rivals with sound delivery systems shifting from huge, fixed speakers to hanging intercom speakers, and later FM radio transmission (Fox 2018, 32). But their technological inefficiency did not matter because the movies did not matter, a phenomenon that became even clearer in the 1960s. The Beach Boys' 1964 song "Drive-In"[5] showed that they understood everything about it: "Forget about the plot and take your dates to the drive in." The drive-in as a site for sexual adventures became the sassy supplement to the history of family

2   Proof of this love can also be found in the numerous pop songs around car culture
     by artists such as Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Tracy Chapman, Janis Joplin, the Eagles,
     Steppenwolf, Rose Royce, Lana del Rey, and Iggy Pop, to name a few. This trend, just like
     the drive-in, was also adopted in songs by European bands such as Roxette, Sniff 'n' the
     Tears, Madness, Golden Earring, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones.
3   By comfort, I am referring here especially to the informality of dress. The drive-in was
     just one step to liberate family members from the pressure of dressing up when going
     out. Instead, families could enjoy a shared activity without having to worry about
     babysitters or dinner. The kids could be taken in their pajamas, while food was either
     guaranteed through the offer of snack bars and drive-in restaurants or through self-
     supply, which was allowed in drive-ins as opposed to cinemas downtown.
4   The term "cinema of distraction" was coined by Ben Goldsmith in his 1999 article about
     Australian drive-ins.
5   "Every time I have a date there's only one place to go, that's to the drive in. It's such a
     groovy place to talk and maybe watch a show, down at the drive in. Forget about the
     plot, it'll do very well, but make sure you see enough so you're prepared to tell, about
     the drive in. If the windows get fogged, you'll have to take a breath, down at the drive
     in…If you say you watch the movie, you're a couple o' liars…"

drive-ins, including fogged windows and cars parked in the last row, known as "Love Lane," bouncing up and down. Cars parked on "Love Lane" had to pay additional fees but considering the more prudish and restrictive educative methods of the time, most adolescents welcomed drive-ins as the only place for secret getaways. "Love Lane" indeed lost a bit of its popularity when the gear stick in car models started to be placed between the two front seats, instead of next to the steering wheel. In this design, the "separated" seats were more reminiscent of those in downtown cinemas, where the last row continues to be the favorite place for getting closer in touch with a date.

Meanwhile, the first drive-ins were culturally exported to Europe.[6] The first one opened in 1960 and still operates today in Gravenbruch, near Frankfurt. A curiosity and another product of American Cultural Imperialism, this element of the American lifestyle was sold as described by film scholar Nils Peiler: "There was an outdoor-cinema for individualists who wanted to watch a movie from their cars while eating Burgers at a time when US soldiers were still stationed and 'Fast Food' was a foreign word" (Peiler 2016, 12). The drive-ins' leap to European destinations happened at the end of the 1960s: a time of change in audience demographics and the beginning of Hollywood's restructuring process, targeting a younger audience. The ultimate result of this early New Hollywood is *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1968), which promotes a successful date between the two protagonists at a drive-in, chatting and eating burgers to Simon and Garfunkel's "Big Bright Green Pleasure Machine"—a wink to happy, consuming Americans. The failed version of this date follows ten years later in the musical comedy *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978), which reveals the worst-case scenario[7] of being stuck next to grabbing, abusive, and infectious company in the enclave of the car. Here lies the fallacy of the presumed safety in cars, luring consumers with their elaborate designs and controllable gadgets to feel safe and sound, or, as in Karin Bijsterveld et al.'s twisted formulation "sound and safe."

6   But compared to their wide extent in the US, they never really exceeded the status of curiosities, because in Europe the pragmatic notion of cars as a means of transportation prevailed.

7   This only pertains to worst-case scenario for dates at drive-ins. The real worst-case happens in the film *Targets* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1968), where the drive-in becomes the target for a killer's rampage.

[Figure 1] *Trapped in the Car* (Screenshot: Karin Fleck 2020, 5)

In the scene, Danny's (John Travolta) advances to the shy, well-behaved Sandy (Olivia Newton John) are constantly rejected. As the screenshot above (fig. 1) shows, the front of the windshield is the most telling: Not only does its frame, visually separating them, anticipate the upcoming conflict, but the windshield as a whole even replaces the screen (or is the screen), and reveals what the drive-in experience is really about, meaning what happens inside rather than outside the car. The windshield could thus be described as a double-sided screen. It is a projection surface for the disastrous drive-in date, or, put another way, a movie about movie experience at drive-ins, whereas from the opposite perspective behind the wheel, the windshield also works as a mirror, reflecting the drive-in spectators' distracted attention. To a great extent, the spectator's drift towards other activities is also provoked by the radio transmission of movie sound and the car radio as a personally controllable audio device enabling what Bijsterveld et al. called "acoustic cocooning" (2). Auditory information is received differently through the radio than during a live-concert, which makes listening a culturally learned but also hierarchized process. Anahid Kassabian categorized radio music as "ubiquitous music," which is "the kind of music that we listen to as part of our environment" and which could "invisibly accompany any kind of activity" (2013, 4). But the sort of distraction activity Danny pursues is offensive in Sandy's eyes, so she ends the scene outraged by leaving a devastated Danny alone at a drive-in movie,[8] shouting desperately after her: "Sandy, you can't just walk out of a drive-in!"

8   Which is also the title of an instrumental song of the same name, featured on the *Grease* record single of *You're the One that I Want*.

[Figure 2] A heartbroken Danny sings the soundtrack to the silent ads at the drive-in. (Screenshot: Karin Fleck 2020, 6)

The feeling of being alone at a drive-in is not only the dramatic consequence of Danny's failed date but a sensation that is symptomatic for drive-ins, where spectators are sitting isolated in the self-enclosed space of the car: a private bubble in the public drive-in area, which tends to feel even more private once the space is filled with darkness at night. Drive-ins thus bring the "outside experience" of cinemas to the inside of one's own four wheels, provoking closer contact between those inside the vehicle while keeping everything outside at a close distance. But there is something about Travolta's filmography in particular that predestines him as the iconic figure of these emptied pandemic cinematic spaces. In fact, the look of lonely Travolta at the drive-in as in the screenshot above (fig. 2) is not unfamiliar, given that the GRK "Configurations of Film" chose a specific configuration of the "Confused Travolta GIF" for their website, which shows him in the more than ever abandoned space of the cinema with empty rows of red seats. The GIF is a future outcome of the expert of nostalgic resurrections, Quentin Tarantino himself, who revived the figure of dancing Travolta for *Pulp Fiction* in 1994. The scene preceding his famous dance at the Jack Rabbit Slim's Twist Contest served as a basis for the GIF. Commissioned by his boss to take out his wife, the contract killer Vincent Vega (John Travolta) needs to pick up Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) from home, where she communicates with him via a semi-hidden intercom speaker. The confusion in the scene stems from his irritation as to the source of her acousmatic voice, while Mia Wallace is in control of Vega and the operation of the speaker.

[Figure 3] Confused Travolta at the Cinema (Website Configurations of Film 2018, 5)

What confused Travolta is looking for in this reconfigured version of the GIF from the Website Configurations of Film (fig. 3) is the missing audience. Part of that missing audience is currently sitting in one of the many hundred drive-ins[9] in Germany, a well-visited extra setup for movie entertainment during the pandemic. Even my small hometown Zweibrücken in southwest Germany set up a drive-in at the former airport site[10]—a military relict from Canadians, North Americans. The 2020 drive-in scenario intertwines two kinds of audiences, namely the absent audience of the pandemic and the sustained restructuring of the audience effected by the drive-in. The former is recon-figured by dispersion, whereas the latter is distracted by the re-configuration of the apparatus.

In the trailer for the 2019 documentary *At the Drive-in*, a female narrator explains the current fascination of younger generations for this format with nostalgia in the sense of an ache: an ache to return to that unknown place of the drive-in. But I don't think this is a quest for a lost space. In fact, I think we have been here before many times in the movies. This is about something different: the fatal pattern to repeat and the visual drive, driving us in hope for moving experiences in times when we are told not to touch, nor to get too close but keep a social distance. The automobile as an obstacle, separating

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9   Another resurrection of Tarantino in his latest movie *Once Upon a Time…in Hollywood*. In this love letter to the cinema as a place, the stuntman Cliff Booth lives in a trailer behind The Van Nuy's Drive-In Theater, which first opened in 1948. According to the *L.A. Times*, the theater was demolished because of financial problems in 1998. The drive-in scenes were filmed at the Paramount Drive-In Theaters.

10   Something Zweibrücken did not come up with is the idea of Ed Brown, who opened the first and only "Fly-in/Drive-In Theater" to cars and planes in Wall Township, New Jersey in 1948. He operated an airport at the very same property and would allow up to 25 planes to park at the back of the theater grounds.

rather than connecting people, has already been thematized by Jean Baudrillard in *The System of Objects*. It is this proximity to his audience and between audience members that Helge Schneider misses and that is lost through the drive-in movie experience, regardless of the content being shown, which ranges from concert broadcastings to Hollywood blockbusters. In other words, drive-ins miss out on something, which lies at the heart of the movie experience at cinemas beyond displacement through streaming devices, the pandemic movie suppliers. The drive-in experience thus needs to be located between that of classical cinemas and that of streaming devices, while incorporating aspects of both. It is cinema, but one that maintains enough safety distance between the screen and the audience (and its members) to make it an approved leisure entertainment during the pandemic, while allowing all sorts of side activities during the screening as granted through streamed movie consumption. Comparable to big stage performances of music stars that are surrounded by security for safety reasons, drive-ins assume the role of protected and protective starlets among cinemas during the pandemic. Their history is one of secluding, distracted movie entertainment in line with current social distancing advises: a pandemic media space that was active even before the pandemic. Therefore, drive-ins not only celebrated a comeback during the pandemic, but most of all they reflect consumer preferences of the domestic movie experience in the twenty-first century through the windshield of the car, which is both a screen for an outward projection and a mirror of distracted, displaced, and dispersed spectators.

Movies will continue to move, but Baudrillard also notes that "a whole civilization can come to a halt in the same way as the automobile" (2020, 137). Some driving schools in Germany are called "Walk in-Drive Out," which is also a catchy ad slogan at the same time. In conclusion and in contrast, however, I suggest: If the place of the drive-in turns out to be a disappointing distraction from the movie, you can always just walk out of a drive-in, as Sandy did in *Grease*.

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SPACE / SCALE

AERIAL VIEWS

DRONES

ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT

ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Of Drones and the Environmental Crisis in the Year of 2020

Teresa Castro

As coronavirus lockdowns left the world's cities deserted, drone footage of empty towns made its appearance on video-sharing platforms. Across the globe, observers insisted on the melancholic feelings that such "post-apocalyptic" images aroused. This essay proposes to read these images against the background of our current ecological crisis, highlighting their connections to drone footage of anti-racist protests and to footage of wild animals taking over lockdown cities around the world. Attention will be drawn to their problematic aestheticization of politics, in particular when it comes to ecological thinking.

As I write this text, in June 2020, George Floyd's body has just been put to rest. Across the globe, people have taken to the streets, protesting against racial discrimination and toppling statues of slave traders and colonialist rulers. In mid-March, when the world was progressively brought to a standstill by a bewildering pandemic, it was hard to imagine that the year 2020 would be remembered for anything else than *Covid-19*, a cunning virus strain that spilled over from bats to humans and is still taking lives. But our current and

elusive enemy has brutally exposed a world fraught with economic and racial inequalities.

What do anti-racist protests have to do with coronavirus drone footage? I bring them up for two reasons. First, because this text is an immediate reaction to the political questions raised by such footage, and as such, a response deeply embedded in the present moment. We've had little time to reflect on the massive amount of images inspired by the outbreak. If the history of aerial imagery can help us to better grasp some of the issues at stake, some of these problems strike me as intimately related to the nature of our times. In this sense, the powerful George Floyd protests that we are witnessing are part of the equation: they're all the more relevant as enormous crowds filled the streets, shortly after virus lockdowns across all continents left them deserted. Against the rising specter of surveillance societies, drone flyovers of such massive demonstrations—and this is my second point—have become inseparable from aerial views of cities transformed into ghost towns. The uncanniness of Los Angeles's eerily quiet streets, shot on March 20th, appears even more staggering when compared to the extraordinary images of Hollywood Boulevard swarming with protesters on June 8th (fig. 1).[1] My discussion of coronavirus drone footage will keep these images in mind—as it will summon very different pictures made during the pandemic, such as footage of wild animals taking over lockdown cities around the world. By juxtaposing these apparently disparate elements, I wish to highlight their underground connection. On the one hand, they all evoke the policing and monitoring of human and non-human bodies, as well as the belief that some lives are more valuable than others. On the other hand, they refer to a problematic "aestheticization of politics," in particular when it comes to ecological thinking.

[Figure 1 a–b] Los Angeles on March 20th and Los Angeles on June 8th, 2020.

1   See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O51LOuQzROI, posted by *The Washington Post* on YouTube on March 20th, as well as Ron Kurokawa's viral drone footage, documenting a march organized by Black Lives Matter BLD, PWR and local LA rapper YG : https://www.instagram.com/p/CBKLOkAhGEV/, posted on Instagram on June 8th. All accessed June 11, 2020.

Coronavirus Drone Footage

"Uncanniness" is a good starting point. As drone footage of unusually des-
olate cities popped up on video-sharing platforms, the words "awe-inspiring"
and "post-apocalyptic" came up almost immediately. In early February, an
evocative assemblage of drone sequences captured in the city of Wuhan, then
under strict lockdown, was widely relayed.[2] Some qualified it as "haunting,"
mentioning "scenes reminiscent of a post-apocalyptic movie" (O'Brian 2020);
others evoked a "spectral situation" (Anonymous 2020). As the pandemic
spread to more than 200 countries and aerial footage of other cities under
lockdown was broadly circulated, observers insisted on the "eerie beauty"
of such once familiar and now "ghostly towns," as well as on the melancholic
feelings they aroused.

As vehicles that have access to humanly impossible movements and points of
view, drones are uncanny by nature. So are the images they produce: Harun
Farocki's expression, "subjective phantom images," evokes such uncanniness
well (Farocki 2004). Police surveillance drones generated much of this footage,
destined first and foremost for humans and machines to monitor and there-
fore inseparable from disciplinary power structures.[3] Despite this (whether
shot by the police, civilians or major news organizations, coronavirus drone
footage is strongly embedded in the surveillance society), such pictures
cannot be described as fully "operative," that is, as images made by machines
for machines, "neither to entertain nor to inform" (Farocki 2004, 17). While
illustrating an iteration of logistical images, coronavirus drone footage doesn't
totally exclude the human eye. Its horizon might be full automation, but
human intermediaries are still present. Moreover, as they enter the maelstrom
of visual culture, such images escape their purely instrumental destiny and
become aesthetic objects offered to the contemplation of their anxious, con-
fined spectators. Drone footage of cities under lockdown evokes the longer
history of urban cinematic views (Castro 2017). The feeling of flight, as well
as the extraordinary mobility of their point of view, was (and is) as important

2   The New York Times. 2020. "Drone Footage shows Wuhan under lockdown." *The New
     York Times*, February 4. Accessed June 11, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/
     asia/100000006960506/wuhan-coronavirus-drone.html. The footage was shot by a
     Chinese photojournalist and edited by *The New York Times*.
3   See, for instance, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bpe-ARGSi-w (drone and time-
     lapse footage of Paris before and under lockdown, put together by the French police
     and posted online on March 28th 2020, accessed June 11 2020) and https://www.youtube.
     com/watch?v=ND1EIf7s2d4 (drone footage from the Barcelona lockdown shot by the
     Catalonian "Mossos de esquadra," posted online of April 20, 2020, accessed June 11,
     2020). I will not address other features of these so-called "pandemic drones" in this
     essay, which, beyond monitoring social distance and quarantined individuals, claim to
     remotely pick up the heart rate and temperature of people, or to know if they're wearing
     a mask. Note also that talking drones equipped with speakers were used in different
     countries during lockdown, from China to Portugal.

as the enjoyment experienced in observing the city from an unusual point of view. The pleasure inherent to coronavirus drone footage equally lies in this oscillation between visual and kinaesthetic perception, referring to cultural practices of looking that go beyond the military expediency of drones.[4]

Like some of these earlier views, coronavirus drone footage has a strong affective dimension. Even sequences documenting deserted tourist hot-spots, inviting their viewers to experience entertaining virtual tours from the safety of their homes, seem shrouded in an elegiac veil, often reinforced by atmospheric soundtracks.[5] A clip entitled *The Silence of Rome* is absolutely exemplary.[6] While the video's aesthetics perfectly illustrates the corporate, promotional look in which its maker specializes, the ambient soundtrack encourages contemplation.[7] In one of the first pieces on coronavirus drone footage, Patricia Zimmerman and Caren Kaplan have pointed out the melancholic, almost mournful nostalgia, of such aerial images (Kaplan and Zimmermann 2020). Despite their innocuous appearance, such reactions are deeply political. As Zimmerman observes, "the affective response … seems like a form of romanticism available only to the privileged with time to meditate on emptiness and revel in it" (Kaplan and Zimmerman 2020). Indeed, coronavirus drone footage illustrates in many ways a worrying aestheticization of politics, and not only because it primarily speaks to the world's privileged.

4   In addition to this, it should be pointed out that despite its military origins, drone technology is sometimes used in order to undermine the same power regime that produced them. See, for instance, the way in which the No Dakota Access Pipeline movement used drones in order to monitor police activities. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXWw0y44xaM (posted on YouTube December 2, 2016).

5   See, among countless examples, drone footage of quarantined San Francisco, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQky8qARcwc (posted on YouTube April 2, 2020), Chicago https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8Ia03Ve1fc (posted on You Tube April 11th 2020), Florence https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTJvE7BIZTo (posted on YouTube March 28, 2020) or Lisbon https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSsarnHMXbA (posted on You Tube April 3, 2020). All accessed June 11, 2020. The platform Airvūz, "the premiere online video sharing community for the emerging Drone Age," compiles a large number of drone lock-down footage shot all-over the world (see https://www.airvuz.com/). Drone DJ, a website specialized in the drone industry, also made compilations of coronavirus drone footage. See https://dronedj.com/2020/04/01/ultimate-coronavirus-drone-footage-roundup-usa-china-italy-spain-and-more/ (posted on April 1st 2020, accessed June 11, 2020).

6   The video was shot by shot by a certain Luigi Palumbo, a professional drone operator. See Il Silenzio di Roma, posted by Invidiosrl, April 7, 2020. Accessed June 11, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFGZKUxJwkM.

7   Some of the viewers' responses, left on the comments section, are worth quoting: "beautiful and sad" or "wonderful and truly moving video clip, poetically beautiful Rome, wounded in the heart by the sirens in their sad silence, in order to rescue lives from the virus" ("Stupendo video clip davvero commovente, Roma poeticamente meravigliosa, ferita al cuore dalle sirene nel suo triste silenzio, per strappare vite al virus"). On the author's Instagram account, an aerial photograph of Victor Emmanuel II Monument is accompanied by the comment mala tempora currunt ("bad times are upon us"). See https://www.instagram.com/p/CBIMIZQh8TU/, posted June 8, 2020. Accessed June 11, 2020.

Drones and the Aestheticization of Ecological Politics

The expression "aestheticization of politics" was first used by Walter Benjamin in order to address fascism's "glorification of war" (Benjamin 2008, 41). Sieg-fried Kracauer's discussion of the mass ornament (and aerial views), illustrates well what the aestheticization of political life meant during those gloomy inter-war years (Kracauer 1995; Castro 2013). I will use this idea in a different way. It seems to me that the pleasurable and affective dimensions of coronavirus drone footage—their inherently aesthetic features—induce, in the public sphere, a worrying victory of spectacle over criticism. This is particularly evident when it comes to ecological thought—an aspect otherwise dis-regarded by discussions on the automation of vision. As a human-made crisis (not because the virus was fabricated in a lab, but because its spill-over was driven by human activities), the current pandemic links explicitly to ecology and to our troubled relationship with the "natural" world. As governments imposed more or less strict social distancing regulations, commentators were quick to suggest that this was the first major crisis of the Anthropocene (Tooze 2020). Discussions on the positive and negative environmental outcomes of the outbreak thrived: the most optimistic anticipated a new era of ecological consciousness. As satellite images revealed significant drops in air pollution across the planet, drone footage of emptied cities came to embody, for some, what the world would look like without humans—or, at least, with consid-erably fewer humans. Images (many of them fake) of wild animals returning to human-deserted metropolises were widely shared (fig. 2).[8] In the UK and some parts of Europe, false Extinction Rebellion (XR) stickers proclaimed: "Corona is the cure, humans are the disease" (fig. 3). XR quickly dismissed them: they were the creation of far-right activists, who not only wished to discredit the group, but to promote "eco-fascism" (Manavis 2020).

8   See, among others, "Coronavirus Outbreak: Animals Take to Streets among Lockdown," posted by *India Today* on YouTube, April 10, 2020. Accessed June 11, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_DSLP95CR2k; and "6 Things that prove that the Earth is Healing," posted on YouTube by Curly Tales, March 23, 2020. Accessed June 11, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3M9o8TJG9M.

[Figure 2] Two ducks in front of the restaurant Tour d'Argent, Paris. Photograph posted on Twitter by @sisyphe007 on March 31, 2020.

[Figure 3] False Extinction Rebellion sticker: "Corona is the cure, humans are the disease."

In what feels like a long time ago, in the far-away galaxy of our pre-pandemic world, self-proclaimed eco-fascists murdered a significant number of people in El Paso and Christchurch (Darby 2019). Eco-fascism certainly precedes the outbreak (Gardiner 2020). But as drone footage of emptied cities suggested

that the world had turned into a nuclear-disaster exclusion zone where "nature" was regaining its rights, eco-fascists seized the occasion. Their credo: to preserve the planet over *certain* lives, in particular black, indigenous and other minority ethnic lives. The very idea that "humans are the virus"—a meme tweeted and relayed countless times during lockdown, and somewhat inseparable from drone footage and satellite images—is inherently problematic. While human activities are certainly behind the environmental crisis, the genocidal view according to which COVID-19 is the planet's answer to the "human virus" is untenable. In practical terms, those being "sacrificed" are the frailest in terms of health, age, and economic position: the poor, the homeless, the incarcerated, the displaced, the marginalized, etc. If drone footage of emptied cities and "cute" images of wild animals exploring the world's metropolises serve the "humans are the virus" credo, environmental politics is neutralized (if not aestheticized): the real reasons behind our current crisis are not addressed, they become a spectacle.

The link between racial justice and the environmental crisis must be acknowledged. Racial (and gender) inequality and environmental destruction go hand in hand (Ferdinand 2019). In this context, the human and non-human bodies absent or present in drone footage of lockdown (and post-lockdown) cities are significant. While the real impact of the crisis on environmental consciousness still needs to be seen, the pandemic feels like an occasion *to land on Earth* (Latour 2018 and 2020).[9] According to French sociologist Bruno Latour, the modern project has been "in flight," detached from the soil, plants, animals, life. But we cannot escape the ecological urgency anymore: the reality of anthropogenic climate change is making the planet uninhabitable and now begs for a terrestrial politics. Latour's argument appears as particularly relevant for a discussion on aerial imagery: if the disjunction between the world we live *in* and the world we live *from* is at the heart of our current environmental crisis, points of view matter. In other words, from where do we see the world? In this context, the mapping and surveying of the planet from an aerial perspective undoubtedly contributed to our remoteness from it. Beyond the general feeling of mastery and control over space that maps procure, cartography has played (and still plays) a decisive role in the process of extracting natural resources from the Earth. Maps have helped to transform "nature" into an entity to be mastered and exploited. Transitioning from what we could call a cartographic to an ecological reason means, among other things, adjusting our standpoints to more small-scale and non-objectifying points of view, imagining counter-mappings. In order to truly inhabit the

9   In addition to Bruno Latour's idea that politics should be redefined as what leads towards the Earth (and not the global or the national—the "ethnonational" according to eco-fascism), "landing" should potentially be a way to think about the necessary articulation between a "cartographic" and an "ecological" reason. For more or less obvious reasons, aerial views play an important role in this conundrum.

planet and to make it a world worth living in, we need to tackle its problems. As far as environmental politics is concerned, so long drone hovering and detached views: we need to put our feet back on Earth.

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ANTOINE D'AGATA

THERMAL IMAGES

THERMOGRAPHIC CAMERA

BIOPOLITICS

CARE

The Fever of Images: Thermography, Sensuality and Care in Pandemic Times

Alice Leroy

In the midst of the pandemic crisis, while disturbing figures and pictures of intubated patients and mass graves in rich western cities at complete standstill invaded the traditional and social media screens on the one hand, and governments massively invested in pervasive surveillance technologies on the other hand, the French photographer Antoine D'Agata went walking alone, with a thermographic camera, along the empty streets of Paris and in the intensive care units of hospitals in France. The pictures he took testify to a totally different experience both of the media and of the disease: not one of surveillance, identification, and intervention, but one of consideration, sensuality, and care.

First, we hardly see anything. Against a dark bluish background, glowing spots light up the center of the image. After a while, a kneeling figure emerges, the bust and the head turned towards an iridescent and indeterminate shape, like a kind of sun crushed on itself. Taking a closer look, we soon see recognizable

shapes surface. These shadows and these lights outline the folds of a dress, perhaps a loose blouse, covering the entire body of the kneeling figure. The head is underlined with a kind of turban, or a hairnet, which conceals the hair. From the blouse a hand rises, stretched towards a luminous disc which it touches gently, as if to caress it. This luminous disc is a face from which all the features have been erased, as if swallowed by light. Around this face, darker shades outline the hair, the shoulder and the rest of the body covered by a sheet. It looks like a religious scene, a figure of devotion kneeling at the bed-side of a recumbent figure. However, we are not in a church or a museum, but in a hospital. These bodies are not of stone, but of flesh and blood, and that is why they appear surrounded by light in the night of thermal images. This pho-tograph was taken in an intensive care unit at the height of the COVID-19 crisis in France. It belongs to a double series produced by photographer Antoine d'Agata during the eight weeks of lockdown in the country, in the depop-ulated streets of the capital and at the heart of hospitals in Paris, Bordeaux, Marseille, and Nancy.

On March 16, 2020, on the eve of the lockdown, Antoine d'Agata decided to settle in the deserted offices of Agence Magnum, for which he works in Paris. He slept in these premises for two months, and began an intensive and obsessive wandering across the city emptied of its inhabitants, equipped with several devices and in particular with a thermal camera. At first, he wandered the streets in the early morning or at nightfall and saw a new social geography of the city taking shape. The regular distances between the silhouettes, the isolated or fleeing passers-by, the bodies struggling to inhabit a space that had become uninhabitable, and then the last of men, those who had no refuge and for whom a bench, a corner of a building, or a sidewalk were the only place to sleep. In the city engulfed by the thermal spectrum, an abstraction of colors going from hot to cold, the decor disappears and further isolates the bodies, fragile witnesses of a world that sinks into the night. In parallel with this series, D'Agata went to the intensive care units of hospitals, overwhelmed by the influx of patients. The violence expected in these clinical spaces is proportionally opposite to that of street images. Because in the abstraction composed by the thermal camera, not only do the hospital system and its morbid decor of technologies and tubes disappear, but so do all the details singularizing the suffering of the patients, an entire organic life metamor-phosed into spectral clarity. All that remains in this ballet of shadows and lights are the gestures of care, applied with a gentleness which finds its most essential expression there.

Thermal imaging, however, belongs to a set of biopolitical technologies which have a long history. Discovered in 1800 when Sir William Herschel, followed by his son John, tried to measure heat beyond the visible spectrum (Vollmer and Möllmann 2010; Ring and Jones 2013) thermography is literally based on the

detection of invisible radiation from the electromagnetic spectrum. Our eyes can only see visible light, but they can neither detect ultraviolet nor infrared light. The primary source of infrared light is heat. Any organic body emits heat; even non-organic bodies, objects, stones, and even ice, as long as they have a temperature above absolute zero (-273.15 degrees Celsius or 0 Kelvin), produce infrared radiation. We perceive infrared radiation as heat whereas the infrared thermal imaging camera captures it as data and represents it in the form of images. The first infrared-sensitive cameras were designed in the early 1940s with electronic sensors and used as (then poor) anti-aircraft defense. But it was not before the early 1970s that these night vision systems succeeded in framing thermal images on a real-time basis. This was the time when the US Military invented the Forward Looking InfraRed (FLIR) systems, targeting and navigation technologies that were able to detect objects at distances up to 3 km and soon equipped aircrafts and warships (Vollmer and Möllmann 2010, 95). These systems defeated all visual obstacles—night, fog, smoke—and were then logically used not only for aerial reconnaissance, but also for monitoring, tracking, and targeting—or, in the parlance of US special operations, to "find, fix, and finish"—their objective (Parks 2014, 18).

Among the numerous technological gadgets that then became prominent in war movies, thermal imaging came to represent an ambivalent mode of perception, at the threshold of visibility. It is no coincidence that a film reinvesting the genre of man-hunting like *Predator* John McTiernan (1987) granted an alien this more-than-human vision and made it the greatest threat ever faced by a group of elite soldiers. The strangeness of such a mode of perception was so incommensurable with that of human senses that it most surely relied on that of an other-than-human being, like a machine or an alien, than on a man, even if that man was Arnold Schwarzenegger. Ironically enough, one of the US Military's drones, equipped with infrared sensors able to detect heat-bearing objects and bodies, was then to be named "Predator" in 1995 and used during operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The film also confronted an analog medium, that of film, with a digital and quantifiable image, since computer technology had entirely redefined the level of resolution of thermal imaging. This split is not only between two different mediums but also between two opposite modes of perception. In his reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's last book, *The Visible and the Invisible*, which he comments on in his *Seminar*, Jacques Lacan says that the split that matters in Merleau-Ponty's book is not between the visible and the invisible, but rather "between the eye and the gaze" (1973, 73). It does not have much to do with the limits of our perception (the fact that we perceive only a fragment of the electromagnetic spectrum), but rather with the reversibility in vision. Observing is also always being observed. It does not matter to Lacan whether this gaze is materialized or not; it could belong to a living being, as well as to a machine, or it could even be an internalized or imagined gaze. What matters though is that

this being-under-a-gaze is primary. "I see only from one point, but in my existence, I am looked at from all sides," writes Lacan (1973, 72). Aircraft and drone pilots see bodies and forms they would be unable to detect were they not equipped with night-vision or thermal camera systems. Their experience of this augmented vision occurs through a gaze that simultaneously places them under observation, making them objects that are seen. Their omnipotent eye paradoxically designates their own vulnerability as bodies permeable to other gazes, especially those of machines. Thermal images participate in this Lacanian dissociation between the eye and the gaze, causing us to experience ourselves like glowing forms in the night, potential targets and vulnerable beings.

Indeed, before these technological enhancements deployed the electromagnetic spectrum in a series of visible images, the very first thermal medium is our own body. "The significance of body temperature lies in the fact that humans are homeotherms who are capable of maintaining a constant temperature that is different from that of the surroundings. This is essential to the preservation of a relatively constant environment within the body known as homeostasis" (Ring & Jones 2013, 2-1). In the history of medicine, fever was one of the most frequently observed symptoms of a disease. Physicians from the time of Hippocrates used mud on the skin to measure, in a very approximate and subjective manner, the raised temperature of a body, before Galileo invented a "thermoscope" from a glass tube, a predecessor to the thermometer. By producing heat, the organic body thus acts as a medium itself, and by collecting data on different populations of bodies, thermal cameras act as instruments of another form of biopolitical control. Following a Foucaldian perspective, Nicole Starosielski has shown how thermal technologies were part of a vast apparatus and a long history of social control. She analyzes a military technology experimented with by the United States in Afghanistan in 2010, the Active Denial System, also known as the "Heat Ray," which consists in irradiating a human subject with "a millimeter wave beam, a microwave." The radiation leaves no visible mark or burns on the body but it generates a powerful sensation of pain:

> Unlike other 'non-lethal' means of control, such as taser guns and tear gas, the Active Denial System works at a distance, a means of weaponizing the spectrum to generate thermal sensations. The system is akin to existing forms of torture by media: sound cannons that damage the hearing of protesters and strobe lights used in prisoner interrogation. And like the techniques of psychological operations, the heat ray is described as a psychological, communicative, and affective tool, one that conveys an impression of being burned without actually being burnt. (Starosielski 2019, 2)

This thermal violence operates invisibly and at distance, as a kind of 'no-touch torture.' The Heat Ray's absence of traces opens a legal vacuum: how can a government or a military authority be hold accountable for an action without visible evidence? How can it be accused of torture with no physical mark of injury? But beyond these ethical concerns, Starosielski shows that this technology belongs to a long-standing history of intimate and perverse modes of punishment. She recognizes as a predecessor of the Heat Ray the sweatbox, an apparatus designed to detain someone in a very close space, about the size of a coffin, with restricted access to air, water, and food, which was designed by slavers on the ships and plantations before being adopted in prisons and schools. The sweatbox happens to be selectively destined to colored bodies: "what sets [it] … apart from other techniques of racist violence during this period, such as lynching, was its invisibility and indeterminacy" (Starosielski 2019, 10). What she identifies as "thermal violence," and which characterizes racialized techniques of disciplining black bodies, also appears as exposing bodies to an invisible and nonetheless pervasive form of violence that does penetrate deep into the body.

How do Antoine d'Agata's images take into account and respond to this long history of thermal violence and bodily discipline? Against this "politics of exposure," which Starosielski identifies with thermal military technologies, his pictures account for the vulnerability of the body and the precarity of life. Grounded in a history of tracking and targeting, thermography has been described as a hunting device, of which we know how it can disembody its subjects, dispossessing them of their envelope of flesh and the singularity of their features. Quite the opposite here: preserving the anonymity of hospital patients, the image only restores the carnal and deeply empathetic dimension of the care they receive. The hospital represents the opposite of what we see on the streets, because the euphemistic violence of one responds to the paradoxical sensuality of the other. The pandemic risk assimilated the sense of touch to a path of contamination, justifying the introduction of a new gestural lexicon of "social distancing." On the contrary, Antoine d'Agata's thermal images revealed the actions of the caregivers, who were most exposed to the virus, as the last bulwark against the alienation of touch. In the end, these images are not informative, they are evidence of the meaning of "caring": to stand closer, to pay attention, to give help and consideration to the suffering ones. The "poverty" of these images in low definition is therefore neither a gap, nor even a break in style, it simply describes another level of reality, not the emergency and the horror of the pandemic as it has been portrayed on all screens, but rather a space-time where life and death merge in almost liturgical gestures. Reflecting on the powers of mourning and violence, Judith Butler writes:

> The demand for a truer image, for more images, for images that convey
> the full horror and reality of the suffering has its place and importance.
> The erasure of that suffering through the prohibition of images and
> representations more generally circumscribes the sphere of appearance,
> what we can see and what we can know. But it would be a mistake to
> think that we only need to find the right and true images, and that a
> certain reality will then be conveyed. The reality is not conveyed by
> what is represented within the image, but through the challenge to
> representation that reality delivers. (2004, 146)

D'Agata's thermal camera series precisely deals with that challenge by
showing vulnerable bodies through a traditional military tracking system. It
features no graphic violence or abstract shades, but the gentle sensuality of a
gesture of attention to others. They contrast both the frightening pictures that
were produced by drones surveilling deserted cities, and the terrible images
of the loss of sociability gestures in pandemic times. Using a surveillance and
recognition technology, designed for scientific and military purposes, the
photographer makes counter-use of it. By detecting the infrared radiation
emitted by the bodies, the camera does not try to locate and identify them,
but on the contrary to abstract them from the hospital context, and to pro-
tect their identity (so as not to expose people who are already in situations
of extreme distress). "This is not a battlefield and we are not at war," say the
images of d'Agata; in this theater of operations that is the hospital, the only
gestures that matter are those that recognize the vulnerability of the bodies
and that take care of lives. One day, when we remember these forgotten ges-
tures, disappeared with the advent of a digital era which also saw the pro-
hibition of physical contact, these images will compose a sensual atlas of the
gestures of attention and care.

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VIDEOCONFERENCING

SCREEN

MIRROR

INTERFACE

SELF-REFLEXIVITY

SELF-MONITORING

Videoconferencing and the Uncanny Encounter with Oneself: Self-Reflexivity as Self-Monitoring 2.0

Yvonne Zimmermann

During the corona pandemic, videoconferencing has become the standard mode of communication with colleagues from work. Videoconferencing has not only changed the way we interact with others, but also with ourselves. This article explores how video-conferencing has brought about a new relationship of closeness and distance of self and/as other. While virtually meeting others, we primarily encounter ourselves. It is an uncanny encounter, a self-reflection as imaged self/other that opens up to a specific mode of self-reflexivity: to self-monitoring 2.0.

You are you. Now, isn't that pleasant?
Dr. Seuss

Find out who you are and do it on purpose.
Dolly Parton

Contact restrictions in the corona pandemic sent many of us into home office. Many of us were used to working at home, and many have privileged working at home over working at the office. But the corona pandemic has us working *from* home, which is not the same as working *at* home. Working from home is teleworking. The prefix tele means distance—as in telephone and television, where we hear and see from a distance. Teleworking then means working from a distance. But distance from what and whom? Pandemic precaution requires distance from others in real life. This is one side of the coin. The other side is close contact—with oneself, in telework. It is a contact that we didn't ask for any more than we asked for distance from others. Worse, this close contact with oneself comes at a moment when others are to be kept at a distance. Teleworking and the computer-mediated-communication technologies that enable it have produced a new relationship of closeness and distance, of self and other, of subject and object, of looking and being looked at.

The Self, Me or You?

Among the various videoconference systems, some may be preferred over others for reasons of ownership, data security, or usability. Ultimately, they all work the same—with some small but noteworthy differences. All services name the participants in a videoconference, including myself. But in addition to stating my *name* to refer to me, they also use a reflexive pronoun. They label the image of me on screen either as *me* or as *you*. This is a small detail, but it makes a significant difference in how I am envisioned and addressed by the system. Am I a virtual *me* or a virtual *you*? If the person I see on screen is *me*, it is suggested that it is me who looks at an image of myself on screen. I am the subject that looks at me—and at others. If the person I see on screen is *you*, the perspective changes. For this suggests that it is the others who look at an image of myself on screen. I am the object of *their* look—while I am at the same time the object of *my* look. Ultimately, I am both subject and object of my look. I see myself at once as self and other, as one self/other among others, a split perception of self/other on a split screen.

The Screen as Mirror and Interface

In configurations of media like videoconference systems, the screen is both a mirror and an interface. In the history of film theory, the mirror has been a prominent paradigm to describe the relationship of spectator and screen, and more specifically, to theorize the moment "when we are confronted with an image as if with our own reflected self" (Elsaesser and Hagener 2015, 63). The mirror metaphor has been approached from psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage immediately comes to mind, but also Jean-Louis Baudry's thoughts on the "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus"), phenomenology, and neuroscience. The metaphor has been instructive for exploring cinema as reflected in the mirror, that is, as a tool to think about self-reflection. To think about one's reflected self is, in my understanding here, self-reflexivity.

Yet the mirror remained a metaphor, as Christian Metz reminds us:

> But film is also different from the natural mirror in one important respect: although everything can reflect just as well in the former as in the latter, there is one thing that will never find its reflection in film, namely the spectator's body. From a certain point of view, then, the mirror suddenly becomes opaque. (1986 [1975], 45)

Videoconferences are not cinema. If they were, they would prove Metz wrong. For videoconferences *do* reflect the spectator's body. The body may be reduced to the face, but this is not the point. The point is: the mirror is no longer a metaphor. No longer are we confronted with an image *as if* with our own reflected self: The user's face *is* mirrored on screen, the self *is* reflected. But to what kind of self-reflexivity does this reflection of our own self open up? Self-reflexivity in cinema has mainly been about cinema as a medium. Film reflexivity foregrounds a film's own production, its authorship, intertextual influences, its reception, or its enunciation (Stam 1992 [1985], xii, xiv). Self-reflexivity in videoconferencing however is first and foremost about the self as reflected self, about the self as image—and then, perhaps, about the conference system and what it does with the self and to the self, namely both reflecting and othering the self. Othering the self in that it turns the self into an object both of one's own look and that of others. Like modernist reflexive cinema, videoconferencing is a way of 'distanciation' (in the sense of Bert Brecht). It distances the self from the self rather than from the medium, but like in cinema, this distancing opens the self up to critical reflection—both by the self and by others.

The screen as interface, on the other hand, works in opposite directions. Instead of *distancing* the self from the self, it leads to an *encounter* with the self. According to Laurie Johnson, the idea that a computer mediates in

communications between two or more interlocutors is the grand illusion of computer-mediated communication. Arguing from a phenomenological perspective, Johnson holds that what happens at the most basic level when engaging with the computer interface is not mediation on the way towards interlocution, but "the taking of a place for oneself—one self—seemingly beyond the reach of that which is ready, and seemingly, by extension, beyond one's own embodied self." Referencing Derrida, Johnson calls this phenomenon "an ultimately terrifying prospect of an uncanny encounter with oneself—the ghost in the machine—against which one seeks to protect oneself in advance by positing an other that is, … like every other, wholly other" (2009, 170). Rather than mediating in communications between self and others, then, videoconferencing throws the self back on the self. This is indeed an uncanny encounter, even more so because it is an unsolicited encounter imposed by the system, which leads the self to protect the self by imagi(ni)ng the self as other.

Hence, in videoconferencing, there are two opposite processes at work. There is a process of *distancing* the self in the reflection of the self as imaged other in the screen-mirror, and there is a process of *encountering* the self when the self is thrown back on the self while engaging with the interface. Both processes lead towards imaging the self on the screen as other, and both processes incite us to think about this self/other on screen. Thus, videoconferencing enhances self-reflexivity from two directions. If Dolly Parton once reminded her audience to "find out who you are and do it on purpose," videoconferencing somehow calls out for the same, if only that it is no longer necessary to remind us to do it on purpose. For video conference systems ensure that you cannot *not* do it on purpose.

Self-Reflexivity in Videoconferencing— Self-Monitoring 2.0

There have been different modes of self-reflexivity in cinema, popular media culture, art, and advertising. These different modes are based on different concepts of the audience. This in reverse suggests that self-reflexivity is a mode of address rather than a textual feature. Like in modern art, the critical and didactic modes of the 1950s and 1960s arthouse cinema imagined audiences as suffering from (media) incompetence and being in need of education and enlightenment. The ironic and parodic modes of self-reflexivity that the critical and didactic modes have given way to since 1980s postmodernism are festive modes rather than revelatory modes in that they address the audience as media-literate spectators and acknowledge and celebrate their media expertise more than disclosing the workings of the medium itself (Zimmermann forthcoming 2021).

Self-reflexivity in videoconferencing differs from the cinematic modes of self-reflexivity. As mentioned above, the self in cinematic self-reflexivity refers to the medium, whereas self-reflexivity in videoconferencing refers first of all to the self. Self-reflexivity in cinema is largely a mode of address of spectators. It speaks to others. Self-reflexivity in videoconferencing, on the other hand, speaks to the self in a mode of address that can be described as call for self-monitoring. But self-monitoring in a media environment like videoconferencing is self-monitoring taken to a second level. It is the critical reflection—and thus a self-reflexive process—of self-monitoring. The concept of self-monitoring was introduced by Mark Snyder in the 1970s. It focuses on how people monitor their self-presentation, expressive behavior, and non-verbal expression—in short, their performance—in interaction with others, knowing that others monitor their behavior as well. Self-monitoring is an established concept in sociology, so nothing new under the sun. But videoconferencing has given self-monitoring a new visibility. And, as a consequence, it has opened it up to critical self-reflection.

Videoconferencing may be primarily conceived and used as a communication tool that mediates between two or more interlocutors. But it is just as much a monitoring tool of the self. To communicate with others in video conferences is to consciously and constantly monitor the self as imaged self/other. It is self-monitoring 2.0. This is not a fundamentally new phenomenon in communication through media. Yet pandemic media, and videoconferencing in particular, have made this more evident than ever, and thus have opened it up for thinking about the reflection of the self on screen. This self-reflexivity has not been solicited by users, but imposed by video conference systems, and it therefore is no longer only about the self. It is more and more also about the media—and what it does to the self.

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CONVENIENCE

RISK

DIGITAL PLATFORMS

INTERMEDIATION

ZOOM

Pandemic Platforms: How Convenience Shapes the Inequality of Crisis

Joshua Neves and Marc Steinberg

This article examines how digital platforms responded to the COVID-19 crisis, showing how "pandemic platforms" exploit the present intersection of convenience and necessity. During the pandemic, platforms provide convenience-turned-necessity for stay-at-home consumers, even as platforms made use of stay-at-home orders to further exploit (and put at risk) their workforce. What we show are that convenience and risk are two sides of the same coin, shaping how platforms based on a logic of intermediation further entrench themselves during the pandemic. This requires media studies to turn its attention towards the logic of intermediation, organization, and pandemic mediations to account for the ways platforms exploit the current crisis to further entrench themselves via a combined appeal to convenience and risk.

Pandemic platforms can be understood through the convergence of two bubbles. The first is a speculative bubble that gave rise to the monopolistic platforms that have come to dominate digital life. This financial bubble begins with the dot.com boom and bust of the late 1990s, and resurged post-2009, when high risk and rapid return investments in tech companies transformed the industry by prioritizing speculative ventures over the long-term viability or utility of start-ups (Srnicek 2016). Indeed the term "start-up" captures the very logic of financial bubbles. The dot.com crash forced companies to find new avenues to profitability, shaping ad-driven data mining, on the one hand, and the e-commerce giants that dominate the platform economy today, on the other. The second bubble is based on personal health and public safety and encapsulates people's everyday activities during the COVID-19 crisis—albeit in sharply different ways. This idea of the "bubble" has quickly become a dominant metaphor for coronavirus-era co-isolation and co-habitation, such as health and travel bubbles, pandemic pods, and quaranteams. Canada's deputy health officer even framed one's personal space in those terms as he advised the nation to "stay in your bubble" ("'Stay in Your Bubble'" 2020). But while pandemic bubbles are popularly tied to health and security, it is also clear that they can be deeply hazardous—including screen fatigue and addiction, isolation and depression, and problems of access, attention, and ableism (Ginsburg, Mills, and Rapp 2020).

The speculative bubble produces the platform economy; the pandemic bubble remakes and intensifies aspects of it, with financial analysts like Royal Bank of Canada's John Stackhouse going so far as to call this the "platform pandemic" (2020). In what follows, we briefly examine how platformed life is transformed by the current crisis, focusing on the relationship between essential services and the experience of convenience (*consumers*), and how this notion of convenience generates risk and exposure for those who work to produce it (*laborers*).

There are two general models for understanding platforms. The first view, common in media studies, understands platforms as a base that supports social media and related activities: YouTube, Twitter, Twitch, Facebook, etc. The second model is as an economic intermediary between two people or entities to facilitate financial transactions (Eisenmann, Parker, and Alstyne 2006; Kokuryō 1994; Steinberg 2019). Since the 2000s, transactional platforms like the FAANG (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, Google) and BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent) giants, among many others, have become intermediaries for everyday exchange, displacing newspapers, ad agencies, film theatres, booksellers, department stores, cloud providers, taxis, hotels, and much else.

What platform intermediaries provide consumers is convenience. The convenience of not going to a video store; of not re-entering credit card information for every transaction; of calling a driver to your home with an app;

of internet-mediated transactions of all types. Tim Wu has described conve-
nience in the twenty-first century as "more efficient and easier ways of doing
personal tasks" and "perhaps the most powerful force shaping our individual
lives and our economies" (Wu 2018). Convenience is, of course, a historically
relative concept (Tierney 1993). Convenience is produced by a space-time com-
pression that gives rise to a feeling of ease linked historically to "increasing
pressures of time" and tied to the historical rise of the consumer society
(Shove 2003, 22). Convenience is also what Sianne Ngai would call an
"aesthetic category" (2012), one whose parameters change according to the
era in question. As mobilized here, convenience is more specifically tied to
the lure of immediacy offered by tech companies; the "prominent promise
of convenience, with its emphasis on immediacy and instant gratification"
(Appadurai and Alexander 2020, 21) that Appardurai and Alexander find at the
heart of the appeal of Silicon Valley companies and their platforms. Indeed,
convenience is crucial to how platforms disrupt existing industries and carve
out new revenue streams for big tech. But amid critiques of data extraction
and surveillance capitalism (Andrejevic 2009; Zuboff 2019), less attention has
been given to how convenience structures the consumption or production
sides of the platform economy—an issue that is exacerbated by the COVID
crisis.
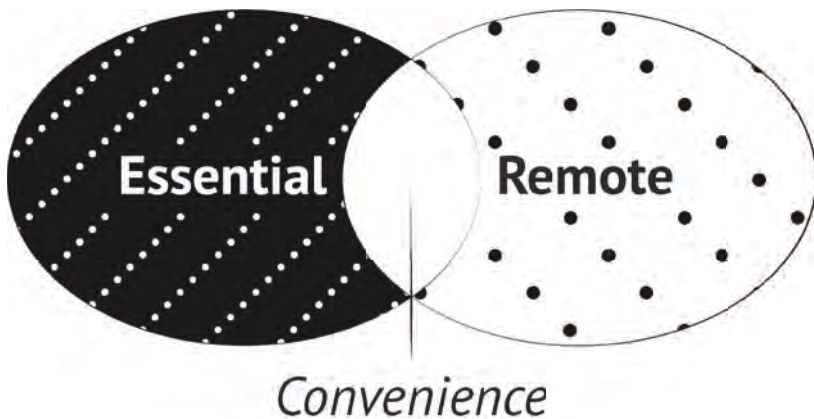
[Figure 1] Pandemic platforms make convenience essential (Source: Neves and Steinberg
2020, image design by Teagan Lance)

The COVID pandemic transforms our relationship to platforms and to con-
venience by expanding and normalizing the protective bubble (distancing,
sheltering, quarantine, etc.). This bubble brings with it two sets of distinctions
that reorder our everyday activities:

   – Essential vs. non-essential (workers, tasks, items)
   – Remote vs. in-person (work, services, interactions).

In this context, activities that are both *remote* and *essential* take the place of most in-person activities, like going to work or to the grocery store, which are further shifted onto platforms (fig. 1). This is to observe an important trans-formation: what was merely convenient just a few months ago has become infrastructural to everyday life for many people. Put differently, this intersec-tion *recasts convenience as an essential or necessary service*. The impact of this shift for digital platforms is crucial and divisive. For the quarantined and the vulnerable, pandemic platforms emerged as basic services providing access and delivery of food, medicine, household items, TV and movies (streaming), and contact with loved ones, students, and coworkers (e.g. Zoom). In an era of contagion, remoteness and the absence of human touch is at a premium, and many platform intermediaries are well positioned to provide essential services at a distance. Amazon, as one person close to the company puts it, is presenting itself as the new Red Cross (Lee and Nilsson 2020).
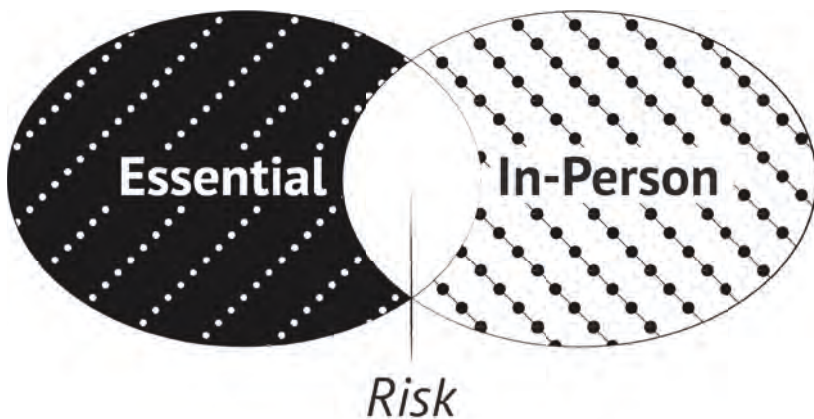
[Figure 2] Essential and in-person platforms produce risk and exposure (Source: Neves and Steinberg 2020, image design by Teagan Lance)

But the conflation of the *essential* and the *convenient* also obscures much about pandemic platforms. Not only does this pervasive discourse under-stand platforms from the perspective of distancing and privileged con-sumers—those who use contactless services to order, receive, and rate—but it diminishes how the production of convenience itself generates inequality and vulnerability. There are, of course, important reasons to ensure essential services and minimize human contact. This is not in dispute. What concerns us here is how pandemic platforms exploit essential and in-person labor (see fig. 2) in ways that intensify risk and exposure (e.g. for grocery clerks, nurses, warehouse and delivery workers) and contribute to the consolidation of the platform industry. A recent headline captures the situation: "The Economy is Reeling. The Tech Giants Spy Opportunity" (Isaac 2020). Instead we need to re-ask an old question: who produces convenience and who consumes it,

and under what conditions? In this way, the current crisis both makes visible already-existing precarity—Amazon warehouses, the gig economy, platform-mediated contract workers (Chen and Sun 2020; Scholz 2017)—and intensifies gigification and self-responsibility by using the crisis to make this work essential. It also presents new opportunities for political dissent and worker organization, not least of which were strikes by Amazon and Instacart workers (Lerman and Tiku 2020)**.**

As platformed convenience becomes the new normal amidst an ethical requirement to flatten the curve and ensure access to basics, a few companies have emerged as the lead providers of essential-remote services. From the perspective of pandemic media, key platforms like Amazon, Microsoft, Netflix, WhatsApp, and Zoom play an outsized role in shaping everyday life (in North America and beyond). Zoom, in particular, is a crucial example of what we are calling pandemic platforms. In the span of a few months, it has shifted from a niche subscription service to a basic infrastructure used for work, happy hours, and even funerals. In December 2019, Zoom had a user base of 10 million. By April 2020, Zoom claims it has "300 million daily meeting participants" (Warren 2020). It has gone from a minor software to become a proprietary eponym and a verb: let's Zoom.

Zoom (like Slack, Teams, and others) brings renewed attention to teleworking, now expanded well beyond tech jobs and privileged digital nomads, as an everyday necessity (Gregg 2013). This includes, in many areas, a crucial role for live and asynchronous video for a wide range of jobs—from telemedicine to teaching. In terms of higher education, and the work of media studies in particular, it's a moment when the object of study also becomes an infrastructural condition. This is also to pressure the conceptual distinction, suggested above, separating consumers and producers in the platform economy. For all its analytic utility (Qiu, Gregg, and Crawford 2014), this separation begs the question of how to parse the range of activities carried out on platforms like Zoom: academics produce course content, use the platform to attend meetings and conferences, hold office hours, conduct research (as in the current fascination with remote ethnography), and even form personal relationships. Students by the same token both *watch* Zoom and also regularly generate their own content and uses.

[Figure 3] The "I Yield My Time" meme speaks to the rapid significance of Zoom and the ways that media platforms penetrate all aspects of life during the COVID crisis. (Source: Screengrab from YouTube video: https://www.gq.com/story/lapd-i-yield-my-time-guy)

The rise of platforms like Zoom also points to the further outsourcing of public services to consumer platforms. On the one hand, even commercial platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp have allowed for local communities to organize groceries for the elderly, among other community projects. On the other hand, the current crisis has enabled multinational corporations to extend their influence across traditional social sectors, including health care (Apple and Google's contact tracing apps), education (Zoom), postal delivery (Amazon), news and public information (Facebook Live), and much else besides. Even public hearings take place on private platforms, exemplified perhaps by the LA Police Department's virtual community meeting gone viral video (fig. 3). These interventions, which intensify changes already underway, demand that we turn our attention to how the platform economy seeks to reorder society. We must not only guard against the Uberization of social care and neighborhood life, but also refuse to let these industries set the terms for how we inhabit and respond to the current crisis.

This brief consideration of pandemic platforms has two general takeaways for COVID-era media critique. The first is that media studies has much to gain by thinking across platforms and not just those that deliver media content (Netflix, YouTube, Facebook). Instead, platforms' unique mode of *intermediation* cuts across multiple sectors—from online ordering to video streaming to health monitoring. This includes, as we have suggested here, the ways that convenience and risk are conflated by the logistical operations of the current crisis. Second, beyond the question of production and consumption that we emphasize above, platform mediation also turns our attention to the centrality of *distribution* and *logistics* (Cowen 2014; Lovink and Rossiter 2018). In

this context, media/platforms, understood as "civilizational ordering devices," play a critical role in administering our experience and understanding of crisis (Peters 2015, 5).

The consequences of intensifying platformed convenience (as both remote and essential) for our everyday habits and social operations will endure long after the coronavirus goes the way of the Spanish flu or becomes a new normal. More than ever we need critical media perspectives that examine how crises—of health, but also economic, political, racial, etc.—shape the platformed convenience that unevenly distributes basic services and risk media society (Neves 2020). This includes, as is forcefully traced in the *Pirate Care* syllabus, the growing gap between care and negligence at the heart of the current crisis (Fragnito et. al. 2020). Here we rely on both quotidian and concrete understandings of *crisis*—especially the experiences and mediations of everyday life during the coronavirus pandemic—as well as the fact that *critique* itself derives from the Greek *krisis.* As Wendy Brown puts it, "the project of critique is to set the times right again by discerning and repairing a tear in justice through practices that are themselves exemplary of the justice that has been rent" (Brown 2005, 6). Addressing crisis is central to the critical project itself, and hence to deepen critique from within platform studies also requires that we attend to how platforms seize moments of crisis to reconfigure the social. This involves connecting the political sense of crisis to its more recent technological consolidation. To rework Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's critique of networked technologies, in *Updating to Remain the Same*, that "habit + crisis = update" (Chun 2016), we might say that: platforms + crisis = inequality. That is, pandemic platforms produce convenience for some, hazard for others, and financial consolidation for elites. In many regards this is a familiar story of exploitation and crisis. What is perhaps new about this mode of organization and extraction is the role of media platforms in redistributing convenience and necessity. Platform monopolies will just be waiting for the next crisis-bubble to work this equation again.

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ANIMATION

MIRGRANT WORKERS

INDIA

SOCIAL MEDIA

GLOBAL SOUTH

An Animated Tale of Two Pandemics

Juan Llamas-Rodriguez

A fifty-second animated video uploaded to Instagram on May 21 by Indian artist Debjyoti Saha poignantly illustrates the contrast between how internal migrant workers and upper-middle-class Indians experienced the country's pandemic lockdown. The video's circulation on social media exposed the connections between these intra-national disparities and those of other nations around the world. In its transnational circulation, the video offers a glimpse into how the pandemic has further expanded the rift between global cosmopolitan elites and the millions that inhabit the Global South.

An oft-repeated refrain in the early weeks of the global COVID-19 pandemic was that "we are all in this together." The assumption behind this phrase was that, because a virus does not socially discriminate, the global pandemic represented an event that affected all groups of people equally. The actual spread of the virus soon belied this ideology once reported rates of infection and death tolls were shown to predominantly affected poor racial minorities. Absent adequate access to healthcare and unable to stay at home for fear of

losing their sole sources of income, disenfranchised groups disproportionately suffered the brunt of infection and death. As the months went on, the pandemic revealed an uneven distribution of harm, particularly in countries where leaders severely failed to respond promptly and decisively to protect public health.

This uneven distribution of harm has been starkly evident in the case of India. On March 24, prime minister Narendra Modi announced a nationwide lockdown starting at midnight. The rushed announcement and short time frame left millions of "internal migrants" (daily wage laborers from India's rural towns working in urban informal sectors) essentially jobless with four hours' notice to get back home. Some made it into packed trains heading back to their home states, but the rest of these estimated 139 million people embarked on the homeward journey by whatever means they could (Bhowmick 2020). As India's states closed their internal borders to mitigate the virus spread, some migrants were trapped in government-run shelters. Most continued to walk for miles on empty highways with little money or food for weeks as the summer heat built (N. Roy 2020). While those in the cities followed shelter-in-place orders from the comfort of their home, hundreds of internal migrants have died not because of the virus but due to starvation, exhaustion, travel accidents, lack or denial of medical care, suicides, and police brutality.[1]

A 50-second animated video by Mumbai-based animator Debjyoti Saha succinctly illustrates these disparities. Posted on Saha's Instagram profile on May 21, the animation shows two side-by-side narratives of an upper-middle-class man and a poor migrant man dealing with the restrictions instituted by the lockdown (fig. 1). While the former finds comfort in all sorts of recreational activities within his home, the latter suffers hunger, discrimination, and unbearable heat in his attempt to travel back to his village. Within days of its publication, the video struck a chord with users, gaining almost 2.5 million views on Instagram and achieving worldwide circulation.

1   The "Non-virus Deaths" project spearheaded by Aman, Kanika Sharma, Krushna, and Thejesh GN has been tracking data about these other deaths related to the pandemic: https://thejeshgn.com/projects/covid19-india/non-virus-deaths/.

[Figure 1] Debjyoti Saha's video uses ironic contrast to emphasize the class disparities shaping experiences of lockdown during the pandemic. (Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CAcKQ41A-s7/)

The video's most powerful rhetorical strategy is the use of ironic contrast by showing excerpts of what seem like two similar activities only to reveal that their distinct contexts make a world of difference: sport sneakers walking on a treadmill versus bare feet walking on the pavement; a cool breeze from air conditioning versus the wind under a tree on the side of the road. Saha alternates between horizontal and vertical split-frames, with the middle-class man in the left or top half and the migrant man in the right or bottom half, training the viewer to first watch the example of economic privilege then confront the sight of disenfranchisement. Water from a shower head contrasts with the greenish liquid coming from a disinfectant hose, an allusion to that time when authorities in the city of Bareilly "sanitized" migrant workers by spraying a bleach solution on their unprotected skin and eyes (fig. 2). The video ends with another allusion to a recent tragic event in India: the death of sixteen exhausted migrants who fell asleep on the train tracks and were

killed by an oncoming train in Aurangabad (MN 2020). Breaking the previously established convention by positioning the migrant worker on the top half, this frame pointedly signals us to rethink how we have been viewing the relationship between the two halves thus far.
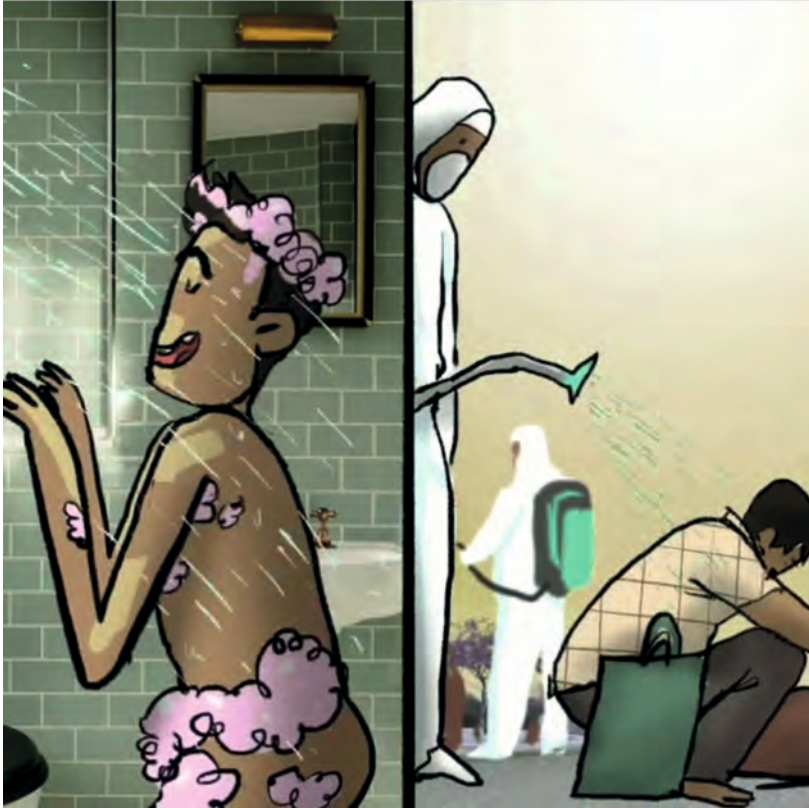
[Figure 2] Debjyoti Saha's video uses ironic contrast to emphasize the class disparities shaping experiences of lockdown during the pandemic. (Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CAcKQ41A-s7/)

Debjyoti Saha's simple 2-D animation and collage aesthetics accentuate the video's social critique. Settings and objects are specific enough to denote class differences yet generic enough to implicate a broad public. In a short montage contrasting the food options of the two men, the background on the poor man's side is a collage of Indian newspapers, suggesting not only the man's lack of plates to eat on but also the news' complicity in ignoring the plight of people like him. Although a thick black line always divides the stories, we hear the diegetic sound effects from both sides at once. The style visually separates the two men's lived realities while aurally reminding us of their co-temporality. Its ominous soundtrack (an excerpt from the score for *Dunkirk*) accentuates

the tragedy at the intersection of its twin stories: ignoring the situation of the poor man is what allows the rich man to enjoy his quarantined time unbothered. These are not just contrasting stories; they are relational and interdependent. At the end, when the train horn blares and a light approaches the poor migrant man, presumably about to run him over, the rich man sleeps soundly (fig. 3).

[Figure 3] Debjyoti Saha's video uses ironic contrast to emphasize the class disparities shaping experiences of lockdown during the pandemic. (Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/ CAcKQ41A-s7/)

This animated tale of two vastly different experiences of the pandemic was the most popular entry in Saha's *Korona* video series about long-standing tensions and rifts in Indian society laid bare by the pandemic. Saha modifies corona as "Korona" to signal "don't," the meaning of the word in Bengali. "It is a wordplay on all the things people shouldn't be doing during this coronavirus pandemic," he admits. An early video in the series features a doctor trying to explain the lack of resources to deal with the rising virus infections but being overwhelmed by banging pots and pans. Another video features a woman at

a pharmacy racially profiling an Asian man, an African man, and an Arab man by associating them with different viruses. Saha published the videos on his Instagram page, where they regularly logged anywhere between 50,000 and 100,000 views each. In an interview with the *Hindustan Times*, the animator explained that "Public memory is short and news fades away, but I hope the message [of these videos] stays" (quoted in Rao 2020).

In particular, the message of the "two tales" video soon found resonance around the world. While the black line dividing the two narratives signals social differences within India, the popularity and widespread circulation of the video illustrate the similarities between India's disparities and those around the world. Across Latin America, the video acquired notoriety following its publication on the social media accounts for *AJ+ en Español* with the provocative tag "¿Vivimos todos la misma pandemia?" (Do we all live the same pandemic?) Indeed, I first came across the video when Mexican journalist Gabriela Warkentin tweeted the *AJ+* post with the caption: "Es la India, pero podría ser México y tantos lugares más." (It's India, but it could be Mexico and many other places.) Akin to the millions of internal migrants in India, countries in Latin America rely heavily on informal markets, and leaders in countries like Mexico and Brazil were unable or unwilling to proactively support poor communities affected by the pandemic (Rivers 2020). By summer 2020, the United Nations Development Programme warned that the unfettered rise in COVID-19 cases, growing food insecurity, and the coming economic recession in most countries in the region would exacerbate already stark inequalities (Luiselli 2020; Santos 2020).

Through its online circulation, the video manages to transform the referent for "we" in the "we are in this together" refrain. It addresses a global cosmopolitan audience, understood as a transnational network of urban elites (Cheah 2006) that would have the time, resources, and labor stability to be watching the video on their online feeds. While the incidents alluded to in the poor man's narrative invoke specific events in India, the references in the rich man's story include recent social media fads such as Dalgona coffee, Zoom parties, and the "Laxed (Siren Beat)" dance on TikTok. Despite being spread across different countries, the cosmopolitan audience, in some ways, lives the pandemic together through this shared media online. Yet the video explicitly divides this public from the global marginalized. That other public, represented by the poor man, has no access to these shared media. Instead, they walk every day; brave the heat, exhaustion, and the virus; and plunge further into poverty. Excluded from the global "we," this other public is instead the global "they."

"They" belong to what scholars often refer to as the deterritorialized geography and subaltern relational position of the Global South. Rather than categorizing nation-states as haves and have-nots, the concept of the Global South illuminates how the uneven transnational spread of racial capitalism

upholds rich elites in so-called poor countries and maintains subjugated peoples within the borders of so-called wealthy countries (Prashad 2013). It's India, but it could be Mexico and many other places. The Global South exists in relation to the cosmopolitan elites that benefit from its exploitation. In many nations in Latin America, for instance, wealthy citizens returning from Europe trips first introduced the COVID-19 virus but then poorer citizens who kept working in formal and informal sectors suffered its worst effects (Stott and Schipani 2020). Most of the euphemistically titled "essential workers" and "pandemic heroes" are in fact working-class and migrant people bearing the risk of infection and death to support daily (and often leisure) services for everyone else (Hammonds, Kerrissey, and Tomaskovic-Devey 2020). In this regard, the Saha video not only illustrates an intra-national division but also exposes the networks of complicity perpetuated by cosmopolitan audiences around the world.

In April, Arundhati Roy examined the Indian response to the pandemic and argued that "pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different" (2020). Imagining the world anew, however, will require admitting there are at least *two worlds* suffering through the pandemic and contending with the rift between the two—a rift the pandemic only further exacerbates.

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FILM

RESILIENCY

VULNERABILITIES

FESTIVAL ECOSYSTEM

ECONOMIC SHOCK

Vulnerabilities and Resiliency in the Festival Ecosystem: Notes on Approaching Film Festivals in Pandemic Times

Marijke de Valck

Film festivals are hit particularly hard in pandemic times. Safety regulations restrict festivals in core activities and organizations suffer from the ensuing economic shock. The global health crisis interferes in the logics of the global art film economy, which is paced by an annual festival and award season rhythm. The impact of COVID-19 on film festivals, however, cannot be generalized. These notes distinguish film festivals on a continuum between film-driven and festival-driven events, remind scholars to consider the diverging vulnerabilities in the film festival eco-system, and end with a call to combine a tradition in case-study-based scholarship with large-scale data projects to face the challenge of theorizing transitions in the film festival ecosystem.

On April 9, 2020 I took a seat behind the computer to attend the Zoom event "Screen Talks: moving film festivals online during Covid-19."[1] The inaugural event of the online Screen Talks program discussed opportunities and challenges for film festivals during COVID-19. While *Screen* editor Matt Mueller engaged three guests[2] in conversation, attendees used the chat to flag presence and send amiable greetings to the group. It was this chat space and the sense of community evoked through a spontaneous presence check that added urgency and connectivity to the online event. It took well over 10 minutes before everybody who felt compelled had been able to express presence.

The conversation that evolved over one hour touched upon several pressing issues in the festival world: choosing between moving online, postponement, and cancellation, the status of world premieres, rights online, geo-blocking, IT solutions, the problem of revenue loss, what the big festivals would do and how this would impact the lifecycle of films and the award season. In addition, anticipated long-term effects were mentioned. One hoped festivals would reap the benefits of their forced digital adventures and expected they would continue working with online programs, in particular because of the advantages of increased access and diversification of audiences. At the same time the sentiment that the value of the theatrical experience would not be lost—and may even emerge stronger from this crisis—found resonance as well. Despite celebration of the connectivity gained, the longing for "real" contact persisted.

The Zoom event constituted an early public discussion on the future of film festivals in pandemic times. It offered a useful practical inventory of the immediate concerns of professionals working for festivals and a preview of debates that will need to be conducted more rigorously in the months and years to come. Despite local differences and a high level of uncertainty about future developments, it is safe to say the festival ecosystem is severely challenged by the enfolding crisis, and that this, in its turn, in time, will require film scholars to reassess the tools and frames they use to make sense of world cinemas and contemporary media industries in which film festivals traditionally take on nodal roles (Andrew 2010; Chaudhuri 2005; de Valck 2006; White 2015). Knowledge of what happens in the professional field will be indispensable for the task ahead of us, and close monitoring of developments, I contend, will have to precede new theorizing. These notes on approaching festivals in pandemic times are a reminder to distinguish amongst the multitude

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1   The video stream of the talk was recorded and can be watched here: https://www.screendaily.com/news/screen-talk-the-challenges-and-opportunities-for-film-festivals-during-covid-19/5148961.article.
2   CPH:DOX director Tine Fischer, BFI director of festivals Tricia Tuttle, and executive director and director of programming at Miami Film Festival Jaie Laplante.

of festival events when assessing vulnerabilities and resiliency within the film festival ecosystem before, during, and after COVID-19.

Film and Festival

Of the two key components of film festivals—the films and the festival—it is the festival form that appeared most vulnerable in pandemic times. Confronted with safety regulations or lockdowns many film festivals were quick to respond by making (selections) of their programs available through digital platforms (de Valck and Damiens 2020).[3] Having adapted to digital delivery standards in the early 2010s, technical options for moving films online were readily available and relatively easy to achieve by festivals partnering with platform providers. While films migrated online quite smoothly, creative attempts to emulate the festival experience online proved to be more complicated. Virtual talks, Q&As, cocktail parties, and markets differ from their physical counterparts in atmosphere and affordances. Once the initial excitement of online experimentation had waned off and screen time fatigue set in, virtual festivals are, simply put, less festive and therefore less effective in achieving some of their purposes.

The symbiotic relation between films and festival that is forged at film festival events is worth unpacking a bit further, because ties are far from uniform across events. Some festivals serve the films. At others, the films serve the festival. Cannes can serve as emblematic case at one side of the spectrum. On the opposite side we find a myriad of audience events (Peranson 2008). I will take mountain film festivals, an arbitrary choice of genre, as my example here. Cannes is famous as well as notorious for its "hoopla"—the hype and buzz, glitz and glamour, the indulgence and opulent pleasures, the scandals, sun, and sex (Sklar 1996; Bart 1997; Pascal 1997; Schwartz 2007; Jungen 2014). It is this affective and experiential decoration of the event that lubricates the business of international film industries and drives circulation of prime product globally. Festival serves film.[4] Mountain film festivals are events where adventure sports enthusiasts gather to watch films. The social and communal aspects of the festival are crucial to their popularity, and many festival visitors have prior affiliations through climbing clubs or outdoor gear stores (Frohlick 2005, 177). Their engagement with the narratives and imaginaries of the films

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3   See the special dossier Film Festivals and COVID-19 in NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies for reviews of various case studies (de Valck, Damiens 2020).

4   Please note that the use of the word 'film' in this context is not elaborated upon and deployed to contrast with the word 'festival.' More precise would be to write that the festival form facilitates film business or supports the functioning of a global film economy. Tensions between festivals' commitments to serve the interest of film as an industry versus film as art form, however, have always existed and are a recurrent point of discussion and critique, in which the term 'film' (as art) is typically contrasted with 'business' (of film).

constitutes a welcome occasion to form and perform identities that hold social significance in the peer group. The films screened at mountain film festivals, in other words, are vehicles for mountaineering communities to investigate, articulate, and negotiate shared discourses. Films are conducive to the purpose of the festival. While many film festivals ought to be placed somewhere on the continuum between these two extreme poles, a pertinent question to ask is whether the impact of COVID-19 is felt differently on either side?

Impact of COVID-19

It is evident that festivals are hit particularly hard in pandemic times. In anticipation of a vaccine for COVID-19 safety regulations are required to prevent spread of the virus, and as long as social distancing is the norm film festivals are restricted in core activities. Antonyms for festival–described as "social gathering or enjoyable activity to celebrate something"–are solitude, isolation, and lack of company.[5] At a first glance, the festival-driven events, like the mountain film festivals mentioned above, therefore appear to be heavily affected by the COVID-19 containment measures, precisely because the collective festival experience, the social gathering, constitutes such an essential part of their mission. The Dutch Mountain Film Festival (DMFF) for example states:

> The film festival is the moment when memories become shared. It communicates and accounts for these, and excites and entertains its audience. The film festival provides new insights, education and inspiration. The festival is the platform for meeting film producers, adventurers, as well as old mountain comrades, in the ambience of a mountain refuge. It is like a mountain expedition, where new vistas open out after every corner.[6]

By promoting the festival as meeting place and memory site (Nora 1986; see de Valck 2006, 138) DMFF emphasizes the significance of onsite festival encounters for its event. Such a firm commitment to physical encounters was also apparent in the way COVID-19 was handled by the principal player in the field. The Canadian BANFF Mountain Film Festival, which supplies films to the local hosts of the BANFF Mountain Film Festival World Tour, pointedly did *not* chose to move the tour online, but initially opted for postponing events in Europe. Only when the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths continued to increase, BANFF decided to cancel all events for the remaining

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5   For a full list of antonyms go to https://www.wordhippo.com/what-is/the-opposite-of/festival.html.
6   Website Dutch Mountain Film Festival. Accessed June 15, 2020. https://www.dmff.eu/en/about-dmff/vision-and-mission/.

part of the 2020 tour. Particularly telling is the way compensation was han-dled. Prospective festival visitors who had purchased tickets for the tour were addressed as "dear BANFF fans" and offered two alternatives; either a new streaming platform, where festival tickets could be exchanged for streaming vouchers or the option to receive a voucher for the World Tour 2021.[7] Looking at communication and platform interface it is striking how clearly the streaming platform is distinguished from the festival. Where other festivals attempt to emulate their events in virtual forms, the BANFF World Tour did not eventify the new platform, but instead set it apart from the festival proper. They seem to have sensed that when the purpose of a film festival surpasses the screening of films, the void that is left by cancellation of physical events cannot be filled with online offerings exclusively.

On the film-driven side of events the cards are shuffled differently. His-torically, film festivals are a product of the analogue age, where they con-stituted politically endorsed solutions to the growing power of globally operating film oligopolies (de Valck 2006). Film festivals were strategically positioned outside existing distribution and exhibition markets to create visibility for national cinemas and support their circulation. As the number of film festivals worldwide increased the global network that was formed displayed strict hierarchical stratification (Loist 2016), with a small number of top festivals taking up nodal positions in a global art film economy–combining multiple functions as cultural gatekeepers, market places, media events–and the rest assuming retail functions as aggregators of prime films launched at the wholesale events (Bachmann 2000) and/or as outlet for a variety of niche products, like mountain films.

In the contemporary digital age, however, the original access problem has lost part of its urgency. Possibilities to distribute media content and aggregate films have exponentially increased (Iordanova and Cunningham 2012; Tryon 2013; Smits 2019), and festivals have seen platform-based companies enter the market and take on roles as aggregators and producers of content formerly typified as festival product (Shattuc 2019; Smits and Nikdel 2019). As a result of the advanced digitized state of the film and media industries—in which digital platforms (e.g. Withoutabox, Vimeo, YouTube) also facilitate processes of fes-tival submission, review, and sales—festival programs *could* be moved online relatively easily from a technological point of view. Decisions to do so, or rather opt for postponing or cancelation, were not only a matter of crisis man-agement, but involved careful consideration of the strategic interests of the various stakeholders involved, and awareness of possible long-term repercus-sions on dynamics and power relations in the media industries at large. On the film-driven side of festivals, the global health crisis interferes most clearly in the logics of the global art film economy, which is paced by an

7   See https://banff-tour.de/en/veranstaltungsinformationen.

annual festival and award season rhythm. In this economy, the top festivals exert crucial gatekeeping functions through eventified processes of symbolic consecration (Elsaesser 2005; English 2008; de Valck 2016). A look at Cannes's handling of the 2020 edition sheds light on the interests involved for a festival at the helm of the system. The Festival de Cannes 2020 was initially postponed from May to June, and when the pandemic was not brought under control, a split between the two core activities was made. The Marché du Cinema, the world's premier film market, was moved online and took place from June 22-26. Registration was available from 95 Euros up (early bird fee), including one-year access to Cinando,[8] the online database of film projects and professional networking and streaming service of the Marché du Film. This streaming service was used to hold market screenings during the online edition of the Cannes film market. The official competitions and out-of-competition programs, on the other hand, were not moved online. Instead, on June 3, the festival presented an official 2020 selection list that included 56 titles with the Cannes hallmark of approval.[9] The list included feature films and shorts as well as classics, all to be released in cinemas carrying the Cannes logo. Choosing distinct strategies for market and festival appears riveted on the hope, prevalent in the festival's offices in Cannes and Paris, that 2020 will remain an anomaly year, after which everybody will go back to business as usual. Hosting the market in virtual forms ensured continuation of pipeline business for future years, while *not* hosting a virtual version of the competition programs protects the festival-model in which cultural legitimization and prestige are traditionally linked to theatrical exhibition as a premier release window. The allegiance to theaters is buttered thickly by Thierry Frémaux in his official statement about the selection:

> To be adamant in our decision to deliver an Official Selection is ultimately, for the Festival, the best way to help cinema, as well as focus on the films that will be released in theaters in the coming months. The reopening of cinemas, after months of closure, is a crucial issue. The Cannes Film Festival intends to accompany these films and support their careers in France and abroad, as well as confirm the importance of theaters as in what makes the value of the Seventh Art. We know that many festivals are taking the same position.

The statement closes with an incisive appeal on audiences, "Viva il cinema! See you in the movie theatres."[10]

8   Available at www.cinando.com.
9   See Festival de Cannes, "Announcement of the 2020 Official Selection," accessed June 3, 2020, video, 43:20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbcvBAXYZCQ.
10   See Website Festival de Cannes, "About the Official 2020 Selection," accessed June 15, 2020, http://www.cannes2020.festival-cannes.com/%C3%A0-propos?lang=en.

While many festivals did explore digital routes to connect to audiences, the hesitance and reserve of industry players, including the major festivals themselves, to embrace platform aggregation in lieu of festival curation is indicative of the anxiety over tech companies' growing power in the field (see Srnicek 2016; van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2018).

Vulnerabilities and Resiliency in the Film Festival Ecosystem

Approaching film festivals from a scholarly perspective in pandemic times ought to start by taking note of the individual situation of events. Use of stakeholder theory is common to map various interests involved (Rhyne 2009; Ooi and Pedersen 2010) and elucidate the position and function of festivals in their local, regional, and international contexts. Generalizations about the impact of COVID-19 on festivals are, at the time of writing this—a couple of months into the pandemic—premature, albeit perhaps one: In the short-term, the festivals' biggest problem is financial. How can film festival organizations survive COVID-19 when there are limited ways to generate alternative income? Monetization of online content is tricky, while straight-out cancellation of events results in sure loss of revenues and fees, loss of sponsoring, and a drop of interest in merchandise. The COVID-19 economic shock will come down hard on film festivals.[11] Uncertainty about extended lockdowns, second waves, and possible implementation of safety regulations for several years to come leads to less funding options. The recession caused by the pandemic, moreover, will force a range of companies to cut sponsor budgets, so new fundraising needs to be taken on while rising unemployment figures impact audience demand. Few organizations have sufficient reserves to withstand the economic shock without support and are challenged in achieving a healthy funding mix.
It is the economic crisis rather than the pandemic then that exposes key vulnerabilities in the film festival ecosystem. In Europe, where governmental support programs and relief funds for the cultural sector are made available, two things are apparent: capital reserved for arts and culture is relatively modest, and support prioritizes established cultural institutions. Typically, these include the larger film festivals that already receive structural subsidies and have an industry function to sustain.[12] In other words, it is the film-driven

11   See, for example, staff cuts at North American festivals: South by Southwest laid off 50 employees (33%). Variety, March 9 2020, https://variety.com/2020/music/news/sxsw-lays-off-one-third-of-employees-in-heartbreaking-step-1203528553/; Toronto International Film Festival announced to lay off 31 full-time staffers (17%) CBS News, June 23, 2020, https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/tiff-layoffs-1.5623910; and the Sundance Institute cut 24 positions (13%). Indiwire, July 1, 2020, https://www.indiewire.com/2020/07/sundance-layoffs-cut-staff-budgets-labs-1234570905/.
12   In a post COVID-19 world, greening of international film festivals with their heavy trafficking of guests and visitors, could emerge high on the agenda, and pose the

side of the earlier sketched continuum of film festivals that receives support. Will the rest bounce back as well, or will COVID-19 constitute the turning point after an age of festivalisation? It is too early to tell. What we can say is that moving towards the festival pole this question becomes more and more intertwined with the resiliency and resources of festivals' support communities. The proliferation of film festivals has been described and analyzed by scholars positioning themselves as part of a new subfield of film festival studies (see de Valck and Loist 2009; de Valck and Loist 2013; Iordanova 2013).[13] In the context of COVID-19 I want to draw special attention to the conceptual frames that elucidate the appeal of festivals *as physical events*. Following Janet Harbord (2009) and Odile Goerg (1999), Lindiwe Dovey, for example, emphasizes festivals' liveness in her reading of the popularity of festivals. She argues: "It is the participants at film festivals who bring the possibility of the contingent with them, and with this human contingency and face-to-face collectivity also comes the possibility of disruption and, thus, perhaps some kind of change to the status quo" (Dovey 2015, 15). Ethnographic studies of festival audiences too, emphasize the attraction of being there, live; the physical pleasure of watching films together and favored experience of "coming closer" to industry professionals (Dickson 2015; Xu and Reijnders 2018). Understandings of festival encounters have been further refined by including attention to the role of friendships and collaborations (Damiens 2020). When we take a cue from these scholars and concentrate our perspective on the possibilities generated at festivals through their enabling of social contact and affective labor we may get a good sense of what type of resources can be tapped into, in addition to the much needed economic support to face the challenges posed by COVID-19. Friends and funding, that is in short what film festivals need more than ever in pandemic times. In what proportions heavily depends on each festival's individual situation and needs, which is to be observed on a case by case basis.

Film festival studies has a strong tradition in case-study-based research and is well equipped to take on the task of monitoring what happens at individual film festivals. Assessing how the film festival ecosystem as a whole may be impacted by COVID-19, however, requires a new set of tools. A few scholars have begun the work of collecting larger sets of data to map film festival landscapes regionally and historically (e.g. van Vliet 2018; Peirano 2020; Vallejo 2020) and study film circulation through festivals (Loist and Samoilova 2019). It is such work that will enable the tracking and tracing of mutations in regional contexts and confirm or contradict expectations about diverging vulnerabilities. Anno 2020 the film festival ecosystem is dotted

challenge of lowering festivals' footprint while sustaining their crucial networking function.

13   Updates on the 2009 and 2013 annotated bibliographies of film festival research are provided at www.filmfestivalresearch.org.

with small festival organizations that rely on volunteer labor, community encouragement, eclectic support networks, and creative fundraising. Typically, these are festival-driven events. I would not be surprised if, considering their strong dependence on human capital, the effect of COVID-19 on such events is temporary. The longing for "real" contact will not disappear as the first Screen Talks alluded to and people are likely to reassume their affective investments in cultural encounters when opportunities arise. It is also clear that developments on the opposite side of the continuum will be couched in a power play of economic, geopolitical, and cultural interests. It is the space in between—the mid-sized festivals that have professionalized their organizations but are devoid of solid financing and depend on incidental sponsoring and funds—that may be most at risk; they need a lot of friends to make up for a lack of funds. For the moment, this remains speculation. By combining the wealth of case-study based contextual knowledge with large-scale projects that map and analyze the long-term impact of COVID-19 our film festival landscapes, film festival scholars will have a solid base to rethink festivalization in pandemic times.

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THEME PARKS

FANDOM

THEMED ATTRACTIONS

MEDIA TOURISM

Theme Parks in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Rebecca Williams

This piece explores the impact of the coronavirus in 2020 on theme park spaces and their fans. It outlines the ways that fans maintained connections to favorite physical sites, even when they were unable to visit these places. It also considers the debates surrounding the reopening of themed spaces, and how these mapped onto pre-existing political allegiances and highlighted divisions surrounding civil liberties and the concept of freedom.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began to sweep across the world, one of the first industries to be affected was the tourism sector. As museums, galleries, and leisure sites began to close, the impact on one specific form of tourist site—the theme park—became clearer. From national theme parks such as Denmark's famous Tivoli Gardens, Hong Kong's Ocean Park, and Efteling in the Netherlands through to the international giants of Disney and Universal, gates to theme park spaces were shuttered around the globe. Indeed, for the first time in history, there was a period when every one of the six Disney theme parks in the world (in California, Florida, Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Shanghai) were closed. Whilst these sites have slowly begun to reopen (Disney's Shanghai Disneyland reopened in May 2020, with its France, Florida, and Japan parks following in July 2020), the temporary closure of themed spaces

that have a dedicated fan base and frequent visitors offers a unique chance to consider how connections to such spaces were continued during the lockdowns of the coronavirus pandemic.

Broader "media or participatory fandom refers to loosely interlinked interpretive communities, mainly comprising women and spanning a wide range of demographics in terms of age, sexuality, economic status, and national, cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds, formed around various popular cultural texts" (Pande 2019, 2). Such fans typically form communities with one another, often through online platforms, and produce "fan works including fan fiction, fan art, meta commentary, and fan videos" (Pande 2019, 2). For many fans, there is a spatial element to their fandom and "media fans often have strong emotional interests in finding and visiting sites related to their favorite films, TV shows or celebrities. … Engaging in acts of tourism can offer fans opportunities to learn more about fan objects, immerse themselves in fictional worlds, and make connections with others who share their interests" (Williams 2019, 98). For other fans, however, it is specific places or locations that are the source and focus of their fandom and "it is possible to be a fan of a destination, location or place and considers the resultant fan practices and discourses when it is *particular places or spaces themselves that are the focal point for fandom"* (Williams 2020, 49). Theme park fans fall into this group. There are many fans of Disney more broadly, for example, who undertake fan practices such as writing fanfiction (Maier 2017) or engaging in cosplay (the act of dressing in costumes that represent certain characters) (Winge 2019, 169). For theme park fans, however, it is the act of visiting the physical sites themselves that is central to their engagement, as well as planning for these visits, recording photos and experiences, and discussing the parks online with others on message boards and social media sites.

For such devoted theme park fans, the advent of the coronavirus caused an inevitable rupture in these fan activities. For many dedicated visitors this instigated a sense of mourning and collective loss, especially for those living in the local areas near to the California and Florida Disney sites and who visited frequently. Theme parks fans have typically become used to such feelings of loss when favourite attractions or rides have been replaced or removed. They may find themselves "entrenched in a perpetual and oftentimes nerve-wracking sense of physical evolution … the landscape of Walt Disney World [and all theme parks] is always changing, and remains unstable and forever 'incomplete'" (Kiriakou 2017, 105). This can pose a threat to fans' identities or sense of security in the spaces that they love (Williams 2020) since these can change at any time. In moments of heightened global uncertainty such as the pandemic, such threats may be felt even more intensely; if one cannot visit their favourite places such as theme parks (or more broadly, any physical location that has meaning) they may become anxious and unsure. The pandemic thus

offers the chance to examine reactions to temporary closures or lack of access to favourite spaces.

For those who are fans of sites that are closed during the pandemic, attempts to recreate the experience of being there offer a way to maintain a sense of closeness and, also, to try to deal with any anxieties that may arise from the temporary loss of being able to visit. In response, some Disney fans attempted to recreate rides and shows at home, to cook their favourite recipes from the parks, and to reminisce about their previous visits. The theme parks themselves sought to maintain connections with visitors, posting official recipes for classic foods such as Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* 'grey stuff' dessert (McClintock 2020) or cakes from Woody's Lunch Box in Toy Story Land (Dunlap 2020). Universal Orlando Resort also sought to engage its absent fans with recipes from around the parks and hotels on its official blog (2020). The ability to make food and drink associated with a place that was unattainable enabled fans to maintain connections through familiar tastes, smells, and textures and to try to recreate physical embodied experiences in their own homes during lockdown. Indeed, as one online article noted, "a near-universal sentiment is that what people are missing isn't a specific attraction, or their favorite snack, but an emotional connection that's impossible to replicate" (Renshaw 2020). In trying to recreate attractions and experiences in their domestic spaces, these fans attempted to keep that emotional connection alive.

However, the reopening of themed sites also offered interesting and perhaps unexpected chances to explore the links between fan attachments and more political debates. Such examples work against the commonly held belief that theme park sites are frivolous or even "a force for social ill" (Kokai and Robson 2020, 6) and that those who frequent them are no more than "consumption-driven cultural dupes" (Williams 2020, 12). For instance, when the reopening of both Universal Orlando Resort and Walt Disney World in Florida was announced, visitors on social media were divided. The strict social distancing rules that theme parks needed to enforce, alongside a requirement for wearing face masks, were welcomed by those who accepted the inevitability of a change in behaviour and experience in "the new normal" of the post-pandemic theme park. However, others rejected these demands, arguing that such limitations would adversely impact the enjoyment of the theme park experience, that such a reduced experience (lacking, for example, fireworks, parades, and character meetings) was poor value-for-money and, in some extreme cases, that such requests were an infringement of an individual's civil liberties. In these examples, the social media channels and Facebook groups usually devoted to planning tips or sharing experiences became hotly contested sites of political discourse, with posters often fiercely disagreeing with one other and dividing across partisan lines.

As journalist Dan Kois summarizes:

> As has happened in many discussions about safety precautions during
> the pandemic, the comments [on theme park websites] were soon over-
> whelmed by visitors who viewed safety precautions as an impingement
> on their personal liberty: "Masks?? Temperature readings before
> entering?? Sounds to me like you're pushing New World order kind of
> things and I'm not here for it." Some annual pass holders declared they
> were finished with Disney forever. Others swore they'd attend but pro-
> claimed they wouldn't be wearing face masks. Wrote one commenter: "I
> do care about other people and safety, the issue is that I care about free-
> dom more." (Kois 2020)

Universal Orlando Resort was one of the first to re-open in Florida on 5
June 2020, with Walt Disney World beginning a phased reopening from 11
July 2020. Despite not being the first to throw open its gates to guests, WDW
has attracted the majority of the criticism for restarting operations during
the ongoing pandemic. This has been especially pertinent since the state of
Florida witnessed a wave of new infections and a steady rise in cases and
deaths from COVID-19 as the resort reopened (Wisel 2020). Whilst both UOR
and WDW have taken a number of health and safety precautions, including
increased sanitation, mandatory masks, removing character meet-and-greets,
and eliminating high-crowd events such as parades and fireworks shows,
criticisms remain. Many have voiced their disapproval via social media, others
in more creative ways; when WDW released an apparently reassuring video
to welcome guests 'home' to their resort, online critics were quick to edit the
clip with foreboding music from horror movies or with voiceover soundtracks
instead imploring visitors to 'stay away' and that the resort was 'not safe'
(UMICL 2020).

As the arguments over the parks' responses to the pandemic make clear,
theme parks are not apolitical sites and fan/guest discussions over the
practices and behaviours that are enacted within them cannot be divorced
from broader socio-political viewpoints and structures. In fact, there are
other cases of Disney's parks in particular, appearing as vectors for political
and cultural discussion including protests and counter-protests over the
inclusion of the 45th US President Donald Trump in the Magic Kingdom's Hall
of Presidents (Ian R. 2017), and the inclusion of imagery from Disney's *Song of
the South* film (widely critiqued for its racist depictions) in its Splash Mountain
attraction (Sperb 2012). This latter issue became especially intensified when
the global Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020 coincided with the pan-
demic and sparked discussion of racism and racial inequalities.

The architectural spaces of the Disney parks have been seen to

> reinforce historical erasure and injustice. Participants enjoy staging themselves around the facades at US Disney parks, the design of which often owes its origins to colonialism or Victorianism. The non-everyday life that fans admire in the parks are colonial throwbacks, painting nonwhite cultures as exotic and Euro-American culture as mainstream. (Lantz 2020, 1350)

For example, attractions including "the Jungle Cruise (a light-hearted boat ride through savage country), … [includes] spear-wagging natives with bones through their noses dancing on the shores" (Wood 2020) whilst the original Disneyland Haunted Mansion is designed in antebellum-era architecture which has an obvious visual correlation with the Deep South and its history.

In particular, however, the BLM movement focused attention back on the Splash Mountain attraction which had been critiqued "as a racially sanitized commercial venture ready for popular consumption" (Sperb 2005, 935). When Disney announced its intention to renovate the ride to be themed around its animated movie *The Princess and the Frog*, many fans read this as a direct response to these criticisms and the impact of the BLM moment (Frank 2020). Although not a direct response to the coronavirus, it is, as Alison Hearn and Sarah Banet-Weiser note, difficult to read the pandemic's cultural impact without also considering the context of the BLM movement in the summer of 2020, since "the conjuncture of Black Lives Matter activism and the material inequities exposed by the global pandemic has provided … [a] kind of ontological shattering" (Hearn and Banet-Weiser 2020, 5). The discussions over fans' acceptance or rejection of health and safety measures post-COVID, and how the parks responded to the BLM movement, were thus mapped onto broader political debates over civil liberties, freedoms, and pre-existing political inclinations.

For those of us who research theme park spaces, the pandemic offers new methodological challenges as well. Indeed, "there is no 'back to normal' and there is no knowing or predicting a way 'forward' either; external events move at breakneck speed, and yet also, in the different lived realities of lockdown, unbearably slowly" (Hearn and Banet-Weiser 2020, 2). We are facing a world where global travel can perhaps no longer be taken for granted, and where the future of tourism looks set to be less affordable, less accessible, and less spontaneous than we are used to. This poses questions about how we can continue to examine the lived practices and behaviours that occur within theme park spaces, especially since much research has urged that "getting 'on the ground'—and on the rides—provides a different set of insights, immersed in the experiences of managing, working in, visiting and thinking about the

theme park" (Bell 2007, ix). If the post-pandemic landscape restricts our ability to visit the sites of our research objects (whilst ongoing concerns over the impact of international travel on the environment also play a role), we need to reimagine how such work can take place.

As researchers across media and cultural studies consider the methodological and ethics implications, the use of digital and virtual media may become more integral to how we conduct our work. Many tourist sites embraced the use of virtual exhibitions during lockdown, allowing visitors to see sites otherwise unavailable to them due to geographical distance or other limitations to access. For example, the Studio Ghibli Museum in Japan (which is notorious for limiting its daily guest numbers) offered rare online clips of its artefacts and spaces (Weiss 2020). Online visits to theme parks (especially if new technologies such as virtual reality can be harnessed) may be one way for both fans and researchers to keep up with developments and new attractions in these spaces.

There are also emerging debates in fan studies around ethical consumption (Wood, Litherland, and Reed 2020), and the need to travel to sites such as theme parks can be critiqued from an environmental perspective. One way forward for those who research mediated places or fan tourism is to reimagine a more ethical and ecologically friendly way of conducting this work, ensuring that such journeys are made carbon-neutral or that potential environmental harm is offset. In this landscape, physical visits to sites of fan tourism and pilgrimage (whether theme parks, museums, filming locations, and beyond) may no longer be possible, for both environmental and health reasons. How we research these spaces will need to be reimagined in the coming months and years in the post-pandemic cultural, and scholarly, landscape.

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TECHNOLOGIES / MATERIALITIES

MACHINE VISION

COMPUTER VISION

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

MACHINE-READABLE IMAGES

VISUAL MEDIA

VISUAL CULTURE

Machine Vision in Pandemic Times

Antonio Somaini

This article is about the social and political implications of the different uses of machine vision technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. After arguing that the phenomenon of machine vision should be tackled from a media-archaeological standpoint, one that highlights the lines of continuity and the moments of discontinuity that define its position within the wider history of images and visual media, the article analyzes the different applications of machine vision systems within the context of the social measures taken in order to contain the spread of the virus: from the enforcement of social distancing and the wearing of masks, to the strategies of positive case detection and contact tracing, all the way up to the diagnostic examination of medical imaging. If machine vision systems and the machine-readable images they are applied to raise the question of what we mean by "vision" and by "image" in the

age of algorithms, the COVID-19 pandemic, with the increasing presence of such a non-human gaze within the public space, has further underlined the current relevance of this question.

Since its beginning, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a double, apparently contrasting dynamic: physical distancing, and data aggregation. As bodies were instructed to stay apart and even self-isolate, data about bodies began to be collected and aggregated in order to monitor and contain the spread of the virus. Technologies of machine learning and, more broadly, artificial intelligence, have been deployed across the board as part of this effort, their clinical and societal applications ranging from the study of the genetic structure of the virus to the prediction of the number of positive cases, ICU hospital beds availability, ventilator use, and expected deaths; from the analysis of Google searches concerning terms related to COVID-19 symptoms as a way to predict the infection rate, to the diagnostic examination of medical imaging and the enforcement of measures of physical distancing through drones, heat cameras, and machine vision techniques. As several observers have noted, the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 and AI seemed to be destined to meet one another (Larousserie 2020; Bullock et al. 2020), with the viral spread of artificial intelligence technologies finding an ideal accelerator in the viral spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Machine vision technologies, in particular, have been the object of a wide range of applications: their capacity to deal with huge image datasets in order to recognize, identify, store, and process data has been used to analyze X-rays of patients, to monitor movements across public spaces, to identify bodies with higher temperatures that might be a sign of infection, to identify those who do not respect the guidelines of physical distancing and the wearing of masks. The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased and accelerated a deployment of machine vision technologies that was already happening at various levels, highlighting even more the significant *rupture* that such technologies introduce in the history of visual cultures and visual media.

This history is periodically marked by the sudden appearance of new images and new technologies of vision: images that introduce new forms of representation, and technologies of vision that introduce new ways of seeing, extending and reorganizing the field of the visible, while redrawing the frontiers between what can and what cannot be seen. For a few years, this has been the case with the new technologies of machine vision and with the machine-readable images they can be applied to. Considered from the perspective of the *longue durée* of the history of visual media and images, the

impact of both is so profound that it leads us to raise the question of what we still mean by "vision" and "image" in the age of algorithms. What is "seeing" when the process of vision is reduced to the acts of identifying and labeling, and when such acts are entirely automated? And can we still use the term "image" for a digital file, encoded in some image format, that is machine-readable even when it is not visible by human eyes, or that becomes visible on a screen as a pattern of pixels only for a tiny fraction of time, spending the rest of its lifespan circulating across invisible networks?

Machine-readable images that can be processed by systems of machine vision are *everywhere* today. Everywhere in the sense that *any* digital image—whether produced through some kind of lens-based optical recording of a profilmic event, or entirely computer-generated, or a mix between the two, as it is often the case—may potentially be analyzed by a machine vision system based on technologies of machine learning and neural networks such as the Generative Adversarial Networks (GAN). By processing the several trillions of fixed and moving images that exist on the internet and that keep on being uploaded every day, reaching also the ones that are not on the internet but are stored in our networked devices, machine vision systems are turning the contemporary iconosphere into a vast field for data mining and aggregation. A field in which faces, bodies, gestures, expressions, emotions, objects, places, atmospheres, and moods may be identified, labeled, stored, organized, retrieved, and processed as data that can be quickly accessed and activated for a wide variety of goals: from surveillance to policing, from marketing to advertising, from the monitoring of industrial processes to military operations, from the operations of driverless vehicles to that of drones and robots, all the way up to the study of climate change through the analysis of satellite images. Even disciplines that might seem to be distant from the applications of machine vision technologies, such as art history and film his-tory, are beginning to test the possibilities introduced by such an automated gaze, and we may legitimately ask ourselves what it would have meant for a cultural historian of images such as Aby Warburg to study the spatio-temporal migrations of "formulae of pathos" [*Pathosformeln*] through machine vision systems capable of taking the entire corpus of art history as a dataset, and then to identify and aggregate movements, gestures, and expressions.

Even though machine vision technologies and machine-readable images do introduce a moment of rupture within the history of optical media and images, the very idea of a non-human "machine vision," in itself, is not new. Con-sidered from a media-archaeological standpoint, it runs through the entire history of mechanical optical media. Reactions to it, and attempts to theorize its nature and its impact, can be traced back to the early years of photography, with the physicist François Arago and the geographer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt praising the extraordinary visual exactitude of daguerreotypes

in 1839, and the poet Charles Baudelaire condemning it twenty years later as "art's most mortal enemy": a form of sheer mechanical reproduction that should not "encroach upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary" (Baudelaire 1859). During the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, in the writings of filmmakers, film theorists, artists, and cultural critics such as Dziga Vertov, Jean Epstein, László Moholy-Nagy, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer, we find different ways of analyzing the aesthetic, epistemological, and political potential of images produced by a mechanical optical medium, the camera, capable of extending vision beyond the limits of the human eye, and, at the same time, introducing a new way of seeing from a decentered, non-human point of view. Traces of the idea of a "machine vision" can be found in the "kino-eye" [*kino-glaz*] that captures and reorganizes the visible world through the two operations of optical recording and montage (Vertov 1923), in the "metal brain" [*cerveau metallique*] of a camera that is "a non-human eye, without memory, without thought" capable of "escaping the egocentricm of our personal viewpoint" (Epstein 1921; 1926), in the "new vision" [*Neue Vision*] and the "impartial optics" [*unvoreingenommene Optik*] produced by the "productive" uses the camera (Moholy-Nagy 1927), in the "new image worlds" and the "optical unconscious" [*Optisch-Unbewußt*] revealed by photography and cinema (Benjamin 1928 and 1935-36), and in the "unfeeling camera" that gives us access to the "alienated phenomena" of an "inert world … in its independence from human beings" (Kracauer 1927; 1949).

Beginning with the 1970s, the idea of a non-human "machine vision" is tackled in the writings of Paul Virilio on the intertwinings between military technologies and optical media (Virilio 1984 and 1988), in Vilém Flusser's speculations on "technical images" and the "telematic society" (Flusser 1985), in Friedrich Kittler's radically non-anthropocentric vision of the history of optical media (Kittler 1986; 2002), as well as in Harun Farocki's explorations—in video installations such as *Eye Machine I, II* and *III* (2001–03) and *Counter Music* (2004)—of the realm of "operational images" that are "devoid of social intent": images that are "not for edification" nor "for reflection" (as Farocki writes in the textual commentary that runs along the images of the *Eye Machine* series), but are purely conceived and produced as active means for technical operations.

Machine vision systems and machine-readable images need to be tackled within such a historical perspective, without erasing the radical discontinuity that they introduce due to their connection with technologies of machine learning capable of dealing with data sets of unprecedented dimensions. The rupture that such systems introduce in the history of optical media is such that the very terms of "vision" and "image" run the risk of becoming purely *metaphorical*, since "vision" is here a form of algorithmic processing of different kinds of pixel-based pattern recognition, while the term "image," when

it refers to a machine-readable image, designates what is actually a digital file, encoded in a specific file format (.jpg, .tiff, .png, .mp4, .mov, .avi, etc.) that can be accessed and processed even when it is not visualized onto a screen in the form of an image visible for human eyes (Paglen 2016).

Even though mostly *invisible*, machine-readable images are nevertheless *active* and *operational*, and in this sense they may be considered to be the latest variations within a history of active images that has been explored by art historians and image theorists such as David Freedberg (1991), W.J.T. Mitchell (2006), and Horst Bredekamp (2010). Through operations such as pixel counting, segmenting, sorting and thresholding, pattern recognition and discrimination, color analysis, object detection and motion capture, machine vision systems introduce new kinds of "image-acts" (Bredekamp 2010) that participate in the "feed forward" dynamic that Mark Hansen has suggested as a defining trait of "twenty-first-century media" (Hansen 2015).

As we have already noted, the COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the deployment of such systems in the public sphere. Heat cameras have been installed in public spaces in order to quickly identify bodies with unusually high temperatures. Unmanned vehicles such as drones and robots have been equipped with cameras connected to machine vision systems in order to enforce social distancing and the wearing of masks: speaking drones appeared first in China and then in various other countries, while a sinister robot-dog, which had already made its first appearances in various TV series such as Fox's *War of the Worlds* (2019, episode 4) and Netflix's *Black Mirror* (2017, season 4, the episode entitled *Metalhead*), has been roaming through public parks in Singapore. Matrix barcodes have been integrated into mobile phone apps meant to facilitate contact tracing, and in China red, orange, or green QR codes appearing on mobile phones were used in order to discipline the movements of the population, allowing or prohibiting traveling and access to specific places.

The social and political implications of the wide-ranging uses of machine vision technologies during the COVID-pandemic cannot be overestimated. In countries that had already adopted massive measures of social surveillance— such as China, with its famous Social Credit System, first tested in 2009, and then increasingly expanded since 2014—the pandemic has given the perfect excuse to further increase the means of surveillance and repression, even though the actual effectiveness and pervasiveness of such means still needs to be assessed. In most other countries, reaching an equilibrium between respect for personal privacy and management of the health crisis—with all that it means in terms of positive cases detection, contact tracing, and the surveillance of quarantines—has proven arduous and is still the object of political negotiations that differ from country to country.

A century ago, during the 1920s and 1930s, the non-human, non-anthropocentric "machine vision" of the camera was hailed as an instrument of liberation: a means for the exploration of a visible world that could be reinterpreted and reorganized from a revolutionary standpoint (Vertov), rediscovered with its vitalism and animism (Epstein), detached from its connection with the structures of the human mind (Moholy-Nagy), penetrated within layers that are inaccessible to the human eye (Benjamin), caught in its uncanny indifference to the existence of human beings (Kracauer). Half a century later, during the 1970s and 1980s, the rise of automation within both the industrial and the military domain brought to the foreground another aspect of the idea of machine vision: the possibility of using techniques of automated image analysis within complex sequences of operations that did not require any human agency. It was this turn that Farocki highlighted with his video installations of the early 2000s and with the highly influential concept of the "operational image."

A further step leads us from the early 2000s to the current uses of machine vision: the connection between digital technologies of image analysis and the immense datasets that are accessible through the internet and that can be processed through artificial intelligence and machine learning. This last step transforms the very idea of machine vision into a complex set of operations capable of turning the digital iconosphere into a vast field for data mining. The present and future applications of such an algorithmic gaze are extremely varied and still to be discovered, and one should resist the temptation to see the increasing deployment of machine vision systems as the sign of yet another step in the direction of a condition of panoptic surveillance. The easier access to machine vision technologies might promote new, unpredictable applications. To give an example, we can mention the way in which, at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, the London-based agency Forensic Architecture led by Eyal Weizman used computer vision systems in order to automatically detect the use against civilians of a tear gas grenade, the Triple-Chaser, produced by the company Safariland, whose CEO, Warren B. Kanders, happened to be vice-chair of the board of trustees at the Whitney Museum of American Art. This use of machine vision technologies by an independent, non-governmental investigative agency showed us how such technologies, when openly accessible, could serve political goals that are far from those of policing, surveillance, or the extraction of data from social media platforms.

The COVID-19 pandemic has confirmed once more the plasticity of machine vision systems, triggering a wide spectrum of applications, ranging from social surveillance to diagnostics. The invisible spread of the virus has been countered through a non-human, algorithmic gaze capable of seeing and processing vast quantities of images that human eyes could never handle. In the context of a health crisis that required bodies to be distanced and data

about bodies to be aggregated, machine vision systems participated in a vast effort of data collection and analysis that will definitely leave significant traces in the foreseeable future, and whose consequences are still hard to predict.

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AMATEUR MEDIA

MEDIA AND MOBILITY

SURVEILLANCE

APPARATUS

SMART CAR

The Car as Pandemic Media Space

Alexandra Schneider

Based on some personal observations or anecdotes, this article engages with the car as a site of confession and the driving mirror as a screen of both control and evasion. It argues that that pandemic media space is a space of displacement where established dichotomies perish: the amateur and the professional, the private and the public, the here and there, as well as the past and the present.

Maybe it says something about cinema that its history has so often been told in parallels. There are the parallel tracks of cinema and the railway (Kirby 1997), the parallel and intertwining trajectories of cinema and psychoanalysis (Bergstrom 1999), and the parallel histories and experiences of cinema and the automobile. The cinema and the car are both inventions of a significant period of technological innovation, the period of the 1870s through the 1910s, which, among other things, brought the world dynamite, the telephone, the gramophone, electricity, airplanes, and industrial chemistry (Smil 2005). Cars have been featured in films since the earliest days of cinema, often as vehicles of a joint experience of viewing/seeing and driving, and sometimes of being driven over, as in Cecil Hepworth's 1900 short film *How It Feels to Be Run Over*. As Jeffrey Ruoff argues, cinema itself can be understood as "an audiovisual vehicle," which opens up the "filmic fourth dimension," an emblem

of the multifaceted constellations of transportation and media devices in the twentieth century (Ruoff 2006, 1ff.). Particularly in the first half of the twentieth century cinema, an image of movement and an image in movement, aligned with the automobile in western imperialist scenarios of global mobility, as for instance in the documentary films sponsored by French automobile manufacturers in the 1920s "that served as potent symbols of the French automobile industry and France geopolitical [colonial] ambitions" on the African Continent during the interwar period (Bloom 2006, 139). On a more granular level, the automobile became closely intertwined with the emerging practice of bourgeois amateur filmmaking from the 1920s onwards, with the automobile serving as a privileged subject, preferred mode of transportation, and occasional substitute tripod for those who could afford not just an automobile, but a small-gauge camera, too.

Today's media and transportation ecologies are even more interdependent, and their specific constellations have multiplied and become more diverse.[1] Travel is highly mediatized[2] while digital screens as such have become mobile and ubiquitous; cars are now devices for mobility and mobile computer systems generating data about mobility in order to both facilitate and control movement.

In the following I will argue that that pandemic media space is a space of displacement where established dichotomies perish: the amateur and the professional, the private and the public, the here and there as well as the past and the present. My contribution uses two personal observations about the car as a pandemic media space in order to engage with the idea of the pandemic media space as a space of displacement: the car as a site of confession and the driving mirror as a screen of both control and evasion.

1   See also Lindsey B. Green-Simms: *Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
2   See the contributions in the "Pacing Airports" dossier of *Social Text online*, edited by Marie Sophie Beckmann, Rebecca Puchta, and Philipp Röding, June 2019. https://social-textjournal.org/periscope_topic/pacing-airports/.

The Car as a Site of Confession

[Figure 1] A Car Confession (Source: Natalie Bookchin: *Laid Off*, 2009 https://vimeo.com/19364123)

As Natalie Bookchin's thought-provoking video installation *Laid Off* (USA 2009) shows, YouTube has become a confessional platform on which to share a crisis. Bookchin's video installation consists of a montage of video confessions of people who share their shock after losing a job. One important pattern Bookchin manages to reveal in her careful choreography is that quite a few of these videos are shot in private cars, presumably in a parking lot, more or less immediately after the firing (fig. 1). The inside of the car, recorded with a camera more or less in the position of a rear-view mirror, figures as a generic space of shared intimacy, a space that is both private and public, and in which we can talk to ourselves and simultaneously to others, our friends as well as an anonymous public who might potentially share our concerns.

The car confessional is now firmly established as a template of contemporary visual cultural and social and political articulation. It is perhaps no coincidence that the car confessional also produced one of the first viral videos of the COVID-19 crisis, the passionate rant of a mother of four from Israel who complains about the absurdities of homeschooling, a challenge and a sentiment many parents went through and could relate to.[3] Her car confessional went viral because of its topical subject matter and its raw, unfiltered appeal. However, as the woman's YouTube channel indicates, this was not her first car confessional: she had already tried out this specific setting and role as a potential genre for herself before, but the pandemic helped her find her voice, so to speak. She failed to establish herself as a YouTube star, however; her

3   The video is availible at Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7_wvQHMGOI.

subsequent videos reached a considerably smaller audience than the home-schooling video rant. What made that rant so poignant was that it highlighted the car's double role as a safe space during the pandemic, thus adding new layers of meaning to the car confessional: a private space away from the living quarters of the family, a room of her own on four wheels, but also a safe space protected from the risk of infection, as I will argue in the following section.

The Rear-view Mirror as a Screen

[Figure 2] The rear-view mirror as screen (Source: Alexandra Schneider, 2020)

The night after the lockdown I decided to go on a car ride. Strangely enough it felt like "freedom" and "being safe" by riding a car "for fun." Feelings, I have to admit, I had never before associated with riding in a car but had projected onto others: libertarian individualists, climate change deniers, heteronormative patres familias, and posers. But that is how I felt: safe from potential contagion by this new virus, absolved from having to practice physical distancing and free to move around the city wherever I wanted. Usually I would prefer to commute and travel by public transportation. But the pandemic made the privilege of being able to choose became apparent.

But then it was also something else about this car ride that was rather new to me. Shortly before the pandemic the old car which I usually drove had been replaced with a brand new car with a wide range of data-based driving support technologies. As I quickly learned, this was not a mere car but an audiovisual media device on wheels. The car obviously has the usual displays and screens to provide information about speed, directions, the state of the engine, etc. According to one's preferred media genealogy, these screens serve to "filter" or to "project," to display (to "show," to "exhibit") or monitor (to "observe," to "check" or "control"). However, as a film and media scholar I

was especially struck by realizing that this car features almost a dozen small cameras, which are not detectable by merely looking at the car and which turn this new, but not particularly fancy car into a kind of mobile CCTV device. The "parking assistance," which is now more or less standard in new cars, of course relies on cameras, but this particular car also detects and decodes road signs, translating these readings into information for the driver—such as indications of the current speed limits—but also into decisions that the car's electronic system makes regardless of the driver and often against the driver, such as adjustments to the car's trajectory, deceleration, etc. One gadget especially struck me: a nearly invisible flash light which serves to illuminate road signs at night, a machine vision device which turns the car into a "seeing thing" that "looks" with its headlights, raising echoes of the anthropomorphic vehicles of Pixar's CARS universe.

Finally, this car has one feature that particularly resonated with me after a semester of remote teaching and endless videoconferencing: the rear-view mirror that is connected to a camera at the back of the car, so that the mirror image (fig. 2) can be replaced with a live transmission from that camera showing the road behind the car as if in a cinemascope framing. It was indeed Christian Metz who pointed out, in his last book *L' enonciation impersonelle ou le site du film* (1991), that the windshield of a car often materializes as a kind of second screen in films.

This new kind of mirror-screen-device serves to maintain a clear view of the back of the car for the driver when the loading area is fully packed, with luggage or other items blocking the view to the rear. If the camera in the car confessional serves as a kind of rear-view mirror that is also a recording device and instantly creates a sense of proximity and intimacy, this rear-view mirror projection has a rather uncanny effect because it erases the presence of the other people in the car (who, in the case of Marion's flight from Phoenix in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* haunt her as voices of absent bodies on the rear windshield). If the car confessional can be said to be modelled on the kind of conversation the driver could be having with his passengers in the back seat even while she is looking at them in the rear view mirror, the screen-mirror fed by the rear-view camera eliminates the passengers from the driver's immediate vis- ibility. They persist as accousmetric voices even as the viewer has a splendid widescreen view of the area behind the car. This visibility gap created by the machine vision devices of the car is, perhaps, an apt reminder of the fact that the purported safe space of the car can never be quite safe and always retains something uncanny about it. As much as we may communicate with the out- side world through various looking devices, we are never quite at home in it. The car as pandemic media space is always a space of displacement.

The Screen as a Monitoring Device
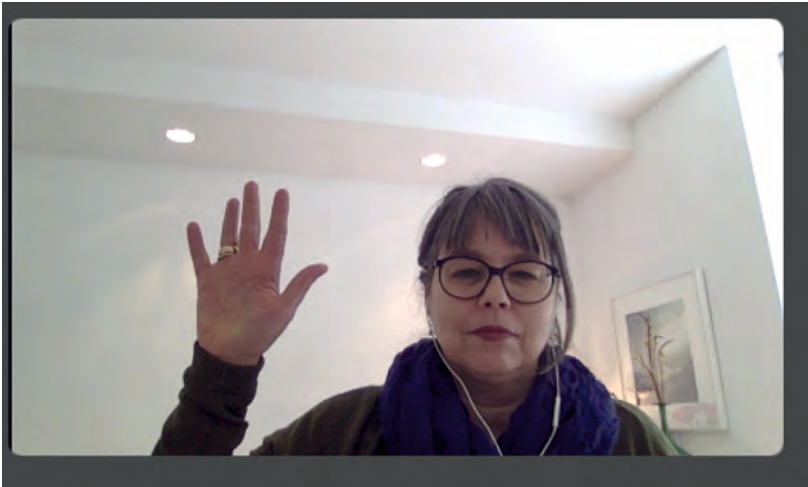
[Figure 3] The screen as monitor (Source: Alexandra Schneider, 2020)

But then, at home, the laptop screen echoes the fake-mirror-screen in the car: if the rear-view devices in the car are a mirror turned screen, the video-conferencing screen serves as both a screen and a mirror (fig. 3). Like a driver restlessly controlling her own behavior and adjusting to a constantly changing environment, the videoconference tools make me monitor and adjust myself to my own self-perception and my perception of the other participants. While participating in a videoconference from home, I may be at home, but I am not safe from the pandemic media space of constant displacement.

In a footnote in his second article on the apparatus (*le dispositif*) Jean-Louis Baudry proposes distinguishing between the apparatus as a specific dis-position of the viewing situation and the basic cinematographic apparatus (or *l'appareil de base* in French), which for him "concerns the ensemble of the equipment and operations necessary to the production of a film and its projection …." For Baudry, the "*basic cinematographic apparatus* involves the film stock, the camera, developing, montage considered in its technical aspects, etc., as well as the apparatus (*dispositif*) of projection" (1986, 317).

In approaching the new configurations of viewing devices and operative sub-jectivities, from driving to videoconferencing, it may be useful to return to this distinction and analyze the configuration of car, camera, and platforms both in terms of the basic apparatus and the viewing disposition. It may help us understand how the difference between home and not-home can easily be overruled and erased by continuities of the viewing dispositions of two seemingly clearly distinct spaces. As pandemic media, they rephrase the *con-nections between outside and inside, public and private,* but also between the amateur and the professional.

Beyond the Screen

[Figure 4] Beyond the screen (Source: Gilbert Meylon, 1939 / Fonds Ella Maillar, Musée de L'Elysée, Lausanne; 1939)

As soon as my screen fatigue goes away, I will revisit Ella Maillart's and Annemarie Schwarzenbach's books, photos, and films, in particular *Nomades Afghans (Auf abenteuerlicher Fahrt durch Iran und Afghanistan*, Ella Maillart, 1939/40), a film that resonates with both the professional and the amateur. Both Maillart and Schwarzenbach were pioneers of transgression, professional travelers who crossed lines and bent the norms and expectations of their time. They traveled through Central Asia by car, and with a camera (fig. 4). In light of our recent experiences, I expect to find in their work something that can help us unhinge the normalizing aspects of what is now consolidating into the pandemic media space of car and camera. A past that imagines the future.

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DRONES

LOCKDOWN

UNMANNEDNESS

TELEPRESENCE

"Covid-dronism": Pandemic Visions from Above

Ada Ackerman

The numerous drone flyovers of deserted cities have become one of the highest-circulating media productions during the COVID-19 crisis and objects of sheer fascination. In this paper, I explore the troubling and unprecedented conjunction they articulate between an unmanned device and the policy of emptying places from human presence that they record.

As the COVID-19 virus was propagating and countries were fighting to stop its progression, drones would be endowed with new functions, which were regularly broadcasted on news and vehemently discussed: disinfection actions, surveillance patrols during lockdowns, identification of new cases thanks to thermal cameras... This proliferation of drones' practices in a pandemic context once again confirms our time to be a "Drone Age" (Anderson 2012). If initially developed as surveillance and military devices raising ethical, moral, and epistemological issues (Chamayou 2015), drones have been provided with an expanding array of new applications in several areas (entertainment, science, delivery...), which rely upon an increasing blurring and overlapping of civilian-consumer and military-industrial applications and networks (McNeil and Burrington 2014, 58–59 ; Stubblefield 2020, 2–4; 159–63).

From a media perspective, however, one is not so much struck by the pro-
liferating images of drones in action—no matter how chilling and dystopic
they might look—than by the images produced *by* drones during these specific
pandemic times. As a matter of fact, drone-made images and films of emptied
capital cities and touristic places became one of the most prominent and
circulating visual objects born out of the pandemic period, especially in news
broadcasting, and to such an extent that they became, so to speak, a visual
topos of the COVID-19 situation. As surveillance apparatuses able to cover
vast areas in a panoramic fashion, drones have proved paramount in turning
the notion of lockdown into efficient and spectacular visual representations,
in which extreme freedom of flight contrasted sharply with the movement
restrictions imposed upon citizens. Benefitting from exceptional shooting con-
ditions, impossible in normal times, drones recorded the unprecedented situ-
ation of stopped cities, stirring feelings of wonder, of melancholia as well as of
uncanniness—features shared by "ruin porn" (Lyons 2018). Since redistribution
of human presence in cities is at stake in the lockdown situation, it is not by
chance that these drone videos mainly revolve around urban structures such
as churches, roads, stadiums, city halls, squares, and so on, that is, places that
have historically contributed to politically and economically organizing the
human occupation of urban space. Among the numerous circulating drone
videos of lockdown cities, one can quote the representative film *La France
en absence* [*Absent France*], made by HOsiHO Drone Network, a grand tour of
twenty-one French cities during the COVID-19 lockdown in March and April
2020[1].

I suggest that one of the peculiarities of those images lies in their troubling
conjunction of two levels of unmanned-ness: made by drones—"unmanned
aerial vehicles" according to their military designation—which are equipped
with a mechanical eye disentangled from a human body, these images unravel
usually crowded spaces as almost devoid of people and with significantly
reduced human activity. To be more accurate, these images show places that
should be empty according to the lockdown agenda, but that are still pop-
ulated by a few individuals walking, running, or cycling in deserted streets
and that display scarce urban traffic. This persistence of rare manifestations
of human presence can be ontologically construed as a kind of humanist
resistance to the radicality of the lockdown cleansing policy—a symptom of
mankind's vitality that cannot be so easily contained. Besides, many of the few
remaining moving elements in these images—and most of all vehicles—reveal
supply and labor circulations that *cannot be stopped,* even in and especially
during a pandemic outbreak.[2] If not totally void of people, those urban

1   https://www.hosiho.net/en/blog/hosiho-drone-network-s-news/66-covid-19-cities-lock-
     down-france-view-by-drone-network-hosiho.html. Accessed June 10, 2020.
2   This articulation is made clear in *Paris confiné 2020,* shot by Skydrone and Futuria Pro-
     duction. After having focused on an emptied Paris thanks to drone cameras, the video

landscapes shot by drones nevertheless convey a strong sense of human absence on a scale not hitherto experienced. These images appear thus as the result of a puzzling correlation between the expelling of human presence and an increasing non-human agency in the production of visibility. What better device than a drone, which is a medium whose high maniability provides the viewer with a supra-human gaze, to register and account for drastic sanitizing policies consisting of emptying places of human activities and manifestations?

While the emphatic and spectacular quality conveyed by the totalizing and sweeping eye of the drone invites one to marvel at the beauty of the sites viewed, at the "purity" of their design and architecture, since almost no human presence is obstructing the view anymore and thanks to a significant decrease in pollution, it is precisely this beauty that appears not only as paradoxical but also as problematic. It is conditioned by a radical removal of human elements, a beauty fostering a feeling of a terrifying sublime among the viewer, according to Kant's definition of a feeling of amazement mingled with dread (Kant 1794, 25).

These images of ghost cities awaken numerous memories of apocalyptic films with which they share their sensationalism and dazzling perspectives (*Twenty-eight days later,* 2002, *Contagion,* 2011...). These images thus turn visual tropes usually associated with fiction into testimonies of real times, in a puzzling interlacing of dystopia and reality. These images not only register how emptied cities look because of the lockdown; they also inevitably convey the threatening potential scenario of humanity wiped out, that is, an extension and a radicalization of this human-presence clearing principle. This would not be possible without their attracting and spectacular quality. As a matter of fact, in order to shoot urban desolated landscapes, TV channels hired drone companies specialized in advertising and in the film industry such as HOsiHO, a worldwide network created in 2014, for which a fleet of 200 pilots captures "the world seen from the sky." Its database provides 4,852 videos related to COVID-19 (HOsiHO 2020). In the case of France, most lockdown videos broadcast on channels were provided by the company Skydrone created in 2010, whose motto is to "bring wings to images" while ensuring stable and high-resolution aerial shootings (Skydrone 2020).

Like much thrilling and exciting imagery produced by civilian and commercial drones, these emptied-city films derive their power from a "technogene sensuality," a "virtual-somatic feeling of presence in spaces where human

begins at 01:06 to insert actions of different workers whose labor proved paramount for the capital city's organization. As stated by Christophe Lyard, one of the filmmakers: "we were aware that behind these images of emptied monuments, life was going on; people were of course working in order to maintain the city's activity: caregivers, postmen, garbage collectors, delivery persons..." (my translation) https://vimeo.com/415263660. Accessed June 10, 2020.

bodies cannot (or almost cannot) be and move" (Jablonowski 2020, 4). As Maximilian Jablonowski suggests, one can connect the pleasure and the intensity of experience provided by drone vision to a form of "telepresence," a term with which Martin Minsky labels the ability for a body to remotely and safely experience a dangerous or an unreachable environment thanks to a media apparatus (Minsky 1980). In the case of drone views of locked-down cities, this telepresence acquires a singular quality as the drone brings the perceptive subject not so much to risky and barely accessible sites than to locations of *forbidden* access. These videos provide the viewer with an exploration of locations in which he is, due to his very human condition, *persona non grata.* Hence a paradoxical experience of telepresence, which demands nothing more from the perceptive subject than his absence as well as the absence of his human congeners. A good illustration of this can be found in *La France en absence* for instance at 02 :42, when the drone camera climbs a flight of deserted stairs in Lyon's old district. These images appear as a doubling of the official lockdown instructions, being caught within a feedback loop in which images enhance the requirements to remove human presence from public space.

Therefore, by documenting the lockdown state, the drone's unmannedness finds the ultimate development of its original goal, which was to be able to watch and strike a target from afar without being exposed: not only is the human object henceforth *already* removed from its gaze, but by the same token the viewer is also reminded of the necessity for himself to vanish from the public scene. Never has the label "phantom shot," coined for films "taken from a position that a human cannot normally occupy" (Farocki 2004, 13), sounded so literal than today.

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MOLECULAR VISUALIZATION

SPECULATIVE IMAGE

HIV-1 MACROMOLECULE

CELLPACK

VITAL FLUX

Of Liquid Images and Vital Flux

Bishnupriya Ghosh

Every epidemic emplaces us in molecular visualizations where iconic spiked orbs circle host cells. As we become accustomed to SARS-CoV2, my essay returns to visualizations of the HIV-1 macromolecule to explore the role of dynamic images in scientific research. The fact that scientists are *still* building models of HIV-1, after four decades, should give us pause in our impatience about "knowing" SARS-CoV2 fully. The *liquid image* built on a synthetic-biologic continuum, I argue, provides a clue to the essentially speculative nature of visualizing and modeling virus-host vital relations. Malleable, dynamic, and always emergent, the liquid image races to visualize and predict the vital flux of parasitic relations, *and* to keep abreast of fast-paced research. I trace editable models and simulations of HIV through an analysis of cellPACK, a software suite developed at the Center for Computational Structural Biology at the University of

California, San Diego. Integrating crowd-sourced data, the platform enables an image composed at one scale to continuously liquidate and reassemble into another (perhaps larger) whole, and vice versa. Such scalable images are creative actualizations of scientific hypotheses based on mathematical possibilities. And yet. Even as they render the capacities and tendencies of complex systems calculable, the partially known haunts the liquid image.

We encounter an ominous spiked orb almost on a daily basis in reportage on the COVID-19 pandemic. Those spikes attach with ease to the ACE2 receptors of human respiratory cells, we are told, enabling a deadly viral takeover of host resources. But we've heard this story before: SARS-CoV2 does to respiratory cells what HIV once did to CD4 cells of the immune system. An abiding accompaniment to every pandemic is the visualization of virus macromolecules, their approach and entry, bloom and blast in host cells. Despite the intense desire to separate and isolate an "invisible enemy," we have come to regard pathogenic particles in their *vital relation* to the hosts that they occupy. Moving images based on structural data plunge us into wondrous voyages in which orbed bodies circle and encounter each other (fig.1). As they morph and dissolve, we watch virus-host co-emergences in the twenty-first century "molecular fantastic."[1] Operating on a synthetic-biologic continuum, these moving images are vital media, whose irreducible vitality is most evident in their *liquid* character. Plastic, dynamic, and speculative, the liquid image, I argue, races to visualize and predict the vital flux of parasitic relations.

We see this in the ongoing technical-aesthetic mediation of the HIV-1 macromolecule, still under construction after four decades of the viral pandemic. On the one hand, malleable, constantly editable images are necessary for processing volumes of new data in fast-paced scientific research. The "image" makes large volumes of data cohere as a single insight, a process that statistician and artist Edward Tufte (2001) named "de-quantification."[2] Scientists

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1   With advanced imaging technologies, in scientific edutainment, we are in the domain of the marvelous: a molecular fantastic of the same order as Akira Lippit's "optical fantastic" in the first half of the 20th (triangulating the development of X-ray technologies, the splitting of the atom, and psychoanalysis, see *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*, Minnesota University Press, 2005). See my account of the cellular agon in "Animating Uncommon Life: U.S. Military Malaria Films (1942-1945) in the Pacific Theater," in Beckman 2014.

2   Edward Tufte, *The Visual Display of Information* (Graphics Press, 2001).

can keep abreast of structural data from multiple sources in contributing to editable models of living systems. On the other, the speculative nature of the liquid image is strategic in keeping up with vital flux. One might consider how genetic mutations that change instructions for protein assembly will impact the entry of viral biomolecules into host cellular receptors—an understanding critical to drug design. For the "best understood of any organism," as illustrator David Goodsell puts it, HIV clocks over 90 drug resistant genetic mutations.[3] Scientists continue to visualize and simulate HIV "molecular docking events" at host cellular sites that enable the design of new drugs— molecules which can sit in the docking site and block viral entry.[4] Dynamic speculative images keep pace with evolving virus-human emergences in these molecular-cellular contexts.
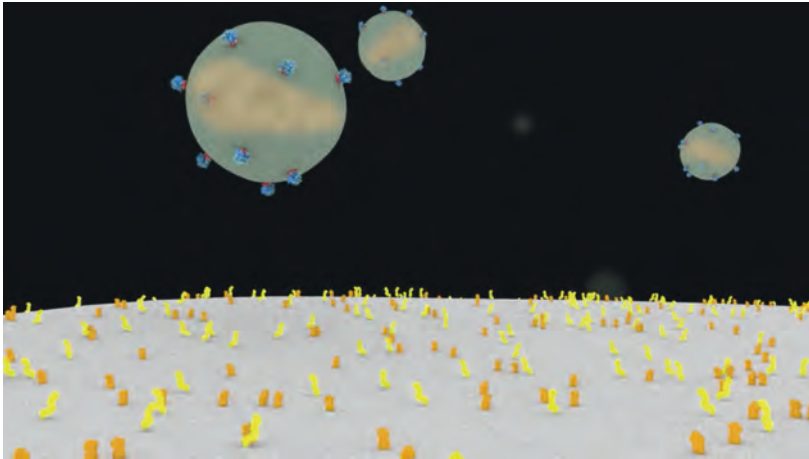
[Figure 1] Screenshot from "HIV Life Cycle" [5]

The mediatic capture of HIV-1 emerges at the intersection of basic science laboratories and creative media industries. While media histories starting from the first capture of the tobacco mosaic virus under the electron microscope in 1938 reveal a shift from morphological preoccupations to decoding viral genomes in the mid-twentieth century, biomolecular models of virus

3   Stanford University HIV Drug Resistance Database (https://hivdb.stanford.edu/).

4   Scientific visualizations that model crowd-sourced data play a critical role in antiviral strategies of epidemic mediation. The histories of SciVis are vast because they include material practices obtaining across computer graphics, bioscience laboratory techniques, and virtual art. I discuss their conjugation further in my current book project, *The Virus Touch: Theorizing Epidemic Mediation.*

5   For the animation, see https://vimeo.com/260291601. This was made collaboratively with the Department of Biochemistry at the University at Utah and the CHEETAH consortium (https://biochem.web.utah.edu/iwasa/projects/HIV.html). Janet Iwasa (Animation Lab), whose scientific animations I have explored elsewhere, headed the project with data sourced from researchers globally. See, Ghosh 2016.

macromolecules remain critical to integrative research.[6] No doubt the push arrives with the turn to complex systems thinking in the life sciences that made computation central to the study of living organisms. In attempting to understand the effects of vital processes at one scale (e.g. biochemical cellular reactions) on another (e.g. folding of protein molecules), scientists of different cloth increasingly share structural data and test competing hypotheses, communicate and educate on new media platforms such as (Maxon's) Cinema 4D or (Autodesk's) Maya. The "molecular movies," as they are dubbed, are robust collaborations between academic researchers, biotech corporations, and digital animators.[7] Making the unseen visible, as the SciVis mantra goes, moving images integrate structural data and simulate possible molecular events in this post-cinematic context. With new data inputs come new possibilities.

In liquid images, "life" as vital process appears as "life itself." As shorthand, "life itself" refers to the mediatic *appearance* of vital processes.[8] Life "emerges with" matter: bodily media like blood or respiratory mucosa sustain the virus. Technical-aesthetic mediation detects and composes the interactions of viral particles in bodily fluids as the numeric distribution of x copies in y milliliter blood (à la the viral load test). Sarah Kember and Johanna Zylinska (2010) name this mediatic capture a "cut" in the flow of living processes—a slice, a snap-shot—so that "life" makes an appearance as "life itself." In liquid images, life appears vibrating, morphing, changing. Animations of dynamic processes make vital flux legible and palpable in multisensory environments.[9]

6   100-500 times smaller than bacteria, viruses were the microbes that passed through Louis Pasteur's porcelain filters and remained unobservable under ordinary light microscopes. When the powerful electron microscope made optical capture possible, research on identifying viruses began in earnest. The focus on virus morphologies soon gave way to the romance with genomic codes in the mid-20th century as molecular biologists drilled down to genomic fingerprints of viruses in host DNA. The latter remains the bedrock of virological research, even as, still later in the 20th century, the onus fell on integrating research with the rise of systems biology.

7   The mantra is associated with SciVis practices which begins to commercially cohere in the late eighties (the precedents in molecular graphics go back much further). The first SciVis congregation (the Visualization in Scientific Computing Conference), in 1987, brought together industry, academics, and government officials. Thus, began the industrial enterprise of new media platforms that allowed scientists and animators to produce images based on experimental data necessary for designing source materials (digital files for synthetic compounds) that could be actualized as marketable "bio-logicals" (biotechnological products). See, introduction to Pickford and Tewksbury 1994.

8   We might remember that "emergence," which is a key concept for large-scale ecological disturbances such as new pathogenic species relations, comes from the Latin root *emegere* signifying "to appear." In this regard, studying viruses in an agar plate under the electron microscope is an epistemic cut that makes virus-human relations legible, readying them for other interventions such as gene-splicing or drug therapy.

9   For the multisensory dimension of building protein macromolecules, one of the best studies is Natasha Myers' (2015) ethnography of protein crystallography. Myers traces

The point is better made with brief illustration: I focus on the making of HIV macromolecules at the Center for Computational Structural Biology (formerly, Molecular Graphics Lab) at the Scripps Research Institute, University of California, San Diego. Its chief biologist, Arthur Olson, was a pioneer in the computer graphics foundational to molecular visualizations. Founded in 1981, the "Olson Lab" (as it is nicknamed) sources its data from molecular biologists (studying gene transcriptions), biochemists (studying chemical interactions), and structural biologists (studying protein assemblies) to build integrative crowd-sourced models which allow researchers to move beyond their silos of expertise.[10] Until now, the lab has made six models of the HIV-1 macromolecule on media platforms so that researchers can manually move molecules around, watch for folds, accelerate or decelerate motion. While the game industry's VR platforms provide inspiration for analyzing biomolecular structures in 3-D, sophisticated toolkits specifically tailored for biological research are now available; some of these have been developed at the Olson Lab.[11] A biology-specific extension of the better-known AutoPACK is a suite of programs called cellPACK, which was developed in collaboration with medical-illustrator-turned-software-designer Graham Johnson (Mesoscope Lab, University of California, San Francisco).[12] Structural biologist and illustrator David Goodsell's legendary "zoomable" watercolors, which magnified cellular structures into their molecular components, are the methodological and aesthetic bases for building unified hybrid models on cellPACK (fig. 2a).[13]

the haptic and kinesthetic qualities of modeling proteins to argue for a sensuous engagement with scientific molecular structures.

10   Arthur Olson has been envisioning HIV from the start of the epidemic in the United States. Studying the structural dimensions of HIV, the Olson Lab's "AIDS-Related Structural Biology Program" is an NIH-funded operation. The team at the lab includes a range of scientists from David Goodsell (on the technical-aesthetic end) to Stefano Forli (on the biotech industry end). The lab developed at least one thousand structures of protease, one of the three important HIV enzymes in the viral replication cycle. Research on HIV enzyme biostructures has everything to do with the life-saving protease inhibitors, placing the Olson Lab squarely within ongoing efforts to develop pharmacological solutions to "managed HIV" (as it is now called).

11   In the area of software programs, the lab's successes are many. "Autodock," a program for biomolecular structure analysis, has been adopted by four thousand laboratories all over the world.

12   cellPACK was developed at the Olson Lab (with Ludovic Antin) while Johnson was finishing his post-graduate work. The open-source program integrates structural biology and systems biology data with packing algorithms to assemble comprehensive 3D models of cell-scale structures in molecular detail.

13   David Goodsell is a central figure who is well known for his watercolor illustrations based on real data sources and magnification specifications; these are available on the Protein Data Bank. Goodsell has not only led on the scientific front, but his books, *The Machinery of Life* (1993) and *Atomic Evidence* (2016), are widely considered exemplars of science communication. Based on his aesthetic protocols, the Olson Lab has produced as many as 6 HIV-1 models to date (HIV-1 1.2, 1.3…), each manually curated with widely sourced data.
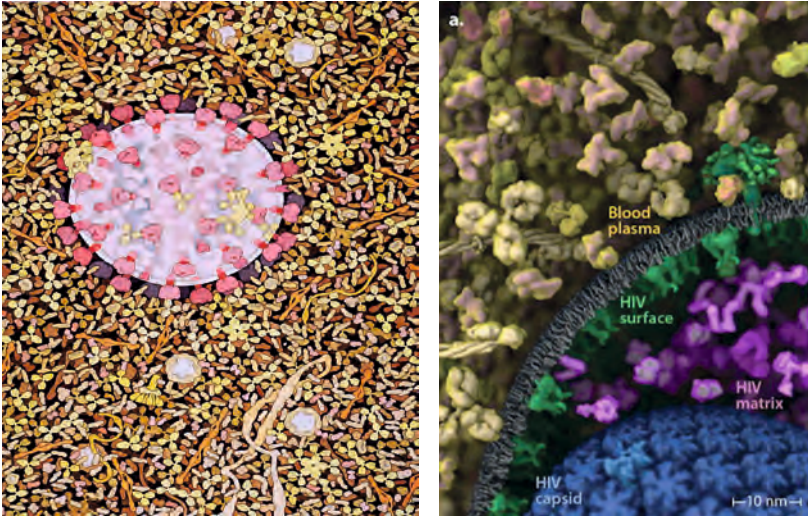
[Figure 2a–b] Watercolor of HIV in Blood Plasma, 1999; HIV-in-Blood Plasma Visualization, 2015

The idea is to combine data from all branches of biology into a comprehensive mesoscale model ranging from 0.1 micron to 10 nanometers. "Artistic depictions of cellular environments" built on the cellPACK suite can integrate data from ultrastructural (light and electron microscopy), infrastructural atomic (x-ray crystallography and NMR spectroscopy), and biochemical (for concentrations and interactions) sources (Johnson et al. 2015, 85-91). "Ingredients" from these data sources produce scientific "recipes" (as the lab's extended cooking metaphor runs) for various parts of the model. Fig. 2b is an image, *HIV-in-Blood Plasma*, made up of seven different recipes (each with a different color coding) that are unified into a single model. Endless updates to the "editable model of HIV" become possible in these plastic, malleable liquid images. The Olson Lab's HIV-1 ultrastructure (the HIV envelope) functions as the polyhedral "mesh" or Euclidean "state space" (adding time to geometric coordinates) for packing ingredients (De Landa 2011). This is accomplished by cellPACK's virtuoso "packing algorithms" that determine how the mesh is filled out to produce a scalable image (see fig. 3).

A The containers of cellPACK recipe *HIV-1_0.1.5* define surfaces and create volume boundaries

B Grid constructed to discritize the nested regions and bind distinct recipes for efficient tracking while packing

C *HIV-1_0.1.5* is a recipe of subrecipes that associate with the environment volume, container surfaces and container interiors

D cellPACK positions the ingredients to create a result file (.apr) that can be visualized with a variety of software (Chimera shown)

[Figure 3] Packing the HIV-1 mesh

Such a drive toward consistent precision in modelling biomolecular structures enables the study of "active sites" on cellular surfaces that drug therapies target to block the successful "docking" of HIV. Stefano Forli, who is the biotech interface at the lab, explained how animating 3-D models on new media platforms not only provided the opportunity to circle, view, and analyze cellular structures, but it also enabled calculating the densities, forces, and propensities of molecules as they interacted with each other. Real-time video-tracking allowed for moving molecules around, accelerating or decelerating molecular motion. As the molecules vibrated in Brownian motion, Olson noted, scientists could better understand the electrostatic complementarity and hydrogen bonding that forms molecular structures. They could zoom into specific sites of structural uncertainty and then out to the bigger picture—the HIV-1 viral capsid in the extracellular environment.

This example of liquid images discloses their infinite malleability. To be sure, these "technical images," to recall Vilém Flusser (1985), concretizing a "universe of particles moving toward dissipation," are as plastic as are *all* digital images. Each image liquidates and reconfigures the previous trace. And yet, the point of the constant update is to keep up with high volumes of incoming data: the Olson Lab's release of HIV 1.6 demonstrated the possibility of integrating crowd-sourced structural data at speeds commensurate with the fast pace of

research (Johnson et al. 2014, 23-44). Further, when animated, scientists were able to experiment with multiple outcomes for the molecules in motion—colliding, adhering, separating. Such dynamism is critical to simulating the changeful interactivity of parasitic relations. As obligate parasites, bits of nucleic acid with a protein coat and without cell walls, we know that viruses "come alive" as secondary organisms always in vital relation to a host; they need host resources to replicate.[14] But this biological partnership is constantly negotiated as virus-host vital relations continue to emerge.[15] Computer animations can simulate the processsualities of emergences, predicting a range of probable outcomes for the form and evolution of vital relations.

Investigating simulations of living systems, Manuel De Landa (2011) examines the computational rendering of *biologic* "possibility spaces"—the space of genes, the space of structural proteins, the space of spatial structures—into *synthetic* possibility spaces. The efficacy of the *scalable* liquid image lies in rendering biological possibilities as calculable mathematical probabilities. In this enriched mechanistic account of life, De Landa asks: What "individual singularities" arise in interactions between agents within a possibility space? Defining individual singularities as *new* properties, De Landa argues that hydrogen and oxygen produce a liquid state more than the sum of its parts, a state whose properties (such as the temperature at which water boils) are distinct from the two gaseous entities. Secondary mutations of HIV that evolve as

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14   Ever since its discovery in the late 19th century, the virus has always been a border object, in the sense that it lacks an important definitive feature of living organisms—the capacity to metabolize what it needs to regenerate. One of the most influential definitions of "life" hearkens to physicist Erwin Schrödinger's simple but lasting distinction of living things as irritable, and capable of reproduction and metabolism. As opposed to crystals, living things were defined, Schrödinger maintained, by their capacity for self-regeneration (to grow, repair, and reproduce) and their fight against dissipative entropy ("What if Life?" 1941). An obligate parasite is an organism that cannot live without a host, as opposed to a facultative parasite that can live independently but becomes parasite under certain conditions. The virus can only live within hosts. It literally "comes alive" from dormant crystalline states when it senses a host.

15   One of the foremost scholars of parasitism, Angela Douglas characterizes symbiosis as a *derived* state: a gradual evolutionary transition from antagonism (including virulent pathogenesis) to mutually beneficial relations including a stable, managed partitioning of resources. One partner, usually the host, takes control of resource distribution over time, imposing sanctions and controlling transmissions for both partners, even as both organisms develop novel capacities (a lateral, not hereditary, transfer of properties) in order to live with the perturbations that the other generates. Symbiosis-at-risk is one step on a spectrum of relations between parasites and hosts; and some relationships (e.g. human-Ebola) never move past that point. Symbiotic relations are those that are mutually beneficial to the participants for the major duration of their lifetime. This does not mean that parasitism is not symbiotic, but that pathogenic parasitism is not. Less virulent parasites are at a selective advantage in this regard, since they do not deplete the resources of the host. We can "live with" virulent pathogens like HIV only with the technological mediation of drug therapies. See, Angela Douglas, *The Symbiotic Habit* (Princeton UP, 2010), *Symbiotic Interaction* (1994), and *The Biology of Symbiosis* (1987).

drug resistance are examples of such individual singularities: these properties emerge at negotiations between host resources, viral particles, and chemical drug molecules. While such new properties can be decoded and documented, what remains *speculative* are the capacities and tendencies that come into play within living systems. Enter liquid images: the attempt to predict outcomes of new individual singularities arising in cellular environments.

As an image composed at one scale liquidates to reassemble into another, perhaps larger, whole, or vice versa, liquid images not only present variable trajectories but they also predict what is not yet known. They are crucial sites for creative actualizations of scientific hypotheses based on mathematical possibilities. Whether those hypotheses concern envisioning the capacities and tendencies of complex systems, or tracking evolving changes in new singularities, the partially known haunts the liquid image. That said, decades of research on HIV forms a baseline for imaging SARS-CoV2. We are indeed ahead of the game, even as it may not seem like it. The famous David Ho, innovator of the protease inhibitors of the anti-retroviral therapies, has been tapped for Joe Biden's team on COVID-19 for a reason. But to expect definitive findings in a matter of months is to live in a fool's paradise. We know scientific agreements on particular outcomes proposed in scientific visualizations come after years of study. Even though HIV is relatively simple in its composition (made of just eight structural proteins), the "HIV trimer" was on the "most wanted" list of protein macromolecules until 2013, when the scientific community could agree on its definitive crystalline structure. The liquid image is an object lesson in patience.

We will have to inhabit the molecular fantastic of SARS-Cov2 for the foreseeable future, watching as this increasingly familiar orb circles and enters its new hosts, leaving cellular ruin in its wake. The liquid image is always at a lag for vital flux continues to exceed all synthetic transcription. Delving deeper, moving faster, these speculative images remain in hot pursuit of ever-emergent virus-host vital relations.

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TRACING APPS

SOCIAL GRAPH

GOVERNMENTALITY

GOVERNMEDIALITY

Pandemic Media: On the Governmediality of Corona Apps

Christoph Engemann

This article investigates the debate and implementation of corona tracing apps in Europe as an example of a new form governmentality. Here the media of governing become the problem to be governed and subsequently this formation can be called governmediality. With corona apps the role of social graphs became a flashpoint for the emergence of such a governmediality. Based on a brief introduction on the history and context of social graphs, the article shows how coders, politicians, medical professionals, and hacktivists debated the effects of social graphs on individual liberties as well as on pandemic management.

The intellectual game of varying Carl Schmitt's notion of "sovereign is he who decides upon the state of exception" whenever a crisis occurs reached new heights during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. Most prominently Giorgio Agamben touted in this vein, framing the crisis triggered by the spread of the SARS-COVID-19 virus as the final revelation of the true core of modern statehood (Agamben 2020). What lies behind the liberal and democratic façade are

not only the post-democratic procedures of faked deliberation and techno-cratic decision-making but also an unfettered desire to reign in the lives of people. This includes altering their freedom of movement, requiring masks, triaging access to health care, and ultimately digitally surveilling whole pop-ulations and every individual at once: a digitally enabled normalization of a permanent state of exception. Statehood in the twenty-first century, so the underlying tenor of these debates, was awaiting such a moment to fully deploy its digitally advanced media of oppression.[1]

The development of corona tracing apps in Europe between roughly March 2020 and mid-June 2020 paints a different picture. Launched by a consortium calling itself DP3-T standing for *Decentralized Privacy Preserving Proximity Tracing*, the resulting smartphone apps were developed via a coordinated effort of an international group of computer scientists, epidemiologists, epi-demic-modelers, virologists, and lawyers. The apps promised to facilitate the mapping and notification of the social contacts of infected persons in epidemic situations. With the coronavirus crisis, manual contact tracing had emerged as one of the most important tools to manage the course of the pandemic. By March 2020, smartphone-based tracing apps using Bluetooth standards for proximity sensing came under consideration to accelerate the laborious process of manual contact tracing. Given sufficient acceptance and adoption within a given population, such software applications promised faster response options to emerging contact chains and dynamic, localized management of lockdowns and similar measures.

With their launch in mid-June 2020 the contact tracing apps were lauded as prime examples of how societies should govern their digital re-mediation. Sur-prisingly this praise was offered by actors typically skeptical about any govern-ment IT projects: high profile hacker groups like the German Chaos Computer Club, data protection officials, privacy advocates, and digital activists.

This praise was partially based on the use of open source developing practices, making the codebase of the apps available to public scrutiny via GitHub. For the Bluetooth stack[2] of the tracing apps the two dominant man-ufactures of smartphone operating systems Apple and Google participated in the development, openly providing APIs[3] to enable access at the level of the operating system, contributing code and privacy consultancy. The code

1   The website of the European Journal of Psychoanalysis has collected Agamben's original article, "The invention of an epidemic," and the subsequent discussion with con-tributions by Alain Badiou, Slavoi Zizek, and Jean-Luc Nancy among others. For a critical discussion see also Christiaens (2020), Sotiris (2002), and Sarazin (2020).
2   Bluetooth stack refers to the vendor specific implementation of the set of protocols defined for the Bluetooth low energy short range communication standard.
3   API stands for application programming interface and defines how an application inter-faces with other applications requesting data from it.

repository GitHub[4] was employed not only to publish code and protocols but to also invite discussions on the social and cultural dimensions of the application.

A practice was thus established around the corona tracing apps that Christopher Kelty (2008, 27f.) has called recursive publics. Based on research in open source development communities, Kelty described recursive publics as contexts that simultaneously deliberate and build the tools that allow for their own deliberation. Such a dynamic was evident with the corona tracing apps too. Using GitHub as well as classical forms of publications in newspapers and journals, a recursive public for building a privacy preserving digital contract tracing emerged. In this process the corona tracing apps became a medium of liberalism. Not only were the algorithms, data structures, and protocols of the tracing apps scrutinized in their effects on liberal values, but the question of how a digital liberalism could be implemented was raised. The pandemic was understood as a challenge of liberalism, and the techno-orientalist (Tai 2020) imaginations of the Chinese, Taiwanese, and Korean approaches to tracking and tracing were mobilized as negative examples. In opposition to these mostly imagined Asian approaches, the European tracing app was to preserve individual privacy and not provide any means for surveillance. The posture of the European tracing apps thus both included an international signal as well as messages to the European public. The latter was addressed as subjects of digital governing that they could self-govern by means of the openness of codebase and discussion.

Members of the DP-3T consortium highlighted the necessity to prevent the emergence of social graphs within the data processing elements of the corona app stack. Graphs are mathematical structures describing linkages between entities called nodes (fig. 1). Despite the diagrammatic connotations of the term graph, these mathematical entities are not primarily visual media. Nonetheless visualizations of graphs are common and, for example, part of the visual branding of Facebook events (fig. 2). Here the stage backgrounds often show networks of nodes and edges. But when such stylized graphs are shown or graph datasets are visualized with tools like Gephi,[5] the use-value is comparably low. Visualizations are only viable for datasets with a relatively small number of entities. The function of these pictures is to depict complexity while large graphs, like Google's search graph with a trillion nodes and edges, escape their visualization.

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4   GitHub is a popular online source code repository allowing for distributed development of software. Founded it 2008, GitHub was acquired by Microsoft in 2018. See github.org.
5   Gephi is an open source software package for visualizing, analyzing and exploring graph-data sets. See gephi.org
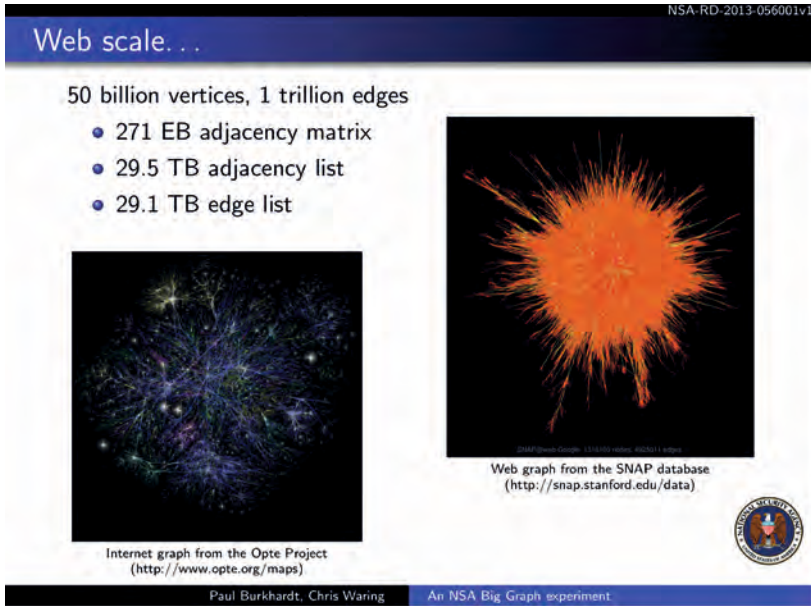
[Figure 1] NSA Big Graph Experiment (Source: Technical Report NSA-RD-2013-056002v1)

The term social graph used by the DP-3T consortium was originally coined by Mark Zuckerberg in 2008. In the case of Facebook the nodes are individual people, their friendships the edges. In Zuckerberg's apt notion of the social graph it is evident that Facebook has nearly managed to monopolize the mathematical representation of all digitally addressable individuals worldwide.

[Figure 2] Zuckerberg Social Graph (Source: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

As the revelations by Edward Snowden as well as material from the War on Terror shows (Burkhard and Waring 2013; Burkhard 2014; Engemann 2016a/b; 2019; 2020; Gellmann 2020), acquiring and maintaining a social graph is a core element of the NSA's approach to surveillance. At the same time platform companies like Google, Amazon, and Uber also rely on acquiring and monopolizing graphs of specific markets: search, consumption, mobility (Valdes 2021; Engemann 2016b; 2020; Seemann forthcoming 2021).

Without openly discussing these dimensions it is apparent that within the DP-3T consortium and a larger community of computer science informed civil society actors it was a shared view that allowing nation states to appropriate social graphs via corona tracing pps would be detrimental to the goal of preserving liberal values within this infrastructure.

In decentralized system where risk is processed on device locally, "this comes with the important benefit that the server cannot learn the social graph, which is data that can easily be repurposed and misused in ways that individuals would not reasonably expect and may not wish." (DP-3T, 4, highlighted in the original C.E.)[6]

This point is stressed further in the accompanying Data Protection and Security Paper of the DP-3T, published in May 2020: "No entity can observe or keep record of a global view of the social graph of a population, in anonymized form or otherwise." (DP-3T, 3)

In a joint statement of researchers associated with the DP-3T project, the dangers of such graphs are further highlighted: "With access to the social graph, a bad actor (state, private sector, or hacker) could spy on citizens' real-world activities. Some countries are seeking to build systems which could enable them to access and process this social graph." (Veale et al. 2020, 2).

In centralized approaches, the tracing data collected by the smartphones could be interlinked and a graph of the contacts between devices would emerge (fig. 3).[7] Due to the anonymous nature of the tracing data this graph itself would not allow surveillance of individuals. But since interlinking the graph with other data is trivial, the existence of such a graph would pose a significant privacy threat. With centralized data storage and processing, corona tracing apps thus would have become a means of graph appropriations (Engemann 2014; 2016 a/b; 2019; 2020; Seemann 2021; see also Chun 2020), allowing for the generation of a dynamic social map of the tracing population.

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6   See also the Blue Trace Manifesto from Singapore (Blue Trace 2020).
7   See for example the position taken by German-Franko PEPP-PT consortium: PEPP-PT Data Protection and Information Security Architecture Illustrated on German Implementation, 5, 8, and 23.
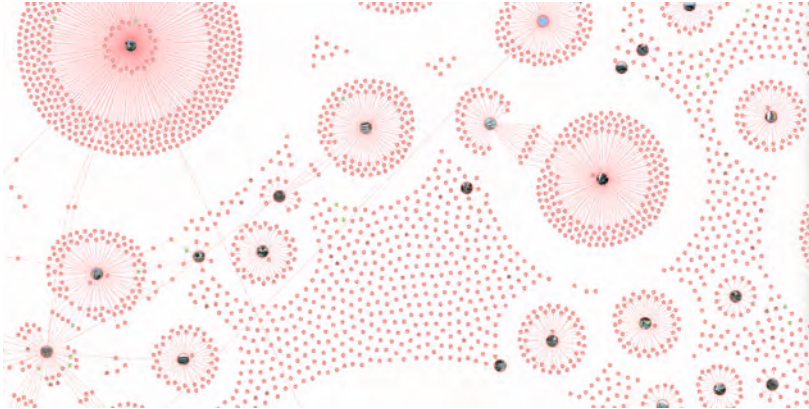
[Figure 3] Contact tracing graph visualization in Singapore (Source: https://co.vid19.sg)

Initially favored by the German and French governments (see PEPP-PT 2020), centralized approaches sparked criticism not only by the DP-3T consortium but by the wider public. Germany eventually changed their stance to a decentralized app, which delayed the rollout by six weeks. France deployed a centralized version in mid-May. By mid-June the centralized approach favored in Great Britain had been dropped and the decentralized model was adopted for the NHS app.

From Governmentality to Governmediality

The development of the corona tracing apps has given rise to a peculiar state of exception: the exceptional situation that those who are governed reject being graphed out. Given the prevalence of graphing for platform economies and in geopolitics since 9/11, such rejection could be called naïve. But perhaps the corona crisis is a moment when contemporary societies began in earnest to muster and investigate the media of their governing. By this I mean the media that both generate the data, addresses, and orders as well as allow societies to store, transmit and process these very data, addresses and orders to govern themselves. Despite romantic inclinations desiring this, unmediated societies have never existed.[8] The current situation of the ongoing transition to digital media is a re-mediation. The scope of this re-mediation is no less than total: an outside of the digital mediality nowhere in sight. Quite the contrary: we are witnessing how every aspect of life gets re-mediated as smart

8   Society as a modern phenomenon is the translocal and transtemporal interrelatedness of individuals, institutions, and entities enabled and facilitated by and with media. The critique of society often relies on calling for seemingly unmediated forms like face-to-face communication to overcome the indirectness and alienation ascribed to society. See for example the classical dichotomy between society and community as offered by Tönnies (2019 [1897]).
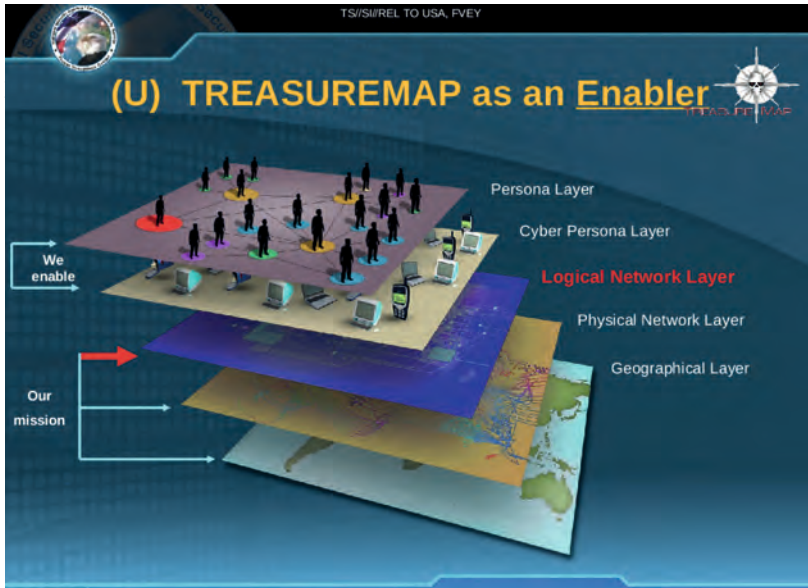
[Figure 4] Slide from the Snowden Archive TREASUREMAP Presentation (Source: https://www.spiegel.de/media/6442ce11-0001-0014-0000-000000034757/media-34757.pdf)

What raised its head in Europe is perhaps not the state of exception as Agamben envisioned it. Rather, it is a further solidification of a new form of governing in which what Michel Foucault had described as governmentality (Foucault 2004) becomes a governmediality. The emergence of a regime where individuals, hackers, experts, NGOs, private firms, and governments generate recursive publics that allow them to study, deliberate, and govern the mediality of their own conduct and of the conduct of conducts. The media of society, more precisely the media which establish and enable the sociality of a given population, are foregrounded and rendered into problems of governing (fig. 4). A process which is inseparable from investigating the media of self-governing of establishing individuality, privacy, and self-conduct under digital conditions. In the emerging liberal governmediality of Europe, enabling citizens to question digital media as tools of both enabling as well as threating liberal values constitutes a core dynamic. The corona tracing apps exemplify this development. In the future, similar developments in the fields of digital identity management, eHealth, eGovernment, but also energy conversation and food safety can be expected. None of these developments will rule out a state of exception in Agamben's sense, but the focus of critical inquiry into digital statehood could perhaps learn more by focusing on the permanent

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9   For an elaborate discussion on the historical and epistemological contexts of cen-
     trality measures, see the excellent overview in Bernhard Rieder's "Engines of Order –
     A Mechanology of Algorithmic Techniques" (Rieder 2020, 268ff).

mobilization of critical faculties enabling liberal implementations of digital media.

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VIDEOCONFERENCING

CLOSE-UP

FACE

WORK

SELF

Zoom in on the Face: The Close-Up at Work

Guilherme da Silva Machado

Recent configurations of the workplace have revealed the face as an indispensable medium for the organization of labor. An attempt will be made here to show how such configurations rely on a cinematic ideal of human expression to operate as a streamlined space of interfacial communication with performance-regulating effects. The cinematic close-up, which historically embodied this ideal, then assumes a new function in contemporary organizations: that of providing an expanded semiotic system of the face for an accurate communication of psychological traits and states of mind beyond verbal exchanges. The facial close-up, in this perspective, instead of a close range between the camera and the "facial object," defines a relationship to the figurative space according to which its totality takes on a physiognomic significance.

A notable effect of the recent pandemic has been the sudden expansion of public presentations of self at work by cinematic means. For a significant number of workers who had, up until the pre-pandemic period, stood in the position of pure spectators of cinematic public figures, the constraint of tele-working has compelled them to acknowledge the fact that techniques such as the close-up, which usually heighten the emotions and beauty of film stars, TV and Internet personalities, are now tools for their own public magnifi-cation. What's more, so-called videoconferencing apparatuses used for work meetings generate situations where workers can both contemplate and be contemplated by all of their interlocutors at will, and from such a distance that the slightest reactions of each person can be equally distinguished by any other. The visual arrangement of these apparatuses enables everyone to enjoy a voyeuristic experience of their colleagues, collaborators, and clients quite similar to that one enjoys while watching a film character. This is due to a blind spot between cameras and screens that makes it possible for everyone to stare at whomever they want without anyone knowing exactly who's watching whom. From this perspective, the pandemic has hastened a reconfiguration of human interactions at work, while making it clear that one indispensable medium of productivism today is—alongside the computer—the human face.

Insofar as this reconfiguration of work interactions is part of a regular trend unexpectedly brought to a paroxysm by a force majeure, one can draw evidence about a shift in aesthetic regimes sustaining labor organization and productive performance. If companies today can dispense with the body as an object of knowledge—and with the architectural, ergonomic, and mon-itoring systems that make it visible in order to better control it (Rabinbach 1992; Hediger 2009; 2013)—but less so with the face, this suggests that inter-facial relations remain crucial for industrial productivity in many sectors. One could then argue that since at least the mid-twentieth century and the rise of technological bureaucracies, an aesthetic regime of work discipline focused on the body and the scientific gaze seems to have given way to another focused considerably on the face and the day-to-day interfacial gaze.

While the convenience of facial observation in work interactions can be simply interpreted as a matter of communicative efficiency, this efficiency is arguably due to a surfeit of events perceived on faces that allows workers to recognize, beyond verbal communication, zones of psychological resonance, fluctuations in the mood of their interlocutors, reasons for admiration, impatience, dull-ness, and disappointment; that is, a series of conscious and unconscious phys-iognomic motions, the reading of which enables workers to identify general expectations, factors of satisfaction and discontent, grounds for laudable performance, and their own levels of *fitness*. Such daily observation practices at work were described, from the 1950s, by sociologists like Erving Goffman, who was particularly interested in the way workers try to control and keep

track of the impressions they convey to their co-workers and other audiences (Goffman 1956). In the field of anthropology, and based on communication theory, Gregory Bateson introduced the concept of "injunction" in 1972 to refer to rules, motivational and inhibiting factors transmitted by non-verbal, albeit effective means in what he called secondary levels of communication (Bateson 1987). Following Bateson's concept, the organizational apparatus of companies can be seen as a combination of different layers of communication aimed at regulating performance. These layers are not all at the same level of explicitness. While at the verbal level typical cordialities are maintained, a range of injunctions can be routinely deployed through non-verbal channels, and in particular through dramaturgies of the face. Interfacial exchanges can, therefore, be understood as a secondary communication channel through which injunctions to daily productivity circulate. Its existence and its potential importance depend on both a certain knowledge to interpret faces as signifiers of concealed judgments and feelings, and a particular concern with the design of the public image of self.

The importance granted to the face as a text of the individual soul has a long history. In its recent theoretical articulations—especially after the intervention of photographic snapshots, which have significantly reframed the debate on physiognomy around issues of facial *mobility*[1]—one might consider the work of Georg Simmel to be one of the first critical accounts on the modern fascination with the face as the locus of visibility of personality and psychological processes. In a famous essay on Rodin in 1911, Simmel argued that the modern preference for the face over the body relies on the fact that the former shows "man in the flow of his inner life," while the latter, prioritized by the Ancients, shows man rather "in his permanent substance" (Simmel 1996, 103). For the Berlin philosopher, "...the essence of the modern as such is psychologism, the experiencing and interpretation of the world in terms of the reactions of our inner life, and indeed as an inner world, the dissolution of fixed contents in the fluid element of the soul" (103). Simmel saw the face as a scene with moving features forming countless units of meaning. On such meaningful and permanently moving surface, the restless personality and emotional life of man would thus find their privileged expression: "only the face becomes the geometric locus, as it were, of the inner personality, to the degree that it is perceptible. ... The face, in fact, accomplishes more completely than anything else the task of creating a maximum change of total expression by a minimum change of detail" (Simmel 1965, 279).

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1   This was at the expense of essentialist conceptions of the soul, which favored a her-
     meneutics of stable features and human phenotypes. For a survey of this (significant,
     but not conclusive) reframing of the physiognomic debate during the nineteenth
     century, see Gunning (1997). For a good overview of the discourse on physiognomy
     before the nineteenth century, in particular since the Renaissance, see Magli (1989).

This modern fascination with the face as the revelatory space of the soul was not without an associated pursuit of technical means to reveal the face. Tom Gunning called the "gnostic mission of cinema" its "potential for uncovering visual knowledge." For many early film theorists, such as Bela Balázs and Jean Epstein, "the gnostic potential of the cinema was especially evident in the conjunction of the cinematic device of the close-up and the subject of the human face" (Gunning 1997, 1). According to Gunning, one of the key impulses in the nineteenth-century development of cinematic technologies was a multiple curiosity about the meanings of the face that propelled attempts to master its reading through the classification and archiving of its signifying moving features. These attempts were carried out by scientists like Duchenne de Boulogne, Charles Darwin, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Georges Demenÿ: "The desire to know the face in its most transitory and bizarre manifestations was stimulated by the use of photography; but that desire, in turn, also stimulated the development of photography itself, spurring it to increasing technical mastery over time and motion, prodding it toward the actual invention of motion pictures" (Gunning 1997, 25). In the early days of the motion picture, close-ups offered the spectacle of magnified facial expressions whose attraction derived from their grotesquely rendered details. The "gnostic impulse" for facial revelation thus fueled the market of technological curiosities and entertainment.

With narrative cinema, the close-up came to be theorized as a technique to give the spectator a clear sense of the moods and emotions dominating film characters, potentially inducing empathetic attitudes. For a film theorist like Balázs, a former student of Simmel who defended the art of filmmaking on the premise of the movie camera's capacity to see more and better than the human eye, this mechanic power of vision was truly "artistic" when applied to unveil the human soul. Balázs argued that facial close-ups communicate the psychological complexity of characters by clear-cut visual means, i.e. by magnifying minimal changes in detail that denote total changes in expression. This made cinema an ostensibly richer and more authentic form of expression than the conventional linguistic signs. He called this realm of cinematic signifiers of the soul, micro-physiognomy, and its application in film narratives, micro-dramaturgy (Balázs 1977). Inspired by German classical idealist aesthetics, he went so far as to extend the idea of physiognomy to the whole universe of filmable things (Koch and Hansen 1987; Iampolski 2010): any cinematic matter was subject to assume a facial function as long as it was stylistically elaborated to take on a subjective signification on the screen. A glimpse of a city, a landscape, or an object may all express a personality or état d'âme. The close-up was the ideal technique to make these elements assume the expressive power of the face: "Close-ups … yield a subjective image of the world and succeed … in showing the world as colored by a temperament, as illumined by an emotion" (quoted in Koch and Hansen 1987, 170).

Balázs's theories testify to a reliance in the superior authenticity of the cinematic image in communicating subjective attributes. Faced with the close-up, the spectators are plunged, he said, into a purely physiognomic dimension, the whole screen being set to reflect inner movements and psychic dramas. He claimed that the close-up was an artistically designed situation of specta-torial complicity with the characters' mind states and personalities. The crucial thing about this technique was that it gives visual access to even the uncon-scious truth of film characters, beyond any representational "make-believe" typical of bourgeois theater. Close-ups of human faces, because of their power of subjective revelation belying any role-playing attitude, make the per-sonalities of characters inseparable from those of the actors who play them: "The film actor is the sole creator of his figures [*Gestalten*], which is why his personality ... means style and Weltanschauung. One sees in the appearance of the human being how he sees the world" (quoted in Aumont, 1992, 86).

Curiously, one of the most influential works on the modern "intimate society," Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man*, also speaks about a demise of role-playing in favor of a "more authentic" mode of individual public expression. According to Sennett, public expression is nowadays experienced as an idio-syncratic and spontaneous manifestation, a direct reflection of individual psychological impulses. The expression of feelings, for instance, no longer reflects impersonal presentation models; it is no longer derived from con-ventional morphologies and significations characteristic of the "public life" which individuals learn to believe in and play with: "Expression in the public world was [once] presentation of feeling states and tones with a meaning of their own no matter who was making the presentation; representation of feeling states in the intimate society makes the substance of an emotion depend on who is projecting it" (Sennett 2002, 314). Insofar as any public action is now experienced as a direct reflection of singular personalities, the principle of "role-playing" is replaced by a principle governing the public life that Sennett calls "narcissistic." According to the latter, both social and material relations that an individual can have all bear a substantially deter-mined relationship with the self; the self is permanently looking for its reflection in experience. Writing in the 1970s and taking white-collar workers as a key example, Sennett portrays modernity as the time when the question of personal identity has pervaded all modes of action, extinguishing role-playing as an attitude that preserves a gap between forms of expression and the self. Modern narcissists, he claims, "treat social situations as mirrors of self, and are deflected from examining them as forms which have a non-personality meaning" (327). Instilled by modern institutions that "mobilize

narcissism" (327), they see all public attitudes as self-revelation, as expressions of their singular personality, personal ethics and motivations.[2]

The "mobilization of narcissism" typical of modern institutions, and the "gnostic impulse" of cinema to reveal the face, have good reason to find a privileged articulation in the current practices of self-branding at work. As practices designed to tie self-identities to personal potential for contribution to business achievements, they request individuals to constantly observe the judgment of others in order to assess personal *fitness*. In terms of rules for personal success, self-branding doesn't involve the adaptation to impersonal models of good work performance. Rather, it requires an ongoing self-revelation attitude—revelation of one's creative, charismatic, motivated, responsible, etc. personality. On the other hand, it's a practice of monitoring the reception of "self" by others (Hearn 2008). If such practices incite narcissistic concern, it's because they erase the boundaries between one's public expression and the assessment of one's innate abilities, character strengths, and other self-related attributes. Both from the point of view of self-exhibition and from the point of view of the inspection of impressions caused by the self, self-branding practices require a network of signs more accurate and more "authentic" than verbal signs. For these too are filtered by conventional courtesy and decorum. It calls for a sign system that is able to communicate the subtle truth of inner drives and personal impressions, to provide a more faithful picture of singular personalities and judgmental thoughts. The fact that the cinematic close-up, with its promise to transform the screen into a space of pure subjective revelation, is now substituting interpersonal relations at work—this should therefore come as no big surprise. It provides self-branders with greater control over their powers of persuasion, as well as greater visual accuracy in detecting meaningful expressions in their critical appraisers—they can thus become aware of the minute motives that trigger this expanded range of judgmental expressions.

Communicational apparatuses operating through facial close-ups and enabling inconspicuous stares do nothing but enhance the same physiognomic practices they capitalize on in the contemporary workplace. By excluding bodies and the environment from the scope of attention, they intensify processes of facial scrutiny. They homogenize a scale of perception that can only be established circumspectly and fitfully in ordinary live interactions. Hence, they situate groups of collaborators in spaces of more rigid interfacial symbiosis. By setting aside signs that don't have a revelatory function of the selves, they compel reciprocal uninterrupted readings of intimacy. Thus, they transform spaces of human interaction into spaces of pure psychological resonance. At the same time, they subject individual

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2   Boris Groys (2010) has recently offered an insight on the modern aesthetics of the soul close to Sennett's ideas in his interesting essay on the "obligation of self-design."

faces to a stricter and more meticulous responsiveness within micro-dramatic collective scenes. They sharpen and intensify meaningful correlations between faces. They cause faces to respond to each other in a more necessary, urgent, atomic way, because of the proximity of their reciprocal frontal exposure. Their effect is to ensure the duplication of official exchanges complete with intense exercises of facial interpretation and dramaturgy. In this way, they complement the regulatory function of verbal communication by securing an efficient, but undeclared (and thus secondary) level of communication.

In such spaces where the gaze can only be interfacial,[3] being able to look at one's own face among others is of prime importance. Videoconferencing mirror images link the presentation of self at work with the aesthetics of social networks, where self-branding practices are well established. They consequently extend to the daily presentation of self, one's view of one's own self as an aesthetic object. The gesture that the mirror image provokes is inevitably that of examining the outward appearance of self and its meaning, for verification that it actually signifies what it is supposed to signify—that its forms are *in conformity* with the circumstances. Such gestures attest that if video communication apparatuses prove useful as substitutes for the contemporary workplace, this is not simply because they support efficient first level team communication, but also because they support processes of *facial production*. They are efficient *faciality machines* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987): they multiply opportunities to create and address meaningful surfaces of self to others. Close-up mirror images make faces proliferate; everyone is given the chance to control subtle signs emanating from the self, which aim to persuade and constrain others to take into account messages that are never explicit enough to be stated, and never hidden enough to discount their effects. The space constituted by the close-ups is therefore a space of intensified inter-excitation, with multiple semiotic agents of interpersonal stress.

But it's not just about the human head's face. All the elements within the individual image frames in videoconferencing act as faces, i.e. they give rise to a view of the inner attributes and subjective states of their characters. In the context of the home office, composing one's video background and choosing the objects likely to enter the frame requires reflection on the signification one wants to see attributed to one's personality and psychological traits. All visual and sound forms become signs of inner features. At this level, the problem of whether or not these images are "close-ups" is in no way a matter of measuring "shot sizes" of the human body. It's the fact that they are *integrally* conceived as signifying surfaces of selves, and they endow their figures (even

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3   For an original theory of the interfacial gaze as a generative force field of the self, see Sloterdijk (2011).

their background details) with a physiognomic function, which links them to a historical practice of the close-up. The cinematic close-up—the embodiment of an ideal of expression of the soul since the nineteenth century—after its drifts in the market of attractions and film narratives, assumes then a tele-pathic function in the world of labor, where its new configurations become the default setting for the public staging of self.

In pandemic times, companies have been massively testing new forms of social interaction that don't fail to strengthen their organizational networks of physiognomic injunctions. Communication networks built on physiognomic knowledge manifest a disciplinary power unlike that of specialized (scientific) knowledge applied to bodies at work. They operate as opportunities of putting into practice a widespread hermeneutics that generates the voluntary normalization of productive behavior. One can always gauge the success or failure of videoconferencing apparatuses to replace live work interactions; in any case, these apparatuses deal with the problem of the reconstruction of an aesthetic regime that ensures productivity in contemporary bureaucratic systems of production. This regime is that of the interfacial gaze: a key channel for the practice of self-branding and the reading of psychodynamic effects of individual actions. Workers today care a great deal about faces, they're con-stantly decoding and encoding faces. The recent cinematic configurations of the workplace are the result of a situation of production where the body has been made disposable—accompanied by a demand for greater visibility of faces. They're the ideal(istic) alternative for the production of a self-disciplined subject immersed in a physiognomic dimension.

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AIDS

HIV

PANDEMIC

BAREBACKING

ILLNESS

DISABILITY

Sex with the Signifier

Diego Semerene

The argument of this chapter is the shift from sex through bodies to sex through words, which the COVID-19 lockdown triggers. This shift is situated within a context of "autistic sex" which precedes the pandemic crisis, where the human subject doesn't recognize the subjectivity of the other in their attempt to enjoy sex. The forms that sexual (non-) encounters must take during lockdown reminds us of the role of fantasy, supported and enacted by the apparatus of the signifier, or *writing*, in bringing forth pleasure for the subject—particularly in sparing them from the inevitably unsatisfactory encounter with the fleshly other. When crises make certain enjoyments impossible, we may thus rediscover the fundamental function of the signifier—whose materiality can be more reliant, and malleable in obeying the shapes dictated by one's fantasy, than that of the body.

A man from Fabswingers, a British hook-up site where I have a profile as a crossdresser, sends me several messages, all of which go unanswered. "Hi. What are you up to? Hello? Hello? Babe? I am close to you. If I'm just wasting my time with you will tell me. Ok, I guess I am." He finalizes with a sad-faced emoji, which prompts me to reply with a "WhatsApp," also the name of the app we are using to communicate. He then summarizes the reason for being of our interaction with astonishing concision, laying bare the function of the signifier in enjoyment, the central argument of this essay: "I want you to speak to me."

I swear I am a much quicker texter with men who allow me time to respond. I, too, want them to speak to me. Particularly when I can't invite them over. But, when I think of it, also when I can. I often turn not to pornography to masturbate, and not even to the photographs these often good-looking strangers send me, but to the sentences they wrote me.

I scroll back on WhatsApp to find places where, for instance, a Matthew from Birmingham, who has told me he wants to marry me, says, "Hope you have a nice sleep princess, wish I woke up next to my angel." I zero in on "princess," I zero in on "angel," even imagining a "little" preceding each noun to make my coming inevitable. I remember his face, but the last thing I want to do before coming is read his words.

On Twitter the profile *DailyScally* offers photos of supposedly straight and working class English men ("scallies"). In one of them we see a handsome young man in a blue hoodie with a shaved head and a disaffected expression. He is made "scally" by the writing on top of the image, which provides his supposed age, 19, and his supposed name. "Mason cums so much and his spunk is so potent that he's made every girl he's ever slept with pregnant…6 kids and counting."

Words will be there to make claims about the body that the body itself cannot. They pick up where the body leaves off. Or is it the other way around? In any case, without the signifier there is not even a way of approaching the body.

Scrolling through my *Finstagram*, where I follow many MMA fighters from Ukraine, even though, or precisely because, I can't read their alphabet, one of them posts a picture of a tattoo he is getting across his chest. There it is, written on the body as anything ever was, astonishingly concise, too:

"I've been holding back tears," says the tattoo, in plain old English.

Someone responds to an ad I post on the French site Annonces-Travesti. After the pandemic, my plans to spend the summer in Paris have been scrapped, but not my eagerness to see what French men have to say. This guy sends me several texts claiming to want to be my boyfriend, "to walk hand in hand, admiring the sun going down." His description is so vivid I almost come even if

I am yet to know what he looks like. It seems I am not alone. "The more I write to you, the more my desire is only one…to see you," he writes.

Someone else on Fabswingers reads my profile, which states where I am from, or where I claim to be from, and writes not to ask for more nudes but to make an acoustic request: "Sexy would love to hear that accent."

Matthew from Birmingham, who wants to marry me after lockdown and will allow me to read all his text messages when we are married, "out of respect for my wife," disappears for a few days. When Matthew resurfaces, he apologizes. He is at risk of being furloughed and was swamped with work. I question whether he is serious. He writes, "How can I say what I've said and not be serious?"

A married 48-year-old from Grindr says he used condoms "pre-corona," but that he is "beginning to think life's too short to pass on real pleasure." He then tells me he needs a mistress, "a real lady," someone who can give him what his wife can't. "Care and respect offered in exchange for fantasy fulfillment."

It is quite striking how I have so quickly managed to adapt my urge for copious sex with strangers to the constraints posed by the pandemic. Like the man from Annonces-Travesti, the more I write the more I want to see them. But then I don't. In clinging on to the efficiency of their words, so competent when compared to the men's sexual abilities, I find pleasure where I expected to find suffering. There is, at last, something there where there was supposed to be nothing. Is that not at the core of their wanting to see, or write to, a cross-dresser in the first place?

I digress. The real question here is where the psychic labor devoted to symptoms that we judge to be fundamental to our everyday lives go when a crisis muzzles them. What do queer cruising subjects for whom a "post-AIDS" world has been governed by retroviral drugs and bareback sex aimed at an endless profusion of partners do with their bodies when such diligently crafted ecstasies are barred? I will argue that, when crises make age-old enjoyments impossible, we seek refuge in the more literal registers of the signifier, whose materiality can be more reliant than that of the body.

French gay writer Matthieu Galey suffered from a terminal illness around the peak of the HIV epidemic. The fact that his illness was not AIDS struck him as an incredibly funny dissonance with the times, "as though I had caught scarlet fever during the great plague" (Galey 2017, 788).[1] Galey's symptoms were a particularly demoralizing blow for someone for whom cruising, for sex and ideas, was a way of life. At first he develops a limp. Then he must use a cane to be able to walk. Ultimately, Galey is confined to a wheelchair and loses his hand movement. The first to go is his right hand, the one he uses to write.

1   All translations from Galey's diaries, which remain untranslated into English, are mine.

And write he does, continuing the diary he began in 1953, at 18 years old, until the day of his death in 1986. Almost one thousand pages detailing the inner workings of Parisian publishing companies, dinner parties and nights at the theatre with the likes of Françoise Sagan, Louis Aragon, Jean Cocteau, and Roland Barthes. He also documents his long love stories and brief sexual encounters, all culminating in the slow breakdown of his body.

This is a breakdown made livable through the written word. For Hervé Guibert, whose entire oeuvre is written with and through the breaking down of the AIDS-afflicted body, "one of AIDS's few mercies is the emphasis it places on the brief time it gives you. What to do with the unsaved life? Use it, Guibert implores his readers, and rage—or write" (Durbin 2020).

At a time when apps dedicated to making sexual intercourse possible thrive it is striking that so many of these app-mediated interactions seem bound to stay within the realm of signifier-ness in its more literal sense. So much cruising, so little sex: from the question, "What do you want to do to me?" as a strategy to fish for words that, unlike the body, can hit the fantasy at its heart, to the exposition of exhaustive scenarios of how the sexual encounter should take place even though, or precisely because, it never will. It can be quite frustrating for those invested in real-life meetings, because to enter this digital sexual economy is, too often, to remain in it. Although the cruising subject in this context can go back and forth between acting out the symptom through the bodies of others or their words, one can find very quickly that there is indeed enough, if not more, enjoyment in the scripting of the event, than in the event itself.

Bice Benvenuto refers to our time as "not that of eros" (2020). We are invested in the auto-erotism of the sensorial, predicated on thingness and surfaces, in lieu of the sensual, predicated on actual seduction. She calls this autistic sex. The subject, who is only interested in getting off, doesn't recognize the subjectivity of the other. That is, she makes do with the fantasy, with the words, with the signifier—the most stable variables given the other's tendency to turn into spoiled objects once they become something other than ghostly apparitions. Galey writes of the blues that follow a particular night of orgies in Avignon in July of 1984. "A pleasure much more intense prior than during. Why act things out? The prologue is so much better than the play" (2017, 750). When he goes to Salzburg to meet Peter Handke, the Austrian writer tells him: "The realization of desires, it's always a bit too much. Desiring suffices" (Galey 2017, 713).

A lockdown that reduces the sexual encounter to the subject's exchanging of images and words with one hand on their phone, and the other on their sex, is a rather fitting proposition for the autistic sex non-partners of our non-eros time. We don't need to meet. We cannot meet. Meeting is conveniently

barred. For some, this can of course become an incentive for breaking a newly externalized law. An Adam from *Fabswingers* writes to me, "Hey, total top here looking to make love during lockdown." Someone else on Grindr says: "Want to get slutty tonight? Fuck this lockdown…"

We are in the era of autism, Benvenuto argues, and the autistic subject is always already in lockdown. We can think of the supposed horrors of lockdown, then, as the culmination of a path we were already on. A path taken by those who take all the pleasure and give out none.

Enjoyment from the signifier obviously predates the digital, but digital sex without sex is a key item on the list of the so-called new symptoms, which have to do with technologies of instant gratification: panic attacks, attention deficits, addictions, hyper-activity, and eating disorders. When it is the mechanism of sex that makes us come, such as in the factory-style dynamic of sex parties where dozens of bottoms await side-by-side on all fours for tops to fuck them without seeing their faces, there can be all sorts of pleasures, but there is no eros.

If the baby wants to carry on living it's because of pleasure, Benvenuto reminds us. If the baby asks for milk it is not milk she is after but eros, which can only be granted by a mother who takes pleasure in the baby. This can't be a one-way mirror. Milk without the breast, and here we don't mean the organ, is automation (Benvenuto 2020). In our autistic times the body of the other might be the breast but it is the signifier that warrants lactation.

It is useful to consider Lacan's shift in theorizing the signifier in Seminar XX, prior to which the signifier was what represented a subject for another subject. He asks us to forget what we know about the signifier, explaining it as an enjoying substance: "As soon as we turn things into nouns, we presuppose a substance …." (Lacan 1998, 21). For Lacan, then, there is a materiality to the signifier, perhaps a milky one, whereas the body itself is a symbolic creation and mere consequence of signifier-ness. Jouissance, which can go from a pleasant tickle to an unbearable explosion, appears as an effect of the signifier. If there is jouissance, there is some sort of writing taking place. A sentence is being written. Bodies affected by lethal viruses are in a good position to know what kind of sentence that is…To be affected by the virus, in this logic, is to be under its sign, whether one suffers the consequences of the virus physically or, for now, fantasmatically.

A great part of what we enjoy about the symptom is in the fact that we find, in the words of poet Nuno Júdice, "paths without exit so we can stay inside them for a while (…)" (2019, 74). But enjoyment is supple. The symptom can cast its net onto newly found objects because it is ultimately about signifiers, not objects per se. When psychoanalyst Jamieson Webster volunteers at an Intensive Care Unit for COVID patients in New York, she finds herself yearning

for eloquence from patients in their last moments but only finds "desperate stuttering" (2020) and fumbling. There is writing here too, but of a different kind. The word appears, for Webster, as the go-to defense mechanism for academics, but the isolated terminal patients, many of whom in states of psychotic delirium, speak nonsense as if clinging on to signifier-ness instead of meaning.

For Freud, symptomatic somatization is an essentially creative act. To move something somewhere (i.e. the loss of a father to pain in the neck) is a metaphoric and productive act of representation akin to the dynamic between signifier and signified, which writing and speaking engender. In this sense, writing, on bodies or paper, is supposed to give one the same amount of pleasure as fucking (Webster 2020).

Galey refers to his defiance toward death as an "aesthetic" resistance (2017, 822). Because a death sentence is being written by every speaking subject the minute they come into the world, he sees a confrontation with death predicated on the idea of a cure as a futile proposition. Instead, he is interested in "the beauty of the gesture" (822) that emerges from writing the afflicted body down and away. "My impression is that I am writing my own obituary, except better" (821).

It wasn't in his being spared from HIV that Galey carved himself a space outside illness. AIDS, like COVID-19, haunts and re-shapes bodies even if the virus fails to enter them. In other words, the ravaging or emancipatory consequences of viruses are not contingent on infection, but on infectiousness. Galey resisted the crisis by writing it, "in order to look the beast in the eye. We never know; we might intimidate it" (2017, 831). He claims that if he was surprised by the miracle of the cure he would be disappointed. The sudden opening of yet another 50 years to be lived would feel like a catastrophe. "It is the brevity of my current life that makes it so beautiful and so precious. Something to be consumed *in situ*…" (757).

Edmund White remarks the many intersections between AIDS and COVID-19, such as the prevalence of misinformation traversing each crisis, while also listing their differences. For instance, the fact that AIDS posed a much lesser threat to health professionals, and that it "bore a badge of shame even in the gay community—if you were infected it was your own fault for not practising safe sex—whereas everyone feels sympathy for coronavirus victims" (White 2020). There are many reasons why it would be nonsensical, if not perverse, to compare AIDS to COVID-19. But there is surely a way to trace a relationship between them that escapes equivalence, but finds kinship in certain registers—such as fantasy. The signifier is surely a fundamental apparatus within fantasy as the interface that organizes jouissance and its objects. Fantasy is that which allows, for instance, some to think of masks and

condoms as equivalent figures in that they can both expose the male body as vulnerable, contradicting phallic claims it makes about itself. Right-wing YouTuber Brenden Dilley recently said he will never wear a mask to protect himself from COVID-19 "because he hardly ever wears condoms and, so far, he's only produced three offspring" (Gremore 2020).

For Guibert, enjoying the atrocity of AIDS is a gift between species that leads to lucidity and inspiration because "it was a disease delivered in steps." The virus "granted death time to live, the time to discover life at last, … a great modern invention that green monkeys from Africa had transmitted to us" (Guibert 1990, 193).[2] Gifts that retroviral drugs have perhaps robbed from those privileged enough to live in a "post-AIDS" bareback bubble but that COVID-19 has offered back, like a heirloom. Although the pace of COVID-19 is decidedly different than that of HIV, they coincide in the threat they come to represent as signifiers themselves. The possibilities of the gift lie in the potential usages the subject may make from the haunting that a destabilizing threat enacts. If AIDS was a gift because it allowed for an interim where death was mulled over before taking over, the status of COVID as a gift is perhaps contingent on its remaining in the horizon—neutered from pathogen into the fantasmatic safety, and multivalence, of the signifier.

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2   Translation is mine from the original publication of Guibert's *À l'Ami Qui Ne m'a Pas Sauvé La Vie.*

FACE MASK

TEXTILE-OBJECT

ALTERITY

FASHION

ETHICS

FRAGILITY

Textile-Objects and Alterity: Notes on the Pandemic Mask

Marie-Aude Baronian

This essay looks at the pandemic mask as a material object, which—beyond a means of immunization—measures the global fragility we experience and the way we relate to and encounter radical otherness. The face mask embodies what I term a "textile-object": a tangible medium that one wears and handles, but also that one reflects on and contemplates. Drawing on an ethical reading of the mask, the essay questions this pervasive item as both a fashion object that crystallizes our contemporaneity and an accessory that tackles and seizes instances of alterity. Ultimately, wearing a mask forces us to infuse fundamental ethical thoughts into the way we inhabit the world and the way we engage with material objects.

Nowadays, the mask can be seen as the ultimate material object, and it is arguably one of the most widely and frequently used sartorial items: in such a short time span, the face mask has become a ubiquitous, routine, and enforced wearing practice. If the mask is a medial and prosthetic sartorial

object, protecting the body from inside-out and acting as a barrier and a means of immunization, it also measures the extreme fragility of life, in its social and material sense. As viral as the virus itself, the mask is not only analogous to current modes of investing in public spaces and platforms; it has come to circumscribe and dictate how we occupy and inhabit the world. Indeed, masks orient the way we perceive and feel the world, others, and ourselves, and define—affectively and socially—the fragile global situation we are experiencing. If the pandemic mask represents a material sign of vigilant precaution, or *fin du monde*, it concretely reminds us that behind every mask there is a tangible and friable life and world at stake, waiting to be *un-masked*.

Undoubtedly, the viral circulation of the pandemic mask makes us face a myriad of compelling questions. Here, I propose some brief thoughts on the mask as a sartorial medium and fashion object that seizes and tackles certain modalities of alterity.

Imposing itself as the most globally distinctive sartorial object, the face mask had already been vividly considered by various fashion designers who—motivated by sociopolitical concerns[1] and other inspirations—reimagined and worked with this accessory. One relevant example is to be found in a *défilé* by French designer Marine Serre,[2] who dressed her models in masks in order for the fashion industry to meditate on the ecological crisis and apocalyptical matters.

The self-referential mask has very rapidly transcended the medical field (as well as religious, cultural, cultual, and military uses) and migrated to the field of fashion, even becoming the ultimate object in fashion since it concentrates the heart of our contemporaneity.[3] The mask is exemplary of what I call a "textile-object": an object which, by and through its very materiality, textures the way we connect to ourselves, to others, and to the world. The textile-object animates the body in its physical and reflexive gestures. The textile-object is simultaneously matter and text; it is the medium that one wears and handles, but also that one reflects on and contemplates. What is more, the textile-object traces in its weft what happens here and now, and also serves as a memory-object as it holds the imprint of the event.

From an historical and sociological point of view, many clothes and accessories have been conceived to protect the self from others, to take distance from them, or to extract oneself from the mundane.[4] In the context of the

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1   See Corinne Jeammet's online article, "Sept créateurs de mode expliquent les raisons qui les ont poussés à imaginer des masques, bien avant la pandémie du Covid-19" (2020).
2   Her Autumn–Winter 2020–2021 collection was presented during the fashion week in Paris in February 2020.
3   See, for example, Giorgio Agamben's essay, "What Is the Contemporary?" (2009).
4   Let us think, at least in the history of western fashion, of the crinoline, hats, and veils for women, or armor and doublets for men. I would like here to thank Sophie Kurkdjian for

pandemic, however, the mask reveals the persistent, undeniable, and striking frontality of the Other. This accessory, as it is now repetitively stressed, is not only protecting the self from an epidemiological and invisible entity but also protecting others: it is protecting the lives of those we don't know and who do not belong to our familiar and domestic fields of vision. The mask is (following a Levinassian[5] line of thought) both proximity and distance. It is not the proximity akin to the tangible risk of contagion, but the ineluctable confrontation with the Other, even in the most vacuous and unexpected spaces. Such proximity is thus not to be understood in terms of physical distancing, but, on the contrary, it indicates the social proximity of an Other who is always already distant because the Other is not mastered or appropriated. Wearing a mask is more than an empathic gesture because empathy is always conditioned and generated by a certain sense of knowledge and delineation beforehand. Empathy still relies on principles of recognition (of certain familiar structures), of choice and decision, and on potential identification, wherein the Other is not perceived in its otherness but as an "alter ego." Wearing a mask does not translate to a "good conscience," but it disturbs the comfortable and contended Self. The mask is exposition to the most unexpected, fortuitous, or enigmatic encounter. In that sense, the mask is more than a signal of civility, solidarity, or benevolence because the mask can always be confronted with a radical Other, who will cross our way and will break the rules of the consensual come-and-go. The mask makes us invisible (without hiding us) while opening up a new type of anonymity. It is therefore crucial that beyond the primary sanitary function of the mask, a non-serial anonymity emerges. In other words, the mask should not turn this non-visibility into mere statistical data, which are controllable and which de-singularize.

Within the specific realm of fashion, where the mask has so quickly found its perfect host and market, such an accessory condenses "*stylish* solidarity," capitalist opportunism, and disguised wariness. But if fashion is essentially to be understood as the materialization of the Self, it is also where the relationship with others and the "outside" becomes the most apparent. What is more, the mask epitomizes the "other" of fashion, since it implicitly acts as the magnifying glass, revealing how material objects—valuable or futile—are somehow necessary for accompanying the unpredictable and singular encounters of life. Not such a long time ago the mask was considered suspicious, offensive, and synonymous with identitarian closure, at least in the western part of the world. While altogether a marker of anxiety, precaution, discipline, and obedience, it has become, without irony, the most indispensable—fashionable—accessory of the season. But might it also simply become the most tangible

her helpful addition on this.

5   Here I am indebted to the ethical thinking of Emmanuel Levinas, such as in his seminal works *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (1961) and *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974).

accessory of alterity? Could we conceive of the mask as urgency without fear, as solidarity without moralism? The mask is the textile-object that says: "we are affected by what is to come."

The mask indicates that we are no longer in control of the living. The physical body is to be protected and shielded by the mask in order to defy infection, and also to face and confront the social body in a different way. The seemingly trivial and unsophisticated object has suddenly become critical as it stands for our being-together and our relationship to the living. At once iconographic of fear and hope, the mask is extra-ordinary because it constantly reminds us that we are living through unprecedented moments in time. It is ordinary and always already prosthetic as it imposes on us a matter of indispensability. It is similarly banal and exceptional, common and subversive, typical and atypical.

Drawing some ethical thoughts from the pandemic mask does not exclude the important fact that, as Soncul and Parikka (2020) convincingly explain, "[f]rom gas masks to surgical masks, the covered mouth and nose has become a sign of affected bodies" that are regulated technologically, culturally, politically:

> The mask is a regulatory device at the threshold of war, illness, the clinic, belief and other spatial, temporal, and epistemological arrangements where a body changes its status based on the mask one wears. … The martial and the clinical do not only relate to each other on a symbolic level but also approximate procedurally: how the body is protected, exposed, regulated in a hostile environment.

Therefore it seems even more decisive to rethink and to reinvest in—beyond the urgent necessity of elaborating alternative and viable socio-political configurations—elemental approaches of alterity, and to bring these in close relation to everyday objects through which expressions and manifestations of vulnerability do not engender or consolidate forms of "co-morbidity," such as the juxtaposition of "the virus and racism" (Ronell 2020). The social reduction that the coronavirus has brought about forces us to engage seriously with critical modes of decolonizing our habits and senses of living. If the world seems organically and politically disconnected while increasingly digitally connected, it appears conflated, reflecting the fact that everything is so closely linked, such as, for example, "environmental racism,"[6] in which ecological, medical, and social exclusion can no longer be approached separately. In that respect, and unsurprisingly, the mask does not solely symbolize the global invasion of the virus but also numerous invading paradigms of exclusion for which "Black

6   This term, coined by African-American civil rights leader Benjamin Chavis (in 1981), refers to the ways that waste, pollution, and the climate crisis disproportionately impact Black people, indigenous people, and other people of color. According to him, there is a direct correlation between racial demographics and toxic waste locations, racial segregation, and land use policies.

Lives" and "other"[7] affected bodies, for instance, are distinctively representative and that, therefore, require crucial and active ethical-oriented reflections.

If my reading of the mask is guided by some central motifs at the heart of the ethical metaphysics of Levinas, there are certainly further perspectives that offer ways to debunk stances of subjectivity and alterity, and to overcome and resist the idea that the mask conjures the end of sociality. For instance, Lukáš Likavčan states:

> By wearing a face mask, you publicly announce that the conditions of your existence do not end at the tip of your nose. … Face masks do communicate that you pose some limits to yourself; wearing a face mask is a cultural behavior that makes vulnerability socially acceptable. Once we are here, we can open vivid debates on how to build an ethical framework around politics of vulnerability, from the standpoint of the non-oppressive governance of bodies we need. (2020)

More than a pervasive and over-depicted item in the public and media sphere,[8] the mask itself becomes the focal material object, enabling both proximity and distance. It differentiates and closes off, but also orients and intrigues. The face mask is simultaneously "look at me," "look at others," "look at us," and "look at the world we live in." As a wearable and global textile-object, the mask signals the inextricable close link between intimacy and publicity, between disguise and disclosure, between subjectivity and exteriority, between in and out.

Such an identifiable and iconic material object forces us to reconsider the contours of our social ethos. The mask crystallizes the frontality of otherness and, as a material object itself, also invites us to infuse fundamental ethical thought in the way we produce, handle, and experience material objects in the first place. Altogether, the mask indicates the fragility of the object in its current historical context, the fragility of the systems that fabricate and disseminate them, as well as the fragility of life, which is deemed to be protected and reinvented. Be it taken in a sociological, consumerist, or symbolic register, the mask is a textile-object that concretizes the time we are caught in, in its material and social sense. Even if the mask hinders us from fully recognizing one another, it nevertheless reveals a collective singularity and the vulnerable living. The virus does not limit itself to infection or to its media representation and propagation because it already lies at the heart of the object while bringing us so close to a non-virtual, larger, and pressing reality. What is the future

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7   In a comparable vein, Soncul and Parikka (2020) point to "the stigmatisation via physical, visual cues such as masks builds up in relation to already existing racist infrastructures of emotion and affect."

8   One could also further and closely analyze and distinguish the various media instances and depictions of the pandemic mask (such as in news and social media, in instructional media and public announcements, as well as on retail websites).

of this material object that will take residence on our faces, and will lodge itself in our pockets, bags, and drawers, ready to "vitalize" and arm the affected body at any moment?

In migrating from the surgical realm to the fashion and everyday realm, the mask does not obliterate the distress that it refers to: it discloses a wider and more complex field—that of the exhausted living waiting to be un-masked.

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CULTURAL TECHNIQUES

POLITICS OF SPACE

VISIBILITY

DISABILITY

LABOR

Glass, Adhesive Tape, Boom Mic: A City in Crisis in Three Acts

Marek Jancovic

This essay documents my experience of the pandemic through three inconspicuous objects that it has driven into a new visibility. As Amsterdam grappled with COVID-19, glass, adhesive tape, and boom microphones became conspicuously present in its local news station's reporting. These three objects, all vital to media industries, usually remain invisible. Their newfound presence allows us to ask how the politics of space and visibility is negotiated through media techniques. Each of the three stands for various aspects of a society—and a world—lingering under the threat of contagion.

[Figure 1] Drawing boundaries (Still from news report. Source: AT5, 19 April 2020, https://www.at5.nl/artikelen/201434/discussie-over-mondkapjeswinkel-jordaan-het-lijkt-de-oorlog-wel)

Adhesive Tape

Adhesive tape has been appearing on Amsterdam's local news with increased frequency during the crisis (fig. 1). What would the film industry be without adhesive materials like gaffer tape? Gaffer tape is the ultimate medium of improvisation, of the *ad hoc* fix meant to last just until the shot is in the can. We urgently need a media archaeology of gaffer tape: of the productions it has saved, of the film sets it held together, and of the visual relations of proximity it made possible by garrisoning actors in space. How many legendary film scenes do we owe to tape stuck to the floor?

Adhesive tapes are also a key medium of commerce and logistics. Online shopping is skyrocketing during the crisis, the news reports. We don't often think of the adhesive tape that seals our online purchases. It is single-use waste, yet it is so central. It protects our commodities in transit, "encrypting" the packets we receive, enclosing and occluding their contents from view during their passage through the logistical network. In this moment, gaffer tape represents to me enclosure and the disciplining of space. Never before have I had to pay so much attention to cultural techniques of shielding and demarcation. Supermarkets draw grids and tables onto the sidewalk with tape. In assigned cells, consumers must bide their time before they are allowed to enter and shop. To plough a furrow into the soil, I remember Bernhard Siegert wrote, is "to engage in symbolic work because the *graphein* serves to mark the distinction between inside and outside, civilization and barbarism, an inside domain in which the law prevails and one outside in which it does not" (Siegert 2015, 12). Tape on the ground also symbolically

delineates safe from contagious. There is, Siegert argues, ultimately no dis-
tinction between the symbolic and the material. Even adhesive tape, in its
sticky ordinariness, can turn into a complex technique of inscription. Arrows
and lines and various textual instructions can be written on the ground in
tape. Suddenly, entering a supermarket requires choreography and direction.
The ground becomes a legible medium, dictating how we must orient our
bodies and what directions we have permission to take. A spontaneous
system of diagrammatic governance emerges. The life-sized maps drawn in
adhesive tape have turned the city into a film set, with positional cues for
its cast spread out everywhere. Local news reports that more surveillance
cameras are being installed around Amsterdam because unruly youth keep
defying the strict new proxemic regime and continue to congregate in various
areas around the city. All of us have become Truman Burbank.

[Figure 2] Creating barriers (Still from news report. Source: AT5, 20 March 2020, https://www.
at5.nl/artikelen/200803/met-een-lach-en-een-traan-een-feestje-voor-het-raam-van-de-jarige-
oma-van-beersum-86)

Glass

Glass windows have been appearing on Amsterdam's local news with
increased frequency during the crisis. I am more used to seeing windows on
the news when they are destroyed or damaged, due to a shooting or explosion
perhaps. During the pandemic, reporters oddly focus on glass that is intact.
Elderly people in nursing homes are not allowed to receive visitors anymore,
the news reports. A terminally ill man is only allowed to bid his final farewell
through a window. Glass creates both access and its privation. "Maybe this is
her last birthday," a woman says with tears in her eyes as she is interviewed in
front of a large pane of glass. Behind it, her grandmother remains out of sight
to us (fig. 2).

Alexandra Schneider recently proposed that we should let glass and its many optical, architectural, and tactile uses lead our inquiry into the topologies and histories of the moving image (2020). Glass is so central to the film industry. The lenses of cameras and projectors are made of it, as are phone screens and computer monitors. But glasses also connect the moving image to optical medical instruments, and vaccine vials and Petri dishes. Despite its ubiquity, glass is a scarce resource. The news reports on a looming glass shortage, caused by the vicissitudes of global supply chains and the difficulty of man-ufacturing borosilicates. In this moment, glass represents to me impoverished social contact. Glass, this infuriating form of materiality that creates distance despite nearness. So cool and smooth are the glass screens we touch daily that they barely make a tactile sensuous impression at all (Schneider 2020). Glass is the antithesis of the textured shared surfaces and tactile forms of writing that many people rely on to navigate space (Goggin and Ellis 2020, 171). It is the antithesis of those ways of inhabiting the world for which physical contact and nearness are vital, and for which distancing is not an option (Shin 2020). "Objects, as well as spaces," I remember Sara Ahmed wrote, "are made for some kinds of bodies more than others" (2006, 51). Glass is terrifyingly good at marking and guarding the "for-ness" of spaces. Spaces that are for "the elderly," "the disabled," "the vulnerable." By being contained in such spaces, they can also be pushed out of sight (Lemos Dekker et al. 2020). In a few weeks' time, many of us will have adjusted to remote teaching and Zoom dinner dates behind glass screens. Many others will have died secluded behind glass screens.

[Figure 3] Crossing distances (Still from news report. Source: AT5, 3 May 2020, https://www.at5.nl/artikelen/201743/de-straten-in-de-zwanebloemlaan-thuis-krijg-ik-wel-minder-snel-straf-dan-op-school)

Boom Mic

Boom microphones have been appearing on Amsterdam's local news with increased frequency during the crisis. To comply with distancing rules, TV reporters are forced to let go of the instrument so characteristic for their work and improvise new interviewing techniques (fig. 3). Never before has the labor of sound been so visible to me. The boom mic looks bizarrely out of place in news reports. It is heavy and cumbersome and belongs to a different tradition of moving image production; a tradition that has done its utmost to expel it from the image. The boom operator, the invisible Atlas of the film industry. Hardly any other job on the set requires as much endurance as the boom operator has. Endurance has become a valued resource during the pandemic. Our prime ministers ask us to endure: the new rules, the confinement, the distancing. We must endure, we are told, or else be fined. The boom operator is so central, a key worker of the film industry, and yet permanently out of view. Key workers, as the Dutch government calls them, are all those employed in "vital sectors" whose labor simply does not lend itself to transmission via glass screens. But it is "sectors" that are vital, not their workers, and thus working bodies can be put to work at risk to their own vitality. Protected are corporations and infrastructure, not the many logistical workers and seasonal, migrant, and undocumented agricultural workers. Health protection is also perversely denied to health sector laborers, a large portion of whom work on zero-hour and temporary contracts, since, after years of privatization, the neoliberal remains of the Dutch healthcare system cannot sustain secure employment (Brandon 2020).

In this moment, the boom represents to me endurance and invisible labor, but also a model of sociality. A way of organizing space very different from both adhesive tape and glass. The boom does not belong in the disciplinary order of partitioning that grids drawn in tape make possible. Nor is it comparable to media of containment and seclusion like glass. The boom mic produces spaces that are permeable, spaces not already designated "for" someone but necessarily shared, open, and traversable. The boom mic allows voices to commune and be heard. It creates nearness despite distance.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis brought to my attention with renewed urgency some of the peripheral and transparent media that tend to be pushed from view, and with them some cultural techniques, modes of political governance, and forms of labor that tend to do the same. I chose to focus on glass, tape, and boom mics not only because they persistently kept appearing as visual motifs on my local news, but because each of them presented itself to me in ways that were unsettling and unexpected; their material and affective presence

more piercing than usual. Following the local reporting at the peak of the crisis and observing the responses to it on the streets of Amsterdam, the city appeared to me like the refracted image of a film set. Its gestures, labors, and techniques performed in the open, in an improvisatory but remarkably forceful and effective manner. If "space is political" (Lefebvre 1976, 31), then some of these mundane materials and techniques can help us understand how it becomes such. Objects like adhesive tape, glass windows, and the boom harbor a capacity to reconfigure "the intimacy between habits and space" (Ahmed 2006, 129) that far exceeds their unassuming existence in our lives.

There may be other ways of encountering this capacity. What I experienced as techniques of containment and division, others might view as reasonable, safe modes of contact and socialization under exceptional circumstances. In either case, the pandemic moment is a lesson on how instrumental various unseen media are to the production of specific patterns of spatiality, and thus to the control and distribution of closeness, visibility, and access. Above all, the crisis should make us vividly aware of how political power is articulated in our gestures, movements, and in the textures of objects we both touch and don't dare to. The tape stuck to the floor, the cold glass, and the heavy boom mic remind us that our bodies are never our own. They extend beyond ourselves when they interface with others in networks constituted through the traces we leave behind, the surfaces we come into contact with, and the very air we breathe.

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EDUCATION / INSTRUCTION

CHRISTIAN DROSTEN

ORAL MEDIA

TRUST

VISUAL MANAGEMENT

VISUAL CULTURE

Media of Trust: Visualizing the Pandemic

Florian Hoof

This article looks at the media of trust that imme-diately started to fill the blank spaces of pandemic uncertainty. They are in a position to create trust because they are bound to a visual and oral culture the society is acquainted with. This includes visuali-zation devices such as dashboards that monitor the pandemic situation or podcasts that provide expert knowledge in a situation of extreme uncertainty. Media of trust are two-fold. The first dimension pro-vides an overview of the pandemic and gives orienta-tion in a situation of uncertainty. These visualization devices stem from a visual culture tied to managerial decision-making. The tensions that arise when such specific concepts are repurposed to visualize pan-demic situations lead to the second dimension of media of trust. This includes oral media aimed at the individual, personal level that become important in situations of isolation during lockdown.

When the pandemic hit, what disappeared right away were planes and cars, people too. What appeared were blue skies, singing birds, COVID-19, and a nagging uncertainty. The latter emerged when existing modes of perception and orientation failed to account for the invisible dimension of aerosols and smear infection. As a result, spaces that have been taken for granted like supermarkets and cinemas became unsafe and potentially dangerous. They turned into "unmarked spaces" filled with non-knowledge. This article focuses on "media of trust," on media that subsequently tried to reclaim these blank spaces of uncertainty that arose within society: devices and aesthetics that visualize the pandemic situation, dashboards, pandemic graphs and curves, graphical outbreak maps, images that offer a glimpse of what might lay ahead as well as voices and procedures that give confidence and comfort. Media of trust are technological, social, and aesthetic devices and procedures that give orientation and organize in a situation of extreme uncertainty because they are bound to a visual and oral culture that the society is acquainted with. They tap into established, well-known forms of media as points of departure to account for the unknown situation of a pandemic. Thereby, they provide for a mediated hypothesis between non-knowledge and knowledge that enables social action by reducing the "paralyzing fear" (Luhmann 1979, 4) of uncertainty.

Media of trust can be understood as two-fold in the way that the relations between non-knowledge and knowledge are expressed by and through different forms of media. The first dimension includes visualization devices such as the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Dashboard. They provide an overview of the pandemic and stabilize systemic confidence and trust in political and social institutions and procedures (Lewis and Weigert 1985). As my argument has it, the epistemological stance of this visual culture of trust is not so much rooted in the history of pandemics but can be linked to a managerial culture of decision-making that appeared on the shores of economic management from 1900 onwards (Hoof 2020). Its specific rationality and epistemological structure then reappeared during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Tensions and mistrust that arise when such specific concepts are repurposed to visualize pandemic situations lead to the second dimension of media of trust that are aimed at the individual, intimate level. This includes oral media such as podcasts, which provide working knowledge to cope with the situation, for example in the situation of isolation during a lockdown. Here, I use the German case of a successful COVID-19 science podcast to exemplify the relations and tensions between different forms of pandemic media of trust.

The Pandemic "At a Glance": Aesthetics and Politics of Data Visualization

On January 22, 2020 the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University launched the Coronavirus Resource Center and more specifically the COVID-19 Dashboard (fig. 1).[1] It was intended to "provide researchers, public health authorities, and the general public with a user-friendly tool to track the outbreak as it unfolds" (Dong, Du, and Gardner 2020, 533). Simple data visualizations, open source datasets, the concept of "live" data broadcasting, and the use of data prediction and extrapolation models made the system an immediate success. Within weeks it established itself as one of the most reliable monitoring systems of the pandemic.

[Figure 1] Johns Hopkins Dashboard, March 27 (Johns Hopkins, 2020)

What put the system ahead of official data provided by the various national centers for disease control was its *big data* approach to monitor the crisis. The system combined various data sources including official government reports but also online news services, or monitored twitter feeds.[2] These datasets were aggregated with "a semi-automated living data stream strategy" (Dong, Du, and Gardner 2020, 533) that combines automated data feeds with manual data practices such as the verification of numbers. The system harvests data from partly quite unreliable and random sources. This includes data that is altered or suppressed by political action but also data that is statistically distorted by the impact of different structures and (testing) practices

1   The system was built by Lauren Gardner, a civil and systems engineering professor at Johns Hopkins University and Ensheng Dong, a graduate student of hers.
2   A full list of the data sources of the Johns Hopkins Dashboard is available here: https://github.com/CSSEGISandData/COVID-19/blob/master/README.md.

within national health systems. When such data is gathered, processed, and visualized the poor quality of the raw data disappears from sight. Consequently, the dataflow of such a live casting device does not directly relate to single COVID-19 cases but is mediated through a layer of media technologies and practices that level and break down heterogeneous data sources into standardized items that can be cross referenced and mathematically combined (Hoof 2016, 43–47).

Built to "inform modelling efforts and control measures during the earliest stages of the outbreak" (Dong, Du, and Gardner 2020, 534) the dashboard can be described as a communication device that brings different institutions and individuals literally onto the same page. It is a machine that synchronizes expectations by turning a situation into a specific visual form. The dashboard creates its own history of the pandemic and gives orientation by placing the user on a time scale that incorporates the past and aims towards an unknown future of a perhaps flattened curve. The resulting curves and data visualizations are phantasms of modernity (Rieger 2009) that show the current pandemic situation "at a glance" (Hoof 2016). They provide for an abstract overall impression of how the dynamics of the pandemic unfold in different parts of the world.

Pandemic Aesthetics and the Visual Culture of Business Management

In the following section the text shows that these "at a glance" procedures and the visual aesthetics of the COVID-19 dashboard are part of a genealogy of managerial media. They are not specific to this pandemic, nor to medicine, epidemiology, or the history of pandemic outbreaks in general. Referred to as "graphical methods," such visualization practices and aesthetics became popular at the beginning of the twentieth century and were widely adopted within business management as visual decision-making practices (Hoof 2020, 62–81). Like the COVID-19 dashboard they were aiming at turning heterogeneous events within corporations and economic markets into standardized data sets that could be accumulated, compared, calculated, and visualized. This mode of "visual management" (Hoof 2020, 14–16) created a wide range of data visualizations including break-even charts, danger-line charts, or hybrids between charts and tables.

These visualization devices were aggregated in decision environments, such as planning departments or charting rooms, to display data to executives and managers (fig. 2). A visual culture of decision-making emerged that separated everyday data from important trends that would help to anticipate the future. The latter data was broken down into abstract, standardized forms that could be recombined and reshuffled, allowing different scenarios for a given situation to be displayed (Hoof 2016, 34–35). The data that became part

of such decision environments in the end were pre-selected and restricted to information that could be converted into a graphic form. This gave rise to an epistemology of media-based decision-making that was not so much based on concepts such as truth and falsehood but on visual abstraction and data selection. While the images of such data visualizations are easily accessible to non-experts, the models and procedures that generate the images in the first place remain partly obscured and can only be fully assessed by experts.

[Figure 2] Early decision-making environments (Brinton 1919, 305)

Modeling the Pandemic: Visual Suspicion and Mistrust

Current systems such as the COVID-19 Dashboard and its big data approach are still built on this epistemology of visual management. They depend on complex practices of visual abstraction and data selection that generate an overview of a given situation. Showing data "at a glance" enables orientation within an uncertain situation, thereby stabilizing trust in a system or a nation state. It suggests a model of political action that is oriented towards future developments of the pandemic and that rests on complex data interpolation procedures. The executive character of the COVID-19 Dashboard gives no explanation for the pandemic situation. The complex modes of data inter-polation create visualizations that are aimed at fast decision-making, not at public debate. As a result, mistrust and tensions arise between such abstract forms of statistic data visualization and the subjective perception of pandemic events that unfold locally. What are the consequences when such dashboard aesthetics are approached by individuals that are not in a position to act in

ways management or politicians are capable of; when they are confronted with an epistemology of decision-making that in a way permanently highlights their individual limited range of possible actions and that is based on data selection and modeling practices that are not well understood?

Interestingly, this did not so much lead to mistrust towards the big data approach of the dashboard but it started to create a climate of suspicion towards its data sources. An exemplary case that shows the effects of this asynchronicity is the changing public perception of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the German national center for disease control. In February and March 2020, at the beginning of the first wave of the pandemic the daily numbers of COVID-19 cases were made public by the director of the RKI at daily press conferences. These numbers relied on physical reporting from local authorities, which takes time. Consequently, when compared to the Johns Hopkins Dashboard the numbers were always already outdated. As a result, the bureaucracy, which was able, at least in the case of Germany, to efficiently contain the COVID-19 situation during the first wave of the pandemic, looks slow, clumsy, old-fashioned, not trustworthy. This impression of inefficiency is only one aspect of a general uneasiness that I would argue is related to the managerial dashboard aesthetics and its data interpolation practices. Because it suggests modes of behavior and action that are not available to the public, this constantly fueled a feeling of powerlessness and creates mistrust towards the media devices and data practices used to manage the pandemic. A tendency that can be observed in a wide range of countries and that amongst others lead to 'alternative' explanations such as conspiracy theories. But it also shows that the form of a medium plays an important role as to how a situation is defined, perceived, and understood.

An Oral Irritation: (Mis)Trusting Media Forms

To better understand how trust and mistrust relate to different forms of media, the case of Germany is particularly suitable. Here, quite unexpectedly, the pandemic, and as I would argue the tensions and uneasiness connected to visual media, led to the rise of oral media. Almost exactly one month after the COVID-19 Dashboard went online, the *Corona Virus Update with Christian Drosten*, a daily science podcast produced by the public radio broadcaster NDR, became the single most important source of first-hand information for politicians, journalists, and the public (fig. 3). Between the end of February and the beginning of May, a time that was characterized by lockdown measures and when the virus was still not well understood, this podcast series received 41 million downloads (Hennig 2020a). The series was basically an ongoing conversation between a science journalist and a virologist who specialized in

coronavirus research (Hennig 2020b).[3] In the first weeks of the pandemic this was a daily format of about 30 minutes that explained the basics of virology and epidemiology. New scientific studies were discussed that would help to better understand how COVID-19 spreads, and these findings were then turned into immediate advice on how to minimize infection risks.

In a situation of a pending crisis, one might expect fast, real-time media such as the COVID-19 Dashboard to be popular. But instead a rather "old" medium that referred back to the oral tradition of the radio drew much attention (McLuhan 1964), a medium that not only does not match with the real-time concept, but a podcast that you even have to wait for and that takes time to listen to.
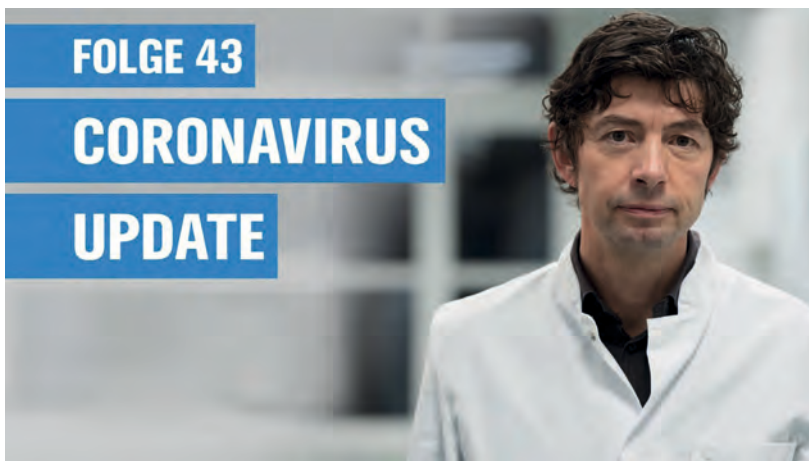
[Figure 3] Corona Update with Christian Drosten (Screenshot: NDR info, 2020)

In contrast to the "at a glance" dashboard aesthetics the podcast consists of lengthy explanations, for example about how viruses reproduce. It compares the current situation with other pandemics such as MERS and SARS, or explains in detail differences between certain COVID-19 testing procedures concerning test reliability. The reasons why this podcast was so successful are not restricted to its form as a scientific conversation. It is moreover a result of the specificity of the podcast as an oral medium. Due to its portability as an

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3   Between February 26 and June 23, 2020, 50 episodes of the podcast were aired, in the first weeks of the pandemic on an almost daily basis. Later the frequency was reduced to two podcasts per week and later to a weekly podcast. Christian Drosten is a specialist on coronaviruses and head of the Institute of virology at Charité hospital in Berlin where he developed the first COVID-19 test. The podcast became so prominent that Drosten turned into a public figure. He received death threats and the largest German tabloid paper, *Bild Zeitung* started to campaign against him personally, including with a frontpage headline that falsely accused him of scientific inaccuracy in a study in preprint status. They were trying to link the study to the political decision to shut down schools and day care centers and to personally blame him for the decision.

audio file it is a medium of "intimacy" that "invades ... private spaces" (Berry 2006, 148). Furthermore, the "psychoacoustics" of compressed digital audio files lead to a certain form of perception that not only consists of conscious listening to arguments but also of a "direct and sensuous interaction with an embodied, sensing, unthinking subject" (Sterne 2006, 836). Consequently, the podcast not only explains complex scientific facts in a straightforward and understandable way, but also incorporates the intimate form of oral media. An aspect that gained additional significance in the situation of the partial lockdown, when people were kept in isolation and cut loose from their regular structures and rhythms of life. Here, the podcast offered a "regular and dependable event" that could be "integrated into the routines of daily life" (Horton and Wohl 1956, 216). By chance Christian Drosten also has a soft, radio compatible "beautiful voice" (Hagen 2005, 121-22), which was able to create "personal intimacy at a distance" (Horton and Wohl 1956). Over time this turned Drosten into a "persona," a projection surface for para-social inter-actions of the listeners. He became the "nation's voice" (Hilmes 1997, xvii) of scientific reason. His listeners even formed an "imagined community" (Hilmes 1997, 11) of people that shared the perspective of a scientific-based approach to handling the pandemic. Consequently, the podcast series enabled relation-ships of "bidirectional trust" between producers and consumers (Spinelli and Dann 2019, 92).

That a virologist became such a media personality shed light on the latent uneasiness that derives from dashboard media and its managerial "at a glance" aesthetics. As a consequence, a second trope of oral media appeared: media that would be trusted because they would give precise advice on how to avoid being infected. But that also would give comfort and reduce uncertainty by celebrating scientific methods and objectivity as a proper way to deal with the crisis; and by providing for an instance of para-social interaction as a way to address intimate feelings of uneasiness and loneliness. Here, this case blends seamlessly into the radio history of the twentieth century and its wide range of radio broadcasts, voices, and technology that became significant in situations of national crisis (Hilmes 1997; Hagen 2005; Birdsall 2012).

Pandemic Media of Trust: A Two-Fold System

So what are the consequences if we look at the relations between trust and the different forms of pandemic media? I argued that pandemic media of trust are two-fold. First, visual media produce systemic trust in political and social institutions and procedures. They provide an overview "at a glance" by combining a huge range of data. Here, visualizations of the pandemic define the situation and thus provide for orientation. And of course, these media have not been exclusively created for this specific pandemic. They were tailored for this event because they were at our fingertips, only waiting

to be used. This led, as I have argued, to the adaptation of managerial media and logics for pandemic management. The genealogy of those visualization devices is not so much part of epidemiology or the history of pandemics, but is based on a visual media culture of managerial decision-making. Consequently, the current pandemic is mapped as an economic problem and interpreted by logics and devices that stem from the culture of visual management.

Tensions and mistrust that result from this "misuse" of economic devices and practices led, as I have argued, to the rise of a second dimension of pandemic media: oral media aimed at the individual, intimate level. They provide for working knowledge that offers a basic sense of trust about how to act within a pandemic. This trustworthiness is based on para-social interactions and the intimate character of oral media.

The tensions I described as a two-fold system of media of trust are symptoms both for the relevance and the limitations of the epistemology of visual management. It shows that the pandemic is predominantly understood through the lens of economic media. This in turn suggests that, as others have argued (Sarasin 2020), the pandemic, at least for the German situation, is not a biopolitical state of emergency. Rather, I suggest that it needs to be understood as a massive allocation of economic resources, a quite radical and uncertain experiment towards the future that is administered by media of visual management and that results in shifting bonds of trust.

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LABORATORY ANIMALS

HUMAN-ANIMAL DIVIDE

HYBRID BODIES

MEDIA THEORY

Mediating Disease: Scientific Transcriptions of COVID-19 into Animal Models

Benjamín Schultz-Figueroa and Sophia Gräfe

When the COVID-19 outbreak burst fully into the public's eye in early 2020, it brought with it a menagerie of animal affects and images. The spreading virus seemed to activate preexistent threads of human/animal relationships with a new urgency, as many struggled to reimagine their place in relation to a newly alien "natural" world and sought certainty and stability in the midst of turbulent change. In this essay, we examine a specialized subsection of this discourse focusing on the bodies of non-human laboratory animals, arguing that in the current public and scientific debate they are not only metaphorically becoming the scene of various mediations, but corporeally as well. We conclude that such animal models have an ambivalent relationship to human/animal distinctions in an era of increasing pandemics, working as they do to shore up porous borders, while also creating new overlapping spaces between each category.

When the COVID-19 outbreak burst fully into the public's eye in early 2020, it brought with it a menagerie of animal affects and images. Non-human animals filled our screens and conversations, from speculations over the bat and pangolin progenitors of the virus, to worrying that domestic pets and farm animals were possible vectors, to debates surrounding the ethics of testing zoo animals before humans, to a renewed obsession with animal memes while sheltering-in-place (Wrage 2020). The spreading virus seemed to activate preexistent threads of human/animal relationships with a new urgency, as many struggled to reimagine their place in relation to a newly alien "natural" world and sought certainty and stability in the midst of turbulent change. In this essay, we examine a specialized subsection of this discourse focusing on the bodies of non-human laboratory animals, which in the current public and scientific debate are not only metaphorically becoming the scene of various mediations, but corporeally as well. As has been shown in studies of the history of science and the scientific use of media, the life science laboratory is a site where bodies are not only altered but powerful signs and images are created. In the course of the pandemic's disruption of an essentialized nature/culture divide, these laboratory bodies act as pandemic mediums that are both uncomfortably close to humans and yet also too far in a material sense.

Along with the images of hospitals or sick patients, a myriad of other discursive threads surrounded COVID-19's introduction to western audiences. Shortly before the colorful icon of the novel virus became the emblem of the infectious disease, statements from western commentators—whether epidemiologists, journalists, politicians, or environmentalists—had an essential early influence on the image of the pathogen. Many expressed concern, horror or disgust at so-called "wet markets" in China, street markets where "wild animals" are being traded and consumed. Some were frightened by the consumption of 'bat soups,' some warned of the too close and too dense settlement of human and non-human habitats and thus invoked racist prejudices and fears to blame the disease on impure relations with nonhuman animals (Taylor 2020). The majority of European and American audiences became aware of COVID-19 not as a purely medical problem, but as a cultural-civilizational shock. It appeared above all as a problem of unacceptable mixture: of decent and indecent diets, of "cultural" and "wild animals," of reasonable encounters with nature and foolish excursions into the epidemiologically dangerous wilderness. Human bodies now did not seem to be safe, clean, and distinct. Bats, pangolins, humans, tigers, dogs, primates, llamas were all imbricated with each other for a brief moment as simple biomass—both infected and infectious. The ways of infection were unclear (via surfaces, body fluids, or the air? through the hands, nose, or mouth?) and therefore everywhere. The symptomatology, pathogenesis, and spread of the disease stood against efforts at localization, tracking, and containment.

Perhaps nowhere was this truer than in the use of non-human animals as models of the disease. Faced with a ballooning number of cases and the high mortality rate of COVID-19 infections, state-led prevention and containment measures henceforth aimed at halting the intermingling of human and non-human bodies; working to stop the flow of people and goods in cities and around the world, and to establish barriers between bodies and their environments. At the same time, animal bodies were being invasively transformed in virology laboratories across the world to resemble human physiology and microbiology as much as possible. Here, enduring questions about the efficacy, best-practices, and applicability of animal experiments were reinvigorated under the intense pressure generated by the search for a treatment and vaccine. The scientific community underwent a moment of hectic material scrambling as it worked to produce an animal model of COVID-19 (Eisenstein, 2020).
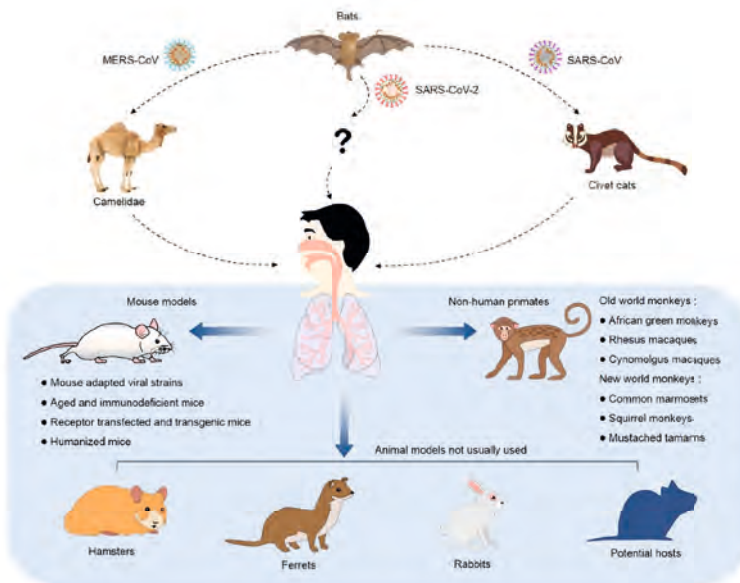
[Figure 1] Illustration of diverse animal test subjects (Source: Yuan et al. 2020)

Animal models have long been essential for developing new treatments, and each new virus requires an elaborate evaluation process in which the manifestation of the disease in a particular animal must be compared to how it manifests in humans. COVID-19, with its long list of possible symptoms and uncertain effects on the body, created an especially difficult challenge for investigators. In some ways, it is similar to previous coronaviruses, like severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), which have previously been modeled with civet cats, camelidaes,

monkeys, mice, hamsters, ferrets, rabbits, among other species (fig. 1, Yuan et al. 2020, 950) MERS-CoV in 2012 and SARS-CoV-2 in 2019. Yet, each of these models had to be hurriedly reconsidered if they were to be used to fight COVID-19. As the science writer Michael Eisenstein outlines in the June 2020 issue of *Nature,* the genetic makeups of most lab animals differ meaningfully from humans, causing COVID-19 to express itself in incomparable ways. Through gene therapy or transgenic modeling, animal cells have been made more similar to human cells—mice can be "humanized" as one virologist describes (Sun et al. 2020, 6)—but these procedures often result in complicating factors that will skew an experiment's results and quickly kill the animals involved. Primates, whose anatomy and physiology more closely resembles that of humans, have also been infected with the disease in an attempt to generate better models, but with little success (Rockx et al. 2020). Alternately, COVID-19 has been adapted to the cells of particular lab animals, but this effectively created a new strain of the virus that differs significantly from the one in humans. Finally, and most successfully, microbiologists are now literally rewriting the genomes of mice and other lab animals through the relatively new gene editing technology CRISPR/Cas9, causing their cells to behave more like humans when contracting the disease (Sun et al. 2020). Eisenstein ends by citing Dr. Chein-Te Tseng, a microbiologist at the University of Texas Medical Branch, who concludes that "for COVID-19, there is no single animal model that will fully reflect the human disease... but if we combine all these animal studies together...we can probably get a good picture of the pathogenesis" (Eisenstein 2020, 168). Here, the animal body as a pandemic media—not unlike the insect media described by Jussi Parikka (2010)—does not simply serve as a moral vehicle for a metaphorical hybridization of the "human body," but rather provides the material, organic, and molecular components for a biotechnological simulation of human life.

How to evaluate this complex and evolving use of animal media? It seems clear that we are witnessing a scientific apparatus being majorly tested and torqued under extraordinary circumstances. On the one hand, the crushing urgency of COVID-19 has led to further intensifying the objectifying servitude of animal bodies in an attempt to overcome the epidemiological crisis. This intensification has the potential to further exacerbate the longstanding political problems of "species projection," which historians of science have demonstrated are often premised on racist and sexist definitions of "the human" that end up compounding social and cultural hierarchies even as they aspire to universal relevance (Bolman 2018, Neel 2016, Glick 2018). No matter that animals and humans are deeply entwined in these experiments, the time of the Chthulucene, Donna Haraway's speculatively longed-for period of interspecies solidarity (Haraway 2016; Haraway, Lipperini, and Durastanti 2020), has not yet come. There is no shared pandemic reality here between human experimenters and non-human animal subjects, who are increasingly

atomized, hybridized, and abstracted (fig. 2). These animals are made to function as tools and service providers for a biotechnological encounter with unclear boundaries and protective devices. Their noses serve as *indicators* for the pathogen, their bodies as a *simulating diagram* of its course, their organs and cells as *models* for medical solution scenarios.
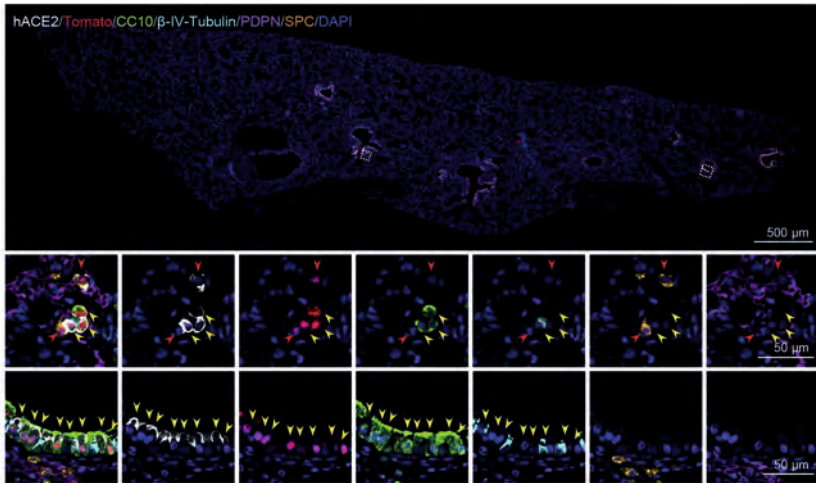
[Figure 2] An example of abstraction and atomization in a staining analysis of mice test subjects. Taken from a collection of images depicting the test subjects through a variety of lenses. (Source: Sun et al. 2020)

But at the same time, the final consequences of this moment for scientific research and animal modeling have yet to be fully realized. Microbiologists and virologists working to develop "humanized" animal models in a time of extreme and unique crisis may point to the manufacturing of a new reality, which could have uncertain effects in the future. The "shared suffering" of the lab—which Haraway (2008) so eloquently argues must be kept in mind to comprehend both the need for important medical experiments and the devastating pain felt by animal experimental subjects—may yet broaden out into a wider social dynamic, as humans/animal distinctions generally are reconsidered in an era of increasing pandemics. If, as experts predict (Bett 2020), climate change, extinction, and habitat destruction lead to increasingly frequent and devastating zoonotic diseases, the stakes of these types of experiments will be amplified to global proportions.

How a disease is rendered within the corporeal media of laboratory animals will have ramifications well beyond the walls of the lab, and the meaning of this scientific media will be politically and culturally contested at an unprecedented scale. Already, the association of COVID-19 with animal bodies and scientific discourse has been activated by political actors seeking to define the disease's impact on government policy and public opinion. We can see

this in the xenophobic obsessions with Chinese "wet markets" (Walzer and Kang 2020) and the rightwing weaponization of epidemiological concepts like "herd immunity" towards neo-Darwinian ends (Hanson 2020). As ecofascists promote ideas of the Earth cleansing itself of human inhabitants (Sherronda J. Brown, 2020), the rightwing embrace of their own post-anthropocentric ethics highlights the dangers of this moment, as well as the possibilities. No longer solely the subject of a specialized or elite discourse, animal models, like other animal images and symbols, will be increasingly central to how society positions itself in relation to a rapidly mutating and evermore perilous concept of "nature" in the Anthropocene.

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PORNOGRAPHY

THICK CONCEPT

CONCEPTUAL HISTORY

CULTURAL GOODS

POPULAR CULTURE

Pandemic Porn: Understanding Pornography as a Thick Concept

Leonie Zilch

The essay takes the notion of "pandemic porn" as an opportunity to address the descriptive and evaluative aspects that are intertwined in the term "pornography." What do we mean by "pandemic porn" and what is the "pandemic" of pornography? To do so, it considers pornography as a "thick concept."

> *From the start, 'pornography' named a battlefield, a place where no assertion could be made without at once summoning up its denial, where no one could distinguish value from danger because they were the same.*
> Walter Kendrick

COVID-19 and the Rise of Pandemic Porn

I was lucky to submit my dissertation two days before the university closed its doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, it is me and my screen—again. The self-imposed quarantine is followed by an official one. "Are you suffering from increased sexual arousal?" asks the white-coated expert on my screen sitting behind his desk with horn-rimmed glasses, a mustache and an "I <3 Mom"-cup

in front of him. Well, no, I spent the last months watching porn for my thesis. "Lockdown got you down?"—yeah, I want to see my friends and family again! "Don't worry! There's no need to be celibate these days." The image switches to a couple wearing gas masks, gloves, and protective suits while being intimate with each other. "In fact, sexual activity can be advised as a urboost to your immune system, so long as your taking appropriate safety measures. Welcome to *Sex in Times of Corona*!"[1]

The short film is a collaborative work of 16 erotic film makers from Berlin and the first "pandemic porn" that enters my filter bubble during isolation. Matt Lambert's *Moan Together*, Erika Lust's *Sex and Love in the Time of Quarantine*, and *Cruising 2020* by Todd Verow and James Kleinman follow. *Coronavirus Porn Is Going Viral on Pornhub* (Cole 2020) headlines *Vice* in March 2020, referring to 112 videos featuring the word "coronavirus." At the end of April, another article reports 1,528 videos (Cookney 2020) and Pornhub itself is continually publishing statistics about traffic changes and corona related search terms during the crisis.[2] The term chosen to address these corona-induced pornographies is "pandemic porn." To work out its various dimensions of meaning and to tackle the implicit and explicit moral concepts accompanying the term is the aim of this essay. For this purpose, I consider pornography as a "thick concept."

Pornography as a "Thick Concept"

The philosopher Bernard Williams (1985) used the designation "thick concept" to grasp those terms that combined descriptive and evaluative aspects, sometimes in a hardly distinguishable way.[3] I would like to consider pornography as a "thick moral concept" (Zangwill 2013), or more precisely as an "objectionable thick concept" (Eklund 2011). Even though the observation that "pornography is 'NOT a neutral topic'" (Smith and Attwood 2014, 9) has accompanied research on pornography since its beginnings,[4] I consider it useful and necessary to think about pornography in this broader sense. As research has also shown,

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1   https://meow.wtf/2020/04/17/corona/ (accessed June 29, 2020).
2   On March 23, in response to a request from *Forbes* magazine, Pornhub released the first "Coronavirus Insights." The seventh and latest update was on June 18. https://www.pornhub.com/insights/ (accessed June 18, 2020).
3   Williams himself refers to a seminar by Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch in the 1950s, which he attended, as initiating the idea of the term (Williams 1985, 218; see also Abend 2019, 210; Kirchin 2013a). Another reference always mentioned is Gilbert Ryle's notion of "thick descriptions," which again was adapted by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (Kirchin 2013b; Väyrynen 2019). Originally a concept of moral philosophy, it was quickly adopted by other areas of philosophy such as epistemology and aesthetics (Väyrynen 2019) as well as by other disciplines such as sociology (Abend 2019). Today, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* considers thick terms and concepts as "widely agreed to be of potentially high significance" (Väyrynen 2019).
4   Porn scholars find themselves repeatedly obliged to respond to their supposedly offensive subject matter. Their statements and reflections on this topic permeate the

pornography often receives a special status that allows morally evaluative judgments to be disguised as descriptive ones. As Alan McKee points out, it seems much more productive to think about what pornography shares with other phenomena than what is special about it:

> Exceptionalist approaches think that everything about pornography is unique—but this is only because they are looking so closely that they miss the world around the pornography, in which many characteristics are common. … As long as we study pornography in isolation we cannot properly understand how much of our object of study is actually broader cultural movements rather than being specific to pornography … . (McKee 2016, 116)

Understanding pornography as a morally thick concept, the notion "pandemic porn" can be conceived in at least two ways: first, for the kind of pornography that deals with or refers to the coronavirus pandemic (descriptive dimension). Second, it marks and extends the trend to label everything we (should not) desire as pornographic (descriptive and evaluative dimension). We remember rather new phenomena such as food porn, torture porn, war porn, earth porn, property porn, etc. In this latter sense, the term is also used for "compelling photos of the coronavirus pandemic … with the implication being that media outlets that publish it are trying to exploit a national tragedy for clicks" (Berezow 2020). In addition, a third (primarily evaluative) dimension exists when thinking about the concepts of pornography, the pandemic and their interconnection: *The Porn Pandemic* (Ferebee 2016). Books such as the one by Andrew Ferebee are not just *Simple Guide[s] to Ending Pornography and Masturbation Addiction and Getting Back into the Real World*, they are a symptom and product of the debates on pornography that have accompanied the term from the very beginning.

The Secret Museum and the Origins of the Term "Pornography"

As Walter Kendrick shows in his groundbreaking analysis *The Secret Museum* (1987), the term "pornography" first appeared in the English language as we know it today in 1850, in the context of the excavations of Pompeii. Among the vases, sculptures, paintings, and frescoes that the archaeologists unearthed there were some that challenged the archival system due to their moral indecency: "a small marble statue, highly naturalistic in style, representing a satyr in sexual congress with an apparently undaunted goat" (Kendrick 1987, 6), numerous representations of the fertility god Priapus, who was easily identified by his "gigantic erect phallus, often out of all human scale, which he brandishes because it is his essence" (8), as well as paintings

research literature as much as their research on pornography itself (see for example L. Williams 1989, 11; Koch [1997] 2016, 249ff.; Smith and Attwood 2014).

of copulating people and "lewd sculptures" (25). The real scandal, however, was not the artifacts themselves, but their significance in the lives of the city's inhabitants. "Paintings of nude bodies, even in the act of sex, had been placed side by side with landscapes and still lifes, forming a jumble that mystified modern observers" (9), explains Kendrick. He also refers to the notes of a cataloguer who was shocked to discover: "The inhabitants of Pompeii … placed these subjects, repulsed by modesty, in the most conspicuous places, so widely did their ideas of morals differ from ours" (10). From the beginning, the controversial items were kept separately and made accessible only to "gentlemen with appropriate demeanor (and ready cash for the custodian)" (6), but after a while, Kendrick points out, a suitable place and classification system was needed to catalog the artifacts: "The name chosen for them was 'pornography,' and they were housed in the Secret Museum" (11).

Following the public debate on pornography into the 1980s, Kendrick comes to the conclusion that "'pornography' names an argument, not a thing" (1987, 31).[5] In other words, what is perceived as "pornographic" depends on the prevailing moral concepts of its time:

> In the mid-nineteenth century, Pompeiian frescoes were deemed 'pornographic' and locked away in secret chambers safe from virginal minds; not long thereafter, *Madame Bovary* was put on trial for harboring the same danger. A century-long parade of court cases ensued, deliberating the perniciousness of *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, and scores of other fictions, many of which now appear routinely on the syllabi of college literature courses. All these *things* were 'pornographic' once and have ceased to be so; now the stigma goes to sexually explicit pictures, films, and videotapes. (Kendrick 1987, xii)

Since then, more time has passed. In the last twenty years, many new forms of pornography have emerged in popular culture. A trend that Kendrick had already anticipated: "… it seems likely that future generations, if they use the term [pornography] at all, will mean by it something quite different— something as unimaginable today as *Debbie Does Dallas* was fifty years ago" (1987, xii). And he was right. Just as "unimaginable" as *Debbie Does Dallas* (US 1978) was in the 1930s, *Debbie Does Salad* (Kaufman 2005) was probably in 1987.

Explosion of the Pornographic

Particularly since the 2000s, there has been an expansion, or in Helen Hester's words, an "explosion" (Hester 2014, 181ff.—she doesn't seem to know Casetti) in the use of the term 'pornography.' What is striking is that sex seems to be

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5   We may remember, for example, United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous expression "I know it when I see it" to characterize hard-core pornography in 1964.

displaced in the phenomena described as pornographic (181ff.). In her conceptual analysis of the term, Nina Schumacher (2017) distinguishes various forms of these pornographic configurations. As she points out, the term pornography is charged with new connotations of the immoral, the condemnable, or the obscene. What these pornographies have in common is that they approach their objects closer than usual and exhibit them in a rather excessive way (Schumacher 2017, 11f.). In this manner, they address and expose what is not (yet) shown or usually not visible or mentionable (11f.).

Schumacher locates rather ironic forms such as fruit porn or the picture book *Porn for New Moms* (Anderson 2008) in the satirical-critical tradition of the concept (Schumacher 2017, 213f.; O'Toole 1998, 1). The latter features attractive men whispering 'obscenities' such as "So, tell me again, what was the consistency of the poop" or "Let's not have sex tonight. Let me just rub your feet while you tell me about the baby's day" (Schumacher 2017, 210f.). Beyond that, she classifies the "lifestyle-pornographies" food, travel, and property porn as "pornographies of desire" (214). These would awaken longings (for food, travel, real estate) for which there can be no immediate or no satisfaction at all. In this case, the pornographic manifests itself through conventional aesthetic strategies known from pornographic films, e.g. the close-up as an expression of the "principle of *maximum visibility*" (L. Williams 1989, 48; Schumacher 2017, 215). Hester further attests a "harmless voyeuristic pleasure taken in representations of desirable items and covetable experiences" (Hester 2014, 187). According to Schumacher, components of the pornographic are just as much realized through the obscenity of what is shown, i.e. the abundance, the decadence, which one becomes aware of when watching and secretly desiring unhealthy but tasty food, travel, or property one cannot afford (Schumacher 2017, 215ff.). She aptly points out that these 'pornographies of desire' are products of capitalism propagating boundless increase, which cannot tolerate the finite satisfaction of needs (218). More popular phenomena such as torture porn, misery or social porn, or "Pornography of the Gag Reflex" (Hester 2014, 49ff.)[6] are characterized by Schumacher as 'pornographies of the rejected' (2017, 224ff.). What is rejected is the human or social body itself and, especially, its bodily fluids. The obscenity of what is shown lies in the exposure and the display of the body in pain or distress.

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6   David Edelstein (2006) coined the term "torture porn" to characterize horror films that expose the vulnerability of the body in a spectacular way, which means through depictions of torture, rape, or destroyed bodies in general. Misery porn (Hester 2014, 181ff.) or, in a more general sense, 'social porn' (Schumacher 2017, 224ff.) refers to literature, films, or TV shows in which poverty or other forms of social hardship are exposed. As 'pornographies of the gag reflex' Hester describes for example Charlotte Roche's novel *Wetlands* (2009) or the Internet phenomenon *2 Girls 1 Cup* (2007).

Without going into the remaining pornographic configurations discussed by Schumacher and Hester, it should have become clear, to borrow Hester's words:

> Porn cannot be characterized as merely 'a sex thing' (O'Toole 1998, 342), even if adult entertainment can; it is not preoccupied with eliciting a genitally sexual response but with provoking more general forms of queasy *jouissance*—horror, anger, sorrow, and a certain nauseated fascination. This kind of response is not a symptom of categorical moral bankruptcy, but part of a dysfunctional sympathetic impulse and a persistent (if perhaps regrettable) facet of our interaction with certain images and texts. (Hester 2014, 185f.)

Pandemic Pornographies

In the following, I would like to discuss the outlined dimensions of pandemic porn considered as a thick concept and address the evaluative and descriptive components they engage with. The first (descriptive) dimension signifies pornography that deals with or refers to the coronavirus pandemic. The objects gathered with this description are as heterogeneous as all pornographic configurations are and not limited to audiovisual content (see for example ABC 2020). To give you an impression: *Sex in Times of Corona* presents eleven short episodes that elaborate on how to have sex without breaking the quarantine regulations in admittedly bizarre ways.[7] *Cruising 2020* is a one minute, not sexually explicit short film featuring two gay men cruising in a park always staying six feet away from each other. The short film *Sex and Love in the Time of Quarantine* follows six adult performers, two couples and two solo actors, as they shoot porn in their own home and how they deal with isolation and their sex life as couples or singles, while *Moan Together* is more of a sexually explicit music video featuring 50 queer sex workers from all over the world performing one song. Typical corona narratives on tube sites, on the other hand, show people breaking quarantine regulations to have sex or getting caught breaking quarantine by the authorities. Gloves and masks are well loved accessories, as is medical clothing in general. Some videos are funny, some educational, some seem to have been created out of boredom. What these pornographies display, as porn scholar Madita Oeming puts it, is that: "porn does not exist in a vacuum" (Cookney 2020), it also reflects our everyday lives. Therefore, the term "pandemic porn," in this sense, simply describes audiovisual media or literature that deals with the corona crisis in a creative way, under a broad understanding of the pornographic.

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7   To name a few: Creating a doppelganger, "fuck yourself", phone sex (illustrated by tin cans connected through fiber), using a 1,5 meter Popsicle-Dildo, voyeuristic-exhibitionistic neighborly help, or "run fast" (down the hallway) for your own "juicy cumshot" (shot out of the window).

The second dimension can easily be placed within the wider 'explosion of the pornographic' and shares the aesthetic characteristics and connotations highlighted by Schumacher and Hester with these new forms. It marks and extends the trend to label everything we (should not) desire as pornographic. What is referred to as pornographic in an aesthetic sense is the excessive documentation of the crisis in mass media: statistics and graphics of hospitalized persons, the number of fatalities or of already overcrowded hospitals. In this case, the characterization as pornographic is clearly evaluative. Displaying this suffering for the dramatic effect, i.e. clicks or profit, is considered unethical and impious in the western Christian value system. This extends to the accompanying voyeuristic pleasure that enjoys this exhibition of suffering.

Furthermore, I have distinguished a third dimension that is not directly related to the corona pandemic, but rather describes a culturally pessimistic, anti-pornographic attitude that, as mentioned above, has accompanied pornography since its existence. As Madita Oeming (2018) convincingly points out, a change in rhetoric and argumentation strategies can be observed over the last decade of anti-porn sentiments. A newly emerging medical rhetoric declares pornography a 'pandemic' or 'epidemic,' suggesting that pornography addiction spreads like a virus and infects, of all people, those in power: white heterosexual men (Oeming 2018, 214f.). This means that nowadays "the focus has shifted from the production to the consumption side" (214f.), with the effect being that:

> Through re-framing its consumption as pathology, the cultural narrative about porn has effectively been changed from 'women need to be protected from men' to 'men need to be protected from porn'—just like the public was once successfully convinced that soldiers needed to be protected from STI-spreading prostitutes. (215)

This framing makes pornography a public health issue that allows us "to present moral judgement as scientific fact" (213). In search of an answer to the question of why this narrative is so successful and powerful, Oeming makes two assumptions. First, she places it in the context of contemporary masculinist, right-wing populist, and anti-third-wave feminist arguments. Analyzing the rhetoric of popular scientific self-help literature, she outlines that "porn addiction alongside 'the rise of women' and 'patriarchy myths'" are cited as the cause for America's male youth "'failing' academically, socially, and sexually" (215).[8] Second, she refers to the combination of "age-old cultural anxieties surrounding sexuality with the newborn moral panic about the internet; the latter being rooted, of course, in yet another long tradition of humankind's recurrent fears about technology and new media" (214).

8   As Oeming plausibly further argues, the diagnosis "porn addiction" "frees consumers from moral judgement—it is compulsive, what can they do?—and puts the blame on the product" (Oeming 2018, 214).

This observation reminds us once again how interwoven fears around sexuality and new media are. It also poses the question of the interconnection between pandemic porn and pandemic media.

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SCREEN TIME

CHILDREN'S MEDIA

EFFECTS STUDIES

STRETCHY TIME

The Time Stretched before Us: Rethinking Young Children's "Screen Time"

Meredith A. Bak

Children's media culture has been dominated by concerns over "media effects" and by a broader preoccupation with how children spend their leisure time. In recent years, a growing expert critique of "screen time" has begun to challenge these dominant perspectives. This critique has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, given the unexpected heightened reliance children have on screen-based media for both educational and recreational purposes. This essay links the media effects tradition with several features of the screen time debate, noting screen time's role in sustaining a future-based orientation of childhood. It proposes the pandemic's changes to domestic life as an opportunity to reconsider children's time and needs in the present, as flexible and occupied by a range of activities, including engagement with screen-based media without the artificial distinction of "screen time," which establishes unnecessary judgments and valuations.

*Demanding that parents just watch the clock
misses the point of parenting in the digital age.*
Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross (2020, 47)

Screen time essentially became time itself.
David Zweig (2020)

On April 6, 2020—only weeks after New York City's lockdown orders were announced, Andrew Przybylski and Pete Etchells published an opinion piece in the *New York Times* titled "Screen Time isn't All that Bad." In the wake of the pandemic, they write, "our families' screen time is about to go through the roof… and that's fine" (Przybylski and Etchells 2020, 27).

Przybylski and Etchells challenge the long-standing dominance of the media effects paradigm: a research tradition advanced in fields from communications to psychology that endeavors to find direct causal links between exposure to media and particular health or behavioral effects in young audiences (Przybylski and Etchells 2020, 27). Since at least the 1990s, researchers have "caution[ed] against the kinds of simplistic, casual connections that are often derived from 'effects studies.' Instead, they advocate a research agenda that pays more attention to the broader social context of how [mediated] images are actually read" (Kinder 1999, 4). The notion of "screen time" is a curious biproduct of the media effects legacy, presupposing that engagement with screen-based media represents a distinct quality and kind of experience that can be measured as such. Przybylski and Etchells's call to critically evaluate (and relax) prohibitive screen time limits thus gestures to a longstanding reconfiguration of children's media discourse that the COVID-19 pandemic has helped to accelerate.

This reconfiguration entails considering young children's screen time—indeed, children's time overall—not as a bounded set of discrete units to be limited and monitored, but as flexible and adapted to the intensity of children's interests and play. Such a shift deemphasizes media effects in favor of recognizing media as one mode (among many) that can foster opportunities for engagement and connection. Interrogating screen time as the core metric by which children's media engagement is judged offers new opportunities, not only to recognize media as a way to foster human connection during this time, but to reveal and unravel ways that time itself has prevented attention on children's everyday lived experiences in the present.

From Futurity to Immediacy

Although contemporary children's media discourses are largely organized around screen time, earlier preoccupations concerning children's interactions with commercial media have principally reflected a concern with *time* overall. The adoption of compulsory schooling and labor reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries subjected children's time to new modes of standardization and rationalization, charging children's leisure time with heightened importance as a resource that can either be squandered or used productively (Bak 2020, 42-49). "Because the activities of daily life provide the knowledge, skills, and behaviors children acquire as they develop," Wartella and Robb write, "it is no wonder that so much of parental concern focuses on how children spend their time" (2008, 7-8). This emphasis on time has long been present, but as the pandemic has shifted the percentage of daily activities that are organized in and around the home, parental concern with children's time (and the amount of children's time to be accounted for) has taken on new significance.

The stakes of how leisure time is spent and of media effects are perceived to be higher for children, given the understanding of childhood—and especially early childhood—as a crucial developmental period. This developmental paradigm has dominated perceptions of childhood since the early twentieth century, a perspective emphasizing children's socialization, that fuels anxieties and moral panics around children's social development (Prout and James 1997, 10–14). The two closely-linked ideas, that children's time is precious and that children are particularly impressionable, form the conditions within which children's media culture has been understood. The principle focus on children as subjects in-the-making (rather than as subjects in their own right) is inextricably linked to classical media effects theory that emphasizes future or long-term impacts over elements of everyday context.

Communication theorist Neil Postman began his widely-cited *The Disappearance of Childhood* by characterizing children as "living messages we send to a time we will not see" (1982, x). Postman argued that modern electronic media such as television were effectively making the idea of childhood vanish, creating the figures of the "'adultified' child and the 'childified' adult" (126). These sentiments reveal a preoccupation with futurity uniquely tied to childhood. At the heart of Postman's influential argument is an underlying perception that media confounds generational differences (and the power dynamics attached to them). The perceived adverse effects of media that result in a "loss" of childlike innocence in Postman's work and similar preceding arguments, such as Greenfield (1973) and Meyrowitz (1986), thus also result in a loss of adult authority when children's autonomy is recognized rather than marginalized (Spigel 1998, 128).

The pandemic's reconfiguration of time and the related changes in adult work patterns, childcare, and education requiring more children to spend more of their time in the home have newly emphasized a focus on necessary choices for children's immediate conditions over their longer, speculative futurities. As the authors of one parenting piece noted: "this pandemic could extend for a long time, so as you create new routines, focus on habits that are sustainable and practical" (Cheng and Wilkinson 2020). The pandemic's indefinite duration, then, throws the tidy, linear arc commonly associated with children's growth and development—a direction associated with progress—into relief. The emphasis has shifted from the future to the present.

The Magic of "Stretchy Time"

The heightened necessity of screen-based media for both formal education and children's leisure time during the pandemic has reconfigured the terms by which parents and caregivers assess the costs and benefits of time with screens. Children's time, like that of adults, has been wrested from its order, and is now subject to new interpretations and valuations. Even before the pandemic, screen time as the dominant analytic wrought "conceptual and methodological mayhem" (Kaye et al. 2020). Among the concept's central problems is the tidy distinction between screen and non-screen time drawn in order to enable a range of judgments.

The perception that screen time constitutes discrete and bounded units of time has been increasingly problematized, especially given the popularization of connected technologies that datify and screenify other everyday practices, such as smart toys and wearables (Mascheroni 2018). Digital media and technologies, write Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross, are "part of the infrastructure of everyday life, rendering time-based, context-free efforts to limit screen time ineffective, with the costs greater than the benefits" (2020, 46). The idea that screen time was an increasingly irrelevant analytic was already gaining traction before the year 2020. In short, Anya Kamenetz writes, "'time' is an increasingly useless shorthand for thinking about digital devices" (Kamenetz 2020). Once an evangelist for measuring and restricting screen time, the pandemic prompted Kamenetz to reevaluate the validity of such a position, and to consider contextual factors such as home and social environment alongside screen time. Like Kamenetz, the COVID-19 pandemic forced countless caregivers worldwide to evaluate screen time debates in new relation to changes in educational and leisure practices, as a means of remote instruction and to occupy especially young children while adults in the household work remotely.

During the pandemic, the divisions that give shape to familiar points of temporal reference—the workday, the weekend, the academic term or

year—have dissolved, giving way to a kind of temporality we might call "pandemic time." Time spent engaged with media is swept up into this formulation, as writer David Zweig lamented, that during the pandemic "screen time essentially became time itself" for his children (Zweig 2020). Hazy, indeterminate, elastic—pandemic time challenges the security associated with imagining children within a clear, future-oriented trajectory, demanding consideration of what is best or necessary for a child *now.*

This imagination of time as more fluid, less fixed, aligns with some models of early childhood education that favor more flexible approaches to structuring children's time: so-called "stretchy time." In contrast to traditional, regimented schedules, when "stretchy time" is implemented "the rhythm of learning [is] governed by engagement rather than the clock" (Cremin, Burnard, and Craft 2006, 115). Stretchy time "prioritise[s] intensity over duration," often asking educators to be more closely engaged in children's endeavors (Sakr and Oscar 2020, 2-3).

Stretchy time is conceptually antithetical to the temporal framework that makes "screen time" an actionable practice. Whereas the implementation of stretchy time enables an activity to expand "'magically'" in response to children's ongoing engagement, screen time is framed by restrictions. In other words, while children's traditional play practices are governed by ideals such as flexibility, "children's digital play experiences are shaped by a popular discourse that children's digital engagement—their 'screen time'—needs to be limited," resulting in "two opposing approaches to time" (Sakr and Oscar 2020, 1). Conceptualizations of "stretchy time" within early childhood discourses retain a valence of urgency associated with the developmental paradigm, by, for instance, tying the benefits of stretchy time to particular outcomes such as enhanced creative thinking. However, the breakdown of traditional, rationalized children's schedules is nevertheless an occasion to prioritize the qualities of elasticity and play associated with stretchiness, thereby reimagining the child as media spectator.

Considering time as elastic, capable of expanding when engagement is intense or meaningful, challenges the rigidity of screen time and the associated judgments that screen-based engagement is of lower quality to "real" social or physical interaction. In an unprecedented historical moment when school, work, and leisure activities move through and across screens more than ever, reconsidering screen time invites a conception of children who use media as and alongside other resources to connect, inquire, explore, and create. Eroding the distinctions that render "screen time" discrete from other forms of time also puts screen-based media back into closer relations with "traditional" media such as books. Media scholar Dean W. Duncan echoes the possibilities associated with such an orientation, arguing that: "It needn't always be a matter of better and worse, still less of right and wrong; the differences

between page and screen are not as important as the very substantial conceptual continuities that bridge both technological and temporal gaps" (Duncan 2015, 3). To reassess screen time is to recast the child media spectator as a dynamic, adaptable, responsible, and resilient figure, whose participation with media drives action and imagination. Stretchy time also invites heightened engagement from adult caregivers, who may observe and facilitate rather than simply set a timer.

Beyond Effects: A New Paradigm for Children's Media

The pernicious logics of media industries have remained intact in the months of COVID-19's initial waves. To challenge "screen time" as a limiting framework is not to acquiesce to the endless flow of streaming video on autoplay (a feature that automatically plays another video when the first is finished) or to get stuck in the ruts of algorithmically-generated recommendations. Recent commentators such as James Bridle have written persuasively of the ways that streaming video on platforms such as YouTube Kids almost seamlessly slides from desired content to bizarre, disturbing, and inappropriate content. Many such videos ascend the rankings through nonsensical strings of keywords and hashtags ("word salad") and are, themselves, algorithmically created, exemplifying "a kind of violence inherent in the combination of digital systems and capitalist incentives" (Bridle 2020). Yet there is considerable middle ground between strictly and artificially-limited screen time and an endless flow of unmonitored imagery.

The long-term effects of the pandemic on today's children are not yet knowable. However, as this essay has argued, the pervasive focus on *effects* should itself be interrogated. The temporal reorientation wrought by the pandemic has not only amplified the already mounting critique of screen time, but has also critically foregrounded the contours of the digital divide more prominently related to the issue. As work like Jacqueline Ryan Vickery's *Worried about the Wrong Things* (2017) has pointed out, the risks associated with young people and new media (secondary school-aged youth in Vickery's study) have more to do with equitable access than with the specters of risk on which traditional effects-based studies focus. Popular commentary examining debates in children's media now acknowledges that parents who can devote significant attention and resources to monitoring screen time possess a "fat honking wad of privilege" (Kamenetz 2020) or regard screen-based engagement in relation to highly racially and socio-economically stratified practices such as private school "pods" (Zweig 2020).

Caregivers and educators have long contended with incommensurate conceptions of children's time—time as a precious resource and as empty space

needing to be filled. Yet the implementation of lockdowns, quarantines, and social distancing practices have reshaped the discussion. The radical disruptions to all facets of everyday life give new occasion to suspend worry or guilt over children keeping up, or falling behind, or achieving an arbitrary balance among leisure and educational activities. The "paradoxical freedom of choicelessness" that McTague (2020) describes in the pandemic's wake need not mean that we accept the heightened role of media in children's lives as a necessary evil. Rather, it initiates a more fundamental reconfiguration of children's temporal rhythms and the value judgments attached to them, providing a chance to acknowledge time's affective value and media's role in shaping it.

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MICHEL CHION

MARA MILLS

TELEPHONE

MICROPHONE

ONLINE INSTRUCTION(S)

THE ACOUSMÊTRE

Mute Sound

John Mowitt

These remarks take up the theme of pandemic media by considering online instructional platforms such as Zoom, MS Teams, and the like to examine, as it were, both sides of the coin: the role such media play during the coronavirus pandemic, but also the role the pandemic plays in giving sense to our relation to such media. Specifically, in thinking about the place of sound on such platforms, the iconography of microphones both muted and unmuted, this contribution examines how Mara Mills's concept of "telephonic hearing" is given fresh relevance in online instruction, both in deepening the divide between sound and voice, and by reactivating Michel Chion's concept of the "acousmêtre." Recast as what sounds in mute sound, the "acousmêtre" at our finger tips prompts consideration of an instructive pandemonium coursing through and as the pandemic.

[Figure 1] In Line Instruction (Source: u/Balcion: https://www.reddit.com/r/OldSchoolCool/
comments/6x9ivi/my_dad_in_a_creepily_perfect_classroom_photo_1956/ 2017)

The motto is designed to provoke a certain obstinacy (fig. 1). Specifically, the normal, whether old or new, is almost certainly overrated. It is only a preposition away from the pathology to which it has been opposed. Now more than ever.

Although unlikely to leap out, pandemic (an epidemic that has affected the global δεμοζ) has deep connotative links to both panic and pandemonium. Hysteria, as both cause and effect, of a pandemic makes this hard to miss. At the hub of these connotative spokes sits Pan and his pipes. Pan spooks, he stirs up animals, provoking them to respond to his piping with noise. This quintessential figure of what Michel Foucault would call "pastoral power" not only splices sound to such power, but splices sound to the pandemic. Where I live, in Northern England, the lockdown has changed the "soundscape" much in the same way that deep snow does. As with the birds recorded "singing" after the cessation of hostilities on 11 November 1918, an intensely "low-fi" ambience was abruptly displaced by the lockdown, as if sonic modernity had been literally thrown into reverse. Nothing has been more affected than musical sound, which is now aggressively rerouted through home studios (Joan Baez's kitchen, or Ryuichi Sakamoto's New York flat, for example), balconies and instruments (one thinks here of the *panelaço* in Rio, or Charlie Watts's "air drums"). But I want to listen for something else. I have called it "mute sound."

Terry Eagleton's humour is not to everyone's liking. Perhaps not even to him. A personal favourite is the Cavellian riff he once elaborated on the sentence:

"dogs must be carried on the escalator." He seizes immediately on the imperative ambiguity of the descriptive—*if you have* a dog it must be carried while you ride the escalator—versus the prescriptive—*if you wish* to ride the escalator you must do so while carrying a dog—"versions" of the same sentence. His point is oriented toward answering the question, "what is literature?" Mine is different.

As those of us involved in that aspect of academic labour called teaching move this and other activities online we come face to face with the screen and the various apps (software platforms) that organize our relation to it. It is here that I encounter "mute sound," an imperative rife with many of the same ambiguities Eagleton teased out of "dogs must be carried on the escalator." Instructions for use thus seem called for. Especially in the context of "meetings" involving numerous participants, one is typically advised to "mute sound" so as to minimize interference on the line. At issue are not voices, but the random ambient noises that sonically profile them. Too much of the latter is thought to render the former unintelligible. On the screen, before our eyes, the icon provided for this functionality is that of a microphone that when muted is placed *sous rature*, that is, it is struck through with the "universal" mark of prohibition. In this it resembles the hardware graphics of the computer's volume control (significantly a loudspeaker) that is also struck through when fully muted. As with the Heideggerian "*kreuzweise Durchstreichung*," we can see the sign of sound (both voice and noise) transmission, and we can see that it is struck through. Off. Interestingly, we "hear" that it is muted typically when someone says "unmute your mic," as the digital technology does not permit us to hear the absence of our ambient noise in the shared feed. Lips moving and voices speaking line up, but ambiguities begin to crackle. Not all of them electromagnetic.

The microphone, as Pauline Oliveros would insist, is a promiscuous transducer. It picks up everything and everyone, converting all into electronic signals. By design. Muting it online draws attention to a difference between the voice and noise, reminding us that the desired sound, the one meant to be facilitated by the microphone, is the voice. The undesirable sound, the noise, is the space, the room of the voice. What then is the icon of the microphone an icon of? A device or an effect? A difference or an indifference? Mute sound? Is it simply an instruction uttered in the imperative, necessitated by the aim of facilitating an exchange with which it interferes? Is sound something that a microphone properly metonymizes? Sound in what sense? At issue here is something Mara Mills and Avital Ronell, in their radically distinctive ways, invite us to think about: is there a break in the line? Are we present before an emerging, thus new normal, mutation in telephonic hearing?

This question has been taken up most emphatically in Mills's essay, "Hearing Things: Telephones and Auditory Theory," where she graphs the rise and fall

of telephonic hearing. Like Friedrich Kittler, she splices hearing and the telephone through the notion of the prosthetic supplement (Edison's deafness), noting that the apparatus effectively usurped the perceptual faculty by urging that we, and the acoustic engineers among us, think about human hearing on the model of telephonic communication and its privileging of intelligibility (picking out phonemes) over fidelity (picking up details of the soundscape). Implicit in this model is a notion of transductive analogy, that is, the idea that like a telephone that moves an information rich signal from point a to point b, hearing itself involves an analogical alignment between sound wave frequencies and otio-electrical currents triggered in the brain. The expression: "I hear what you are saying," is a miniaturization of the entire model. Successive audiological descriptions of the functioning of the human ear and attention to the auto-poetic capacity of transduction to create what it carried, eventually cut the line between telephone technology and hearing. Microphone and receiver, and even loudspeaker ("speaker phone") lost their loop and the telephone faded as an audiological model.

Mute sound. To the extent that, in the context of online congregations it visualizes a segregated distribution of sound shaped by the difference between voice and noise, it oddly works to restore telephonic hearing. Fidelity has returned to the fore, a fact acknowledged in the "rate this call" survey that now concludes virtually every online exchange. It is as though all oral/aural communication has become postcoital: how was it for you? The question is its own answer. There is here, however, more than a simple and direct restoration of telephonic hearing. Hang ups are suggestively catachrestic. A model has morphed.

To amplify this one does well to note that the telephone figures prominently in Michel Chion's thinking about his analytical neologism, the "acousmêtre," a portmanteau (*acoustique* + *être* + *maître*) he employs to track the distinctly sonic curve of narrative suspense in the cinema. Like one's telephonic interlocutor, the "acousmêtre" is absent from the visual field. But unlike the party to whom one is speaking, the cinematic "acousmêtre" always threatens to appear and thus has a determined hermeneutic force, precisely in rendering its "de-acousmatization" (to use Chion's *mot d'art*) narratively consequential. William Castle's 1965 film, *I Saw What You Did* deftly twists the strands that wire together the apparatus of the telephone, and the menacing figure of the "acousmêtre," in this case an uxoricide. Crucial to the hermeneutic force of the "acousmêtre" is the oft-remarked fact that a film aggressively subjects its audience to the syntax of its sights and sounds. The "owner" of Mrs. Bates's voice in *Psycho* (her skull is now at the Cinémathèque in Paris), de-acousmatizes on the film's time, decidedly not ours. Its appearance shocks and means. This effect, and its significance would appear to interfere with a pandemical restoration of telephonic hearing.

Although often indexed to technical matters having to do with signal strength, bandwidth, server stability etc., it is common that with online interfacing one engages in a rhythm of acousmatization and de-acousmatization; one mutes one's microphone, and blinds (?) one's camera. If you continue speaking with the camera blinded one assumes the position of the "acousmêtre" and online teleconferencing mimics telephony directly. However, the etiquette in play— "could you mute your sound/un-blind your camera" (an insistently "oral" thus acoustic gesturing, unless the supplement of "signing" is in play)—deprives the "acoustmêtre" of its hermeneutic force. Its mastery of Bertolt Brecht's long sought "two-way" communication here operates to drain all drama from the event of de-acousmatization, producing the distinctively exhausting tedium of online interfacing whether teaching or meeting. The moment of disclosure is just a click away and the syntax of sight and sound (the "film") falls willy-nilly into our hands.

Or does it? In Mills's discussion of the crisis of telephonic hearing, she points to the gradual but irreversible separation between the psychoacoustic account of hearing, and the model of telephonic transduction. She spends less time on the matter of what happens to telephony as a result of this separation, a history that would include the emergence of online teleconferencing. Although she does not italicize it, the fate of transduction figures crucially in such a history. It too is caught up in the fade of the telephonic model, not merely as an aspect of the model, but as a concept subject to technical modelling. Not surprisingly, transduction has attracted the attention of many, everyone from Gilbert Simondon and Gilles Deleuze to Adrian MacKenzie and Jonathan Sterne. And, if this matters it is because the puzzle of transduction breathes new life into the figure of the "acousmêtre." It does so by evoking and thus generating a matrix behind or beneath the etiquette of the muting/blinding where de-acousmatization reacquires hermeneutic force, not in the syntax of narrative (whose voice organizes the plot?), but in the operation of the medium (how is the signal possible?)

To get at this, another sense of "mute sound" asks to be heard. Instead of hearing it as an instruction, hear it as a description. Sound that *is* mute. Not sound that is muted or muffled, but sound that cannot be voiced. Or better, sound that is not phonic, but sonic. In his tenacious reading of Pascal Quignard's "treatise" on language, Jean-Francois Lyotard elaborates a contrast between music and "*la mutique*," in order to bring forward a music that falls before, yet sounds (Quignard says "bellows") within music. In this spirit might we not invoke mute sound as a way to bring forward a sound before sound? Again, not merely non-vocal sound, but sound prior to a model of hearing modelled on telephony. The commotion produced by the tree falling un-miked in the forest. From behind its "strike through," the muted microphone transduces an appearance that simultaneously promises and

defies de-acousmatization. What (certainly not "who") makes the sound before sound? Can it be picked up by the camera? Such questions and others parasitize the online interface and they transfer to the digital medium of the computer all the hermeneutic force of de-acousmatization, but now realized through a potential gesture of disclosure that defies location in space and time.

At the Greek root of mute lies μουη. It means to close one's eyes or lips, and in thus connoting secrecy ("mum's the word") quickly suggests initiation and mystery. As muting and unmuting belong to apps enabling and even now sustaining online instruction, their use places education back where it belongs. In the (dis)seminary. Serendipitously, the OED tells us that in biology, transduction designates the work of a virus, the transfer of foreign genetic material into an organism. Perhaps it is this that post-telephonic transduction threatens to de-acousmatize, not the pocked face of the virus stirring the current pandemic, but the operation of the pandemic *within* our techno-pedagogical response to it. Or maybe even the pandemical character of all initiation, the collective drive to expose all to the mute sound.

A reminder, however immodest, that we may not yet grasp the crisis of well-being at hand. We cannot simply respond to it. It is in the operation of this response. Just pick up the phone. Take or make the call. Raise your hand. Unmute sound.

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INFRASTRUCTURE

MEMBERSHIP GROUPS

ONLINE TEACHING

BLUFF

FORGETTING

Face Off

Kerim Dogruel

The article asks how the shift to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic is perceived differently by different status groups. Press articles wondered why students didn't show their faces in class. The article explores possible reasons and tries to shift the discussion away from blaming the students and suggests that instead of focusing on generational differences, the situation is better understood with analytical tools from social and media theory, which give special attention to the institutional framework of the university.

When German universities shifted to online classes because of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020, an advanced student described her experience of the situation as if she were in the first semester all over again. Discussing the situation with other students and colleagues from different status groups (ranging from Bachelor and Master students to doctoral students, post-docs, and professors), several stated the opposite: that everything basically stays the same while everyone does the responsible and a little boring thing of staying home. I like to think that both are true. But why does the perception of the same situation differ so greatly? And what does the university as an

institution have to do with it? The student's analogy of being demoted back to the first semester seems to be key, since it describes the critical moment of transitioning into a new learning and working environment. This transition becomes warped during e-learning. This is even more so when the infamous German phenomenon of *Uni-Bluff*—an extracurricular yet crucial behavior that is necessary to successfully navigate university—takes on new forms in the online learning environment.[1] Instead of asking into the intrinsic motivations of the different groups, I want to shift the attention to the infrastructures of digital learning themselves and how they "emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy" (Larkin 2013) that effect the different groups in different ways.

The student described her membership status at university that was somehow lost through the pandemic and now had to be regained again. For the other group, their membership status was never in jeopardy. To better understand the different variables of the situation, the theoretical framework of Star, Bowker, and Neumann provides the tools to make sense of the two different perceptions. Both groups are part of the same *community of practice*:

> A *community of practice* is a group of people joined by conventions, language, practices, and technologies …. It may or may not be contained in a single spatial territory; in the modern information world, it often is not. It contains strong ties that are not covered by the terms *family*, *formal organization*, or *voluntary association*. (Star, Bowker, and Neumann 2003, 243)

While some of the most important social interactions at university take place in classrooms, the communal learning experience shifted because of the pandemic. The social interactions from the classroom and everything in between, from hallways, to libraries, cafeterias, blackboards, and restrooms, collapsed and could only partially be replaced or addressed through online infrastructures, if they were addressed at all. Goethe University Frankfurt bought bulk licenses of videoconferencing software, additionally the already existing infrastructures for e-learning were strengthened and expanded. Zoom was quickly established as the software of choice for most teaching purposes. The videoconference software was added to the other *information artifacts*, as one of many "tools, systems, interfaces, and devices for storing, tracking, displaying, and retrieving information" (Star, Bowker, and Neumann 2003, 244). *Communities of practice* and *information artifacts* depend on each other. When

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1   Wagner has described the bluff in his book *Uni-Angst und Uni-Bluff*, which was published in three very different editions in 1977, 1992, and 2007. Only in his latest edition does Wagner accept the bluff as a necessity. Thomas Waitz provides an analysis of the changes between the editions throughout the years (see Waitz 2019). For this text, I'll primarily use the latest edition of the book. English lanuage quotes from Wagner are my translation.

they converge and the community standard becomes more and more transparent to the individual, membership is achieved. Yet membership is not a rigid category, but rather a trajectory that shapes the individual in the process. An important part of that process is the transformation of self-imagination: "the shaping of individuals so that they see themselves as having the set of information needs that can be met by their new social world's information resources" (Star, Bowker, and Neumann 2003, 245). You can see yourself as part of that world when you have a clear idea of what your place in it could be. Students that didn't have any trouble adjusting to the new learning environment could literally see themselves within the university framework.

Since my own transition from being a student to becoming a teacher wasn't that long ago, I was wary of the side-effects and outside perceptions of me as a teacher. All the menial tasks that come with getting started at an institute, ranging from uploading photos for the institute-website, signing forms to get access to an institutional email-address, setting up institute email signatures, validating your university employee ID, setting up keys to get access to offices and classrooms, slipping in and out of these spaces, using the already familiar learning management system with an enhanced and more powerful interface, made me wary of the transition myself. But they also signaled to the outside that I now had become part of the institution. I already had teaching experience from outside university, but the change in status that came with it was very different from other learning environments, mostly because it's an institution that can itself grant status—regardless of whether I liked that or not.[2] Even though I had taught university seminars prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had not done it often enough for it to have become a habit yet. To continue working "as always" is impossible if "always" is a time-span of two years.

After the first few classes during the pandemic, I had the same conversation with different colleagues individually who had decided to structure their classes through weekly videoconferences. They were confused, surprised, or even slightly offended by students who didn't turn on their cameras in class.[3] Empty squares caused insecurities. The gridded structure of the videoconference homogenizes, each square is equally visible, regardless of what it contains (see Higgins 2009, 9). At the same time the grid signals the inherent power imbalance between teacher and student, host and guest, much more than a classroom could—the grid is a visual testament to the power of the person that has control over it (see Siegert 2003, 95). Paradoxically, the

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2   The main takeaway of Wagner's 2007 edition of the book is that the increase in status (both morally and financially) is a real and valid reason for many students to attend university, therefore the necessity to master the bluff without succumbing to it (see Wagner 2007, 31–36).

3   Besides the obvious technological reasons of not having the necessary hardware available or not having a stable connection.

invisible students become more visible through this equal treatment of every rectangle.

> And the whole time all I could focus on was the sea of blank avatars—rather than actual faces—staring back at me. Why did it matter? Why had students decided to turn off their camera? To be honest, I took it a bit personally. (Eng 2020)[4]

I don't want to guess about the individual agreements that were and are being made in class in the first few meetings. Likewise I'm not trying to explain every possible reason for students not to show their faces on camera. What interests me are the reasons that might lie in the existing and newly facilitated infrastructures of the university itself. Setting up rules for class is important and shapes the direction for what will happen for the rest of the semester, how to work and how to play together. But already before individual rules can be established, students enter the classroom with their own expectations, fears, and desires.

It's a crucial moment, which is particularly strong in the first session of a semester, and even stronger with freshmen students. Wolf Wagner explores the special connection between the face and the status of first semester students at German universities in what he calls the fear of the "smart face": "A face that doesn't show its fear, but covers it up by an emphasized natural, relaxed and confident demeanor"[5] (Wagner 2007, 66). Wagner describes the fine details and micro gestures of students when they enter a classroom full of other people they don't know. It's an anatomy of the process of projection in which the individual student's fear of failure manifests itself in the faces of the other students, who therefore appear as carriers of all "objectified requirements of the university system" (Wagner 2007, 66). The "smart face" becomes operationalized and is appropriated as a bluffing behavior that serves the purpose of navigating the very same system. It's not only a question of pose or appearance, but a bluff that consists of a wide variety of different expressions, especially in writing and speech.

> Just like when an uncertain hand in poker should appear better than it really is, the scholar makes him or herself appear a little better, smarter, more well-read, more knowledgeable, and more profound than he or she

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4   Also: "Why won't the students show themselves? Hoppe can only guess: … She also suspects that sometimes there is actually no one sitting behind the black screens" (Wiarda 2020, 35–36, my translation); "Even though they have been socialized with digital media, students turn off their cameras in videoconference seminars. Why?" (Kirchmeier 2020, my translation).

5   Wagner reasons that—while there is arrogance in other university systems (he discusses the USA and England in more detail)—the bluff is particular to German universities because of their devaluation of teaching in academic performance reviews. He characterizes it as a university system than overvalues research reputation while almost completely neglecting teaching performance (see Wagner 2007, 92–96).

really is. It happens out of reflex that has been rehearsed more than a
thousand times …. (Wagner 2007, 55)

While these types of bluffing appear in a similar form in everyday life, they
become more nuanced and integral in the university context. Almost every-
thing in the academy has to do with communication, yet the bluff actively
impairs it. Since freshmen have fewer cards to draw from, their bluffing is
more severe, and riskier to pull off. But learning to bluff, how and when to put
on a "smart face," is also an expression of attained university membership
within the German context. It's a tacit knowledge that has nothing to do with
the content of your studies. Brave students that have less trouble bluffing
learned "behavior instead of content" (Wagner 2007, 67), behavior that is
part of an invisible curriculum. "The result is mutual isolation that appears as
arrogance" (Wagner 1973, 61).

The gridded videoconference classrooms ask for a different mode of
perception and participation in which every articulation is mediated.[6] In an all-
digital learning environment, everything seems to be readily available at one's
fingertips. But infrastructures are paradoxical (see Star 1999, 386–87), and a
seemingly straightforward task can turn into an array of little steps that are
scattered in different digital places and need their own approach that ranges
from separate log-ins to dedicated streaming websites, following extra links
that accommodate an unusually large file, organizing the digital literature and
material, writing emails and texts to stay in touch with the teachers, with other
students, etc. The visible articulation is only possible because of a second
invisible layer.

> The other is the process of assemblage, the delicate, complex weaving
> together of desktop resources, organizational routines, running memory
> of complicated task queues …, and all manner of articulation work per-
> formed invisibly by the user. (Star 1999, 386–87)

These invisible tasks not only surround the online classes, they are part
of them as well and are put into practice through countless clicks: muting,
unmuting, screen-sharing, switching between the grid-view and the speaker's
view, setting up smaller groups for discussion, opening and closing the chat
window, switching between pdfs and the window of the videoconference.
Click, click, click, click, click.

> At a phenomenological level, what has happened is that these slight
> impediments have become magnified in the flow of the work process. An

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6   "In order to exist, their organic bodies are hidden behind an indefinite series of semio-
     technical mediations, an array of cybernetic prostheses that work like digital masks:
     email addresses, Facebook, Instagram, Zoom, and Skype accounts. They are not physical
     agents but rather tele-producers … " (Preciado 2020).

> extra keyboard stroke might as well be an extra 10 pushups. (Star 1999, 386)

The impediments that cannot be pictured form an additional barrier to the not-so-brave student. Membership in the digital learning environment becomes even harder to attain for some students, therefore the feeling of being in the first semester all over again. It might not be enough to make sense of every student that decides not to show their face in an online class, but it further complicates the possible motivations or rather demotivations brought by the shift to online teaching. To characterize the situation as a symptom of the overall alienation of a generation (see Kirchmeier 2020) is misguided, since it blanks out the different membership statuses of all the people involved and overvalues the importance of the classroom in contrast to the rest of campus life. The difference in perception is also caused by the forgetting[7]:

> For the mature researcher, it is easy to forget the barriers and blockages that the newcomer faces; as communities of practice converge with wider-scale information systems, the categories come to seem entirely natural rather than negotiated. (Star, Bowker, and Neumann 2003, 251)

When the process of seeing oneself in another light is mandatory to obtain membership status at university, it could be a good exercise to imagine oneself as outside of it from time to time.

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7   Wagner also addresses the forgetting: "Since I've known the academy, I've been constantly accompanied by colleagues whining about how much worse current students are than those of the past. It might absolutely be that this has to do with the growing glorification of one's own student past" (Wagner 2007, 70).

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KURZFILMTAGE OBERHAUSEN

ONLINE FILM FESTIVAL

TEMPORALITY

ASYNCHRONICITY

(SELF-)CENSORSHIP

Let's Go to Oberhausen! Some Notes on an Online Film Festival Experience

Wanda Strauven

This short essay reflects on the different spatio-temporal layers of "going" to an online film festival during the COVID-19 lockdown. Particularly, it looks at the case of the 66ᵗʰ edition of the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, which made its competition and other programs accessible in blocks, each for 48 hours. Furthermore, it illustrates the concept of "connected asynchronicity" by discussing the censorship of an archival film that had first been made available (and viewable).

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the notion of "virtual" experience came to be the new norm of life: from virtual meetings with your best friends to virtual museum visits, conferences, roundtables, and film festivals. The "virtual" did (and still does) not stand in opposition to the real, but to the fact that the only real happened (and still happens) online. In this essay, I will briefly reflect on my first experience of "going" to the online film festival. I do not want to make predictions about the future by assuming that this will be the "new normal." The scope is merely to reflect on how this specific experience affected me as a scholar and as a person, in a situation of very strict confinement, while living in Italy, where the first-wave lockdown (from early March to early June 2020) was heavily regulated.

I attended the online version of the 66th edition of the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen (13–18 May 2020) as part of an MA course on film archiving and festival programming that I was co-teaching with Marc Siegel at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. Originally, we had planned a physical excursion or "field trip" to Oberhausen for our students, but we were forced to revise the course concept due to the COVID-19 lockdown. When the festival announced that they would go online, showing not only the competition programs, but also the selections made by archives and distributors, we decided to take the students on this, for us too, new adventure.

A personal code in lieu of a festival pass provided access to around 350 short films, talks, and presentations, in addition to live DJ sets every night. Among the various programs, which were uploaded in blocks according to a precise schedule and remained accessible for 48 hours each, we preselected for our students a couple of competition programs, the archive programs (curated, for this year's edition, by the Russian CYLAND video archive and the Polish Fundacja Arton), the Dutch EYE presentation of Henri Plaat, and the Austrian sixfilmpack distribution selection. Besides this compulsory viewing, students were free to navigate through all the programs and films on offer.

However, not all the programs of the 66th edition of Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen were made available online. The concepts of the "Conditional Cinema" and "Labs" sections, for instance, were not compatible with the new COVID-19 lockdown format, due to their emphasis on and celebration of "live" performance and projection. The "Labs" section, curated by Vassily Bourikas, is all about the experience of watching handmade photochemical films as material artifacts, as film strips running through a projector. This reminds us of the fact that analog cinema has a different kind of temporality, depending on the sequentiality of the film frames, once defined by Garrett Stewart as the "mechanical frame time of the track" (2007, 127). Freed from the linear transportation of the celluloid strip, digital cinema is in this sense more apt for, or more akin to, online viewing practices. The absence of "Labs" at the 66th edition of Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen is, for sure, to be read as a statement, as a rejection of converting 16mm films into digital files, in order to stay true to the section's original aim, which is, however, not to fetishize celluloid, but rather "to maintain the availability of different forms of cinema, not to privilege one over another" (Rapfogel 2018).

The variety of different forms of cinema was indeed annulled, at least in material terms, by the online platform that presented each film as an individually clickable item, albeit with a predetermined position in a program. Viewers were not "forced" to sit through an entire program, but could easily jump from (within) one horizontal program strip to the next, as long as they were simultaneously available on the platform. Deceptively, the typical anxiety about missing out on the gems of the festival ebbed away thanks

to the "flexibility of internet time" (Otto 2015), which underlies the different temporality of digitally streamed cinema. Viewers experienced a great sense of freedom, since they could not only interrupt and restart their viewing whenever they wanted, but also go back and forth in a specific program, watch certain scenes or entire short films again, freeze the image, etcetera. This flexibility also led to impatience among some of our students, who found themselves skipping the more "boring" parts of the program.

Not exactly 24/7 but rather 48/2 (that is, 48-hour program availability spread over two full days including night time), the festival became a form of "non-stop work site," which was to some extent (at least within the context of the strictly regulated Italian lockdown) comparable to an "always open shopping mall of infinite choices, tasks, selections, and digressions" (Crary 2014, 17). This 24/7 logic of sleeplessness had to be combined with some form of "normal" family life, which for me made it personally quite challenging and exhausting, very different from previous film festival visits, during which I usually put all other (daily) activities on hold. Yet the simultaneous running of private and professional "timetables" also had its charms. I especially enjoyed sharing the highlights of the Children's Film Competition programs, which I followed out of interest for my ongoing research on children and media, with my 12-year-old daughter whose genuine reactions to the touching short films I could more easily observe (and anticipate), as it was a repeated viewing for myself.[1] I made an exception for the Children's Film Competition 3+, which we watched directly together and both loved. It was a nice surprise to discover afterwards that our favorite, *The Shoe of a Little Girl* by Kedar Shrestha, was awarded.[2]

Halfway through the festival, we met with the students in a virtual room in order to exchange ideas and experiences. This is how we found out that our asynchronous viewings actually led, at least in one specific case, to the reception/consumption of altered content. For the CYLAND video archive had taken the drastic decision to remove one of their films on the grounds of recent homophobic accusations against the filmmaker. While I was able to watch the video art performance film in question—*New Icarus* (1991) by Edward Shelganov—before the act of curatorial self-censorship took place and as such experienced the program as a 1990s framing of more recent work (fig. 1),

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1   This discrepancy between our viewing experiences was the most "effective" in respect to the Dutch short *En route* by Marit Weerheijm, which follows two children and their father on an early morning trip to the city. Only at the very end does the viewer, together with the young female protagonist, realize that they are a poor family relying on aid from the food bank, which is the destination of their trip.

2   This Nepalese short is about a 5-year-old girl who always wears her shoes the wrong way, mixing up left and right, until she finds an inventive way to remember: drawing a black dot on her left shoe at the same spot where she has a birthmark on her left foot.

others only got to see the "Statement" by festival director Lars Henrik Gass (fig.2).[3]

[Figure 1] Screenshot of *New Icarus* (1991) by Edward Shelganov

[Figure 2] Screenshot of "Statement" by the Oberhausen festival director[4]

Regarding the Q&A with CYLAND curator Victoria Ilyushkina we were equally out of synch, mainly because not all of us had understood that the discussion could be followed "live" on a different platform, separate from the program streaming. In other words, our simultaneous digital connectivity brought

3   The CYLAND program opened with *Nestlings of the Sea* (Boris Kazakov), a 1996 experiment of drawing and scratching on old archive films, followed by three videos from the last decade: *Formal Portrait* (Polina Kanis, 2014), *Horizon* (Sid Iandovka and Anya Tsyrlina, 2019), and *The Sun Monopoly* (Dimitri Lurie, 2018).
4   The full statement can be found at https://www.facebook.com/kurzfilmtage/posts/10158715466976807.

about a multiplicity of temporal experiences, not only quantitatively but also qualitatively differentiable. Picking up Robert Hassan's notion of "connected asynchronicity," one could say we were all forming our own times through the "juxtaposition of asynchronous spaces" (Otto 2015, 91); more generally, we were just experiencing how the "time of the clock" was undermined and displaced by the internet or network time (Hassan 2007, 51).

The collective viewing experience and social interaction, so typical of onsite film festivals, is what we all missed the most. Yet, despite the disparity and fragmentation of our different times, there was still a communal feeling of knowingness that "we are all in this together"—not only this new online media adventure, but also the global COVID-19 confinement. In this sense, it was quite appropriate that the Grand Prize of the City of Oberhausen went to Barbara Hammer's Duneshack material, filmed during a residency in solitude without water or electricity and revisited twenty years later by Lynne Sachs: *A Month of Single Frames* (2019). For this poetic film inscribes the audience very literally within its images: "You are alone. / I am here with you in this film. / There are others here with us. / We are all together."

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ACTIVISM / SOCIABILITY

LIVENESS

ARCHIVES

EUROVISION

FANDOM

This Is Our Night: Eurovision Again and Liveness through Archives

Abby S . Waysdorf

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no Eurovision Song Contest for the first time in 65 years. For fans of the contest, this was distressing, at a time when life was distressing enough. Without the live event to watch and comment on, how could they participate in their fandom and connect with fellow fans? In this essay, I look at how the fan initiative Eurovision Again works to solve this problem by recreating the experience of live viewing through the use of archives. Throughout the lockdown, Eurovision Again has chosen a "classic" Eurovision Grand Final for a Saturday night viewing, complete with Twitter hashtag and voting. I argue that in combining the "shared social reality" of live viewing with the shared culture of archives, Eurovision Again serves to sustain and reinforce a "Eurofan" identity while providing a break from the anxiety of everyday pandemic life.

The 65th Eurovision Song Contest was to be held on May 16, 2020. As "Europe's favorite television show," the contest has been a fixture on screens across and outside of the continent for decades, with a set schedule of national finals and pre-contest events leading up to it. The Grand Final is met with an explosion of attention as the continent watches (and comments).

All of this was underway when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe in March 2020. Within a short period, the pre-contest events were cancelled, the pro-motional tours stopped, and then, finally, the contest itself was called off. For the first time in 65 years, there would be no Eurovision.

Eurovision was not the only media event to be postponed. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on the television schedule. Live events are an important structuring element of contemporary media life. What happens when they disappear?

For Eurovision fans, the answer was to recreate the experience with archives. Eurovision Again, developed by British journalist and Eurovision fan Rob Holley, selects a previous Grand Final for viewing at a set time on Saturday nights, followed along via a Twitter hashtag. (Post-lockdown, it has shifted from a weekly to a monthly event.) Originally set up as a fan initiative, Euro-vision itself has become involved, hosting the livestream on its YouTube channel and using its archivists to put together full versions of shows that are not easily accessible. There may have not been a Eurovision 2020 to participate in, but for much of the lockdown, there has been a Eurovision—and one that is seen as by and for the fans, rather than the general audience that also watches the regular version.

In this essay, I will be exploring Eurovision Again. I argue here that in combining a form of "liveness" with archival material, it helps to sustain and enforce a "Eurofan" identity by both creating a specific public through the livestreams and encouraging increased engagement with (selected) Eurovision history. This serves as a way to "escape" from the pandemic, if just for a night, and keep the Eurofan identity alive in the absence of its structuring event.

The Live Event

The Eurovision Song Contest is just what it sounds like—a (televised) song competition, where every country in a loose definition of Europe can send a song and a performer. From its early versions as a short bit of light entertain-ment, participated in by a handful of western European countries, Eurovision has evolved into a week-long mega-event, broadcast across the continent and world. The Rotterdam edition would have hosted 41 performing countries and thousands of fans, coming not just to cheer on their own country, but to generally appreciate the contest and the fan community that has been built

up in recent years. It would have been broadcast to over 180 million people, mainly via the European public broadcasters that make up the sponsoring European Broadcasting Union, but also through official livestreams that bring the contest to a worldwide audience.

In its 65th year, Eurovision is a media institution—a quintessential "media event" as described by Dayan and Katz (1992). It is scheduled and anticipated, but outside of normal broadcasting—an interruption, made all the more special for how it disrupts the normal flow of media life. Dayan and Katz compare these events to holidays, in that they are disruptive, but pleasantly so. They promise a break from everyday life, a time for celebration, and particularly, a time for celebration with others. People gather together to watch media events, and in doing so, join spiritually with others who are doing the same thing. They disturb the normal atomization of media, in which every household is watching something different, and instead make people "aware of all the other homes in which the same thing is taking place at the same time" (Dayan and Katz 1992, 131). While "normal" media consumption is dispersed and atomized, media events bring people together to view the same thing at the same time.

This "at the same time" is the crucial point of a media event, and what makes it different from just a popular program. A media event is an event that is viewed "live" on television. The promise of live media, and especially live audiovisual media, is that we can experience important events as they happen, regardless of where we physically are, at the same time as others who also agree on its importance. It is this dual connection that Couldry stresses when talking about live transmission as a ritual category of media—it "guarantees a potential connection to our shared social realities as they are happening" (2003, 96–97). The connection is both to the event and to the broader society that makes the event meaningful and worth experiencing in the moment. As Couldry points out, "'liveness' naturalizes the idea that, through the media, we achieve a shared attention to the realities that matter to us as a society" (2003, 99). Without this connection to others, liveness as an idea is less valuable.

While Dayan and Katz saw the connection made between members of the public through televised events as imagined, as one could only react to the celebrants in your immediate vicinity, social media has made this explicit by showing how others are reacting and making it possible to respond directly to them. As van Es (2017) discusses, television increasingly "enhances" its liveness through the direct connections of social media. During a media event, the imagined other celebrants become very real. This is especially true for Twitter, which, even compared to other social media, emphasizes its up-to-date connectivity and facilitates it through a constantly refreshing feed and clickable hashtags that collect tweets about subjects in one place. Commenting on Twitter (and to some extent other social media) during a major media event

is therefore an important way of connecting to others. In a time when media consumption is even more atomized than when Dayan and Katz were writing due to on-demand media streaming, the rare moments of connectivity through a live event are even more valuable.

This idea of celebratory, connected liveness is at the heart of the Eurovision experience. Couldry's reading of Dayan and Katz's original concept emphasizes that media events are "times when large societies are 'together,' but when this togetherness is experienced as something *positive*" (2003, 62). Eurovision is quite explicit about this being a goal, stressing its ability to bring the disparate cultures of Europe together, at the same time, in common celebration. As a media event, it embraces festival and holiday qualities rather than sacredness and solemnity.

Dayan and Katz tend to emphasize the top-down nature of media events, stressing their connection to a society's elite center and celebrating its mainstream values, but with Eurovision, the situation is different. While conceived of as a classic contest between nations, fans of the contest have given it other meanings. Its fan culture is less concerned with the nationalistic clash as it is with the entertainment value of each entry and the joyous togetherness of the event itself.

It has also been widely adopted as a gay and queer event (Baker 2017; Halliwell 2018). Gathering for Eurovision, both online and offline, has taken on this identity. The ideal of Eurovision fandom is not that of opposing nations asserting their superiority, but of marginalized groups coming together to celebrate through music and spectacle. The connection is not with the center, but with other members of the outside. Its break from the everyday is a break from everyday oppression. However, this still happens within the framework of a major media event that "everyone" is watching. There are few other events that so entwine the mainstream and the marginalized.

It is this that was missed with the unprecedented cancellation of the contest. Silverstone (1994) and Coman (2008) stress the ontological security that comes with reoccurring media events, in knowing that this celebration will be repeated yearly. For Eurovision fans, this means connection with other marginalized people, both in-person and electronically, will be provided through the long-standing structure of the contest. The moments of reconnection were greatly anticipated. As one travelling Eurovision fan put it, "it's the one time of year we see our family from Europe and abroad." (Segalov 2020) The pandemic abruptly cancelled this just as it was beginning for the new year.

Alongside all the other COVID-19 interruptions, this caused considerable distress among fans. Eurovision was a constant, having endured longer than most of its fans were alive. Its late cancellation, coming after much of its

preliminaries had been completed and fans were eagerly anticipating the contest itself, was the confirmation that the pandemic was serious and worrying. At the same time, the cancellation removed one of the major support systems that fans had to turn to—the contest itself, and the coming-together that the contest provides, both through media and in person. When fans most needed the togetherness and ontological security of this media event, it was taken away.

Archives and Eurofandom

"Watch in sync. Tweet along. Vote for your hero, that's what you must do." This is how Eurovision Again explains itself. It goes like this: every Saturday at 7:45 PM BST a new "classic" Eurovision grand final is revealed as this week's show. Fifteen minutes later, it begins. Viewers are encouraged to tweet along with the hashtag #EurovisionAgain, and to vote on a polling website once the songs have finished. It has clear appeal—the official Twitter account, begun in March 2020, now has over ten thousand followers, tweets using the hashtag (or related terms) are regularly in the tens of thousands, and Eurovision itself has begun to provide assistance, helping to source (and in some cases, put together) previous contests and airing the stream from its official YouTube account in order to better synchronize viewers.

Essentially, it reproduces the experience of watching Eurovision on television, complete with reactions from others and the ranking of favorites. In doing this, Eurovision Again aims to recreate the celebratory liveness of Eurovision, at a time when fans feel like they need it most. While the contest itself, and all its attendant celebrations, are cancelled, fans can still come together through social media and act as they would without the pandemic.

Indeed, escapism and positivity are the main tones of Eurovision Again. Those who participate do not want to be reminded that the contest was cancelled and that the world is experiencing a global pandemic. They want the disruption from the everyday that Eurovision has always represented. In watching Eurovision, again, the idea is that the joyous togetherness of the media event is also reexperienced, at a time when this is most needed. If the everyday is anxiety and fear, Eurovision provides a break.

However, there is one crucial difference. Rather than the eternal present of the main contest, Eurovision Again orients itself towards the past.

Media events have a complex relationship with the past. Dayan and Katz discuss how an event that finishes immediately loses some of its aura and meaning as it finishes and we must return to everyday life, the event "a record in the archives." (1992, 106) At the same time, media events become "mnemonics for organizing personal and historical time." (1992, 212) Media events

shape the way in which we remember our lives, defining both personal and collective memories of an era.

Both of these uses of the past are present in the liveness of Eurovision Again. The livestreams are given an introduction by historian Catherine Baker, who puts the contest about to be viewed in historical and cultural context. During the livestream, viewers not only react to what they're seeing, but what they remember about seeing it for the first time—how they felt as youth for older contests, memories of being there for newer ones. Photographs of trips to Lisbon or Copenhagen are shared, with recollections of what it was "really like" on the ground and how that compares to watching now. While it is, of course, possible to remember without the impetus of the livestream, watching it with others brings the connectivity of liveness to memory. Not only the contest, but the memory of the contest, is experienced with others. For those who don't have an existing memory of the contest being viewed, they can connect to the memories of others and gain a better understanding of Eurovision's past.

In this, Eurovision Again works to sustain and foster a distinct "Eurofan" identity, distinct from the general viewership of the main contest. A sense of shared history and heritage is an important part of any group identity. Having a shared sense of the past, and what this past means, is crucial in "securing a sense of togetherness and cultural solidarity" (McDowell 2008, 41). While this has largely been theorized in terms of national and ethnic identity, in the contemporary era, it is not only national and ethnic identities that matter. Many find equal value in popular-culture based identities—fandoms.

Here, too, a sense of history is important. De Kosnik argues that "archives provide this connection through giving members of a community a sense of shared culture" (2016, 124). Access to the shared past facilitates a shared identity, which, as De Kosnik argues, is especially critical for fandom as it is generally chosen, rather than "innate." Establishing a shared culture through use of the past and access to historical records of an identity establishes it as legitimate.

For Eurovision fans, knowledge of history is also crucial in distinguishing "Eurofans" from general Eurovision viewers. While the general public watches Eurovision as it airs, Eurofans pride themselves on deeper engagement—knowing more about the artists and songs before the show and, increasingly, knowledge of past contests. Interest in Eurovision's past, as well as its present, is a key marker of being a Eurofan.

Eurovision Again is both created by and marketed to such fans. Even knowing about, much less participating in, Eurovision Again requires a certain amount of awareness of broader Eurofandom. This means that Eurovision is remembered in a particular way. Archives are structures of power (Schwartz and Cook, 2002), shaping memory in specific ways. In selecting and displaying

certain contests and not others, narratives about what Eurovisions were important to the Eurofan identity are created—these are the contests to remember and/or learn about. The casual queerness of Eurovision and Eurovision fandom are also reinforced, both by the organizers, who solicit donations for LGBT charities with each livestream, and by the audience, who make reference to their own and others' assumed queerness. Accepting this is part of Eurofandom. The kinds of songs and moments—campy, energetic, queer-friendly—that are celebrated by this audience become the way of remembering Eurovision. Eurovision Again did not create this way of reading and appreciating Eurovision, but it does enforce it through its selection of contests and voting process.

In this, it both complements and separates from the general remembering that is part of the Eurovision broadcast, which also seeks to use the power of memory and reminiscence in its stated goal of bringing Europe together. However, that the official Eurovision broadcast is institutional puts limits on it that a fan organization does not have. Eurovision's official response to the cancellation of the contest, the special Europe Shine A Light, needed to take a more solemn approach to Eurovision's history and the particular moment of the pandemic. It reflected on the cancellation as a trauma that needed addressing and used Eurovision's history to do so.

Eurovision Again has no such institutional demands. While increasingly embraced by Eurovision—a subject for another paper—it stands outside of its official commemorative culture. Rather, it is a way for Eurofans to experience the fun and connectivity of a Eurovision broadcast at a time when collective levity is hard to come by. Its point is to have fun and recall better times. Eurovision Again is not about mourning Eurovision, but celebrating it.

In this, the potential threat to the ontological security of Eurovision fandom—the cancellation of the media event that it is based around—is mitigated. Fans can recreate at least one of the experiences around Eurovision, while, at the same time, reinforcing their fandom through gaining (or remembering) knowledge about the fan object through the use of archives. At a time when non-mediated connectivity is disrupted, as well as anxiety-provoking, Eurovision Again provides at least a bit of connection to (accepting) others and happier times.

Conclusion

What happens when live events are cancelled or postponed by the COVID-19 crisis? For fans of the Eurovision Song Contest, the answer is a turn to archives. In reproducing the live viewing experience with archival footage, the promise of liveness—a shared social reality—is combined with a sense of shared history. This shared history helps to sustain and reinforce a "Eurofan"

identity at a time when fans were missing this connectivity most keenly. It must be noted that it was not the only initiative created for Eurofans to come together, as national fan clubs and broadcasters held "alternative" contests, Eurovision hosted "home concerts" with artists, and fans continued to communicate online with each other. However, the combination of liveness—of a large amount of fellow fans participating at the same time—and archives—of remembering the event in a specific way—is unique. Through it, the loss of the contest, while keenly felt, is mitigated. Watching Eurovision Again is not the same as watching a new Eurovision Song Contest, but it does remind fans of why they like Eurovision in the first place. It provides an escape from the anxieties of everyday pandemic life and ensures that Eurovision fandom, while disrupted, is not forgotten.

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DATING APPS

QUEER WOMEN

CARE

COMMUNITY

ONLINE DATING

More than You Bargained for: Care, Community, and Sexual Expression through Queer Women's Dating Apps during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Stefanie Duguay

The COVID-19 pandemic raises questions about the safety and relevance of location-based dating apps in light of physical distancing guidelines. This essay draws on research into dating apps' responses to the pandemic to share preliminary findings about how apps for queer women, in particular, are re-constructing their meaning, use, and services. The apps Her and Lex have taken steps to position their technologies as facilitating self-care and the care of others, enabling community and political dialogue, and allowing for responsible sexual expression. However, these aims are shaped by, and often in tension with, dating apps' business models and the broader commercialization of health and wellbeing by digital technologies. Nonetheless, such apps can serve as digital queer alcoves, offering new possibilities for connecting people during times of crisis.

"…s'en tenir à un ou une conjointe seulement." Quebec's Premier François Legault responded to a question about dating during a COVID-19 press conference in April 2020. English media outlets translated this as, "Stick to one partner only" (Moore 2020). The province's National Director of Public Health, Dr. Horacio Arruda, agreed: "Oui, oui, disons que la monogamie est préférable à ce temps-ci," confirming jokingly that monogamy is preferable at this time. This was not the only instance of governments and health officials attending to questions of partner-seeking during the pandemic. Newfoundland's health minister warned, "If you use Tinder and Grindr and you swipe right, you might get more than you bargained for" (Belmonte 2020). With officials asking people to remain mostly at home and stay two meters apart in public, the proximity and interpersonal contact associated with dating raises red flags in light of attempts to contain the virus.

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic presents several challenges for dating apps, as mobile technologies used to facilitate romantic and sexual encounters. Dating apps are designed to catalyze in-person interactions among nearby others. They harness smartphones' geolocational capacities to organize users and their activities according to proximity. Further, their use is intertwined with mobility, granting the freedom to browse partners across city landscapes and arrange spontaneous face-to-face encounters. When meeting in-person suddenly becomes a dangerous act, these apps' mandates, features, designs, and business models are called into question. App companies run the risk of being perceived as facilitating virus transmission, and users disbanding without the promise of potential in-person encounters.

Queer Dating in Pandemic Times

This essay outlines themes I observed in the responses of two dating apps for queer women to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although apps like Tinder and Grindr are well known for targeting large user bases, heterosexuals and men seeking men respectively, less familiar apps cater to a niche of women seeking women as well as transgender and non-binary users. One such app, Her, originally launched in 2013 as the lesbian dating app *Dattch*, has been embedded in start-up culture and sustained by venture capital, reinforcing its focus on a narrow lesbian market instantiated in the app's "aesthetic of white femininity" (Murray and Ankerson 2016). However, Her has undergone substantial rebranding in recent years to open its user base to a broader, yet undefined category of "queer womxn." Her reports uptake by four million women worldwide (Apple Inc. 2020a) and includes swipe-based profile browsing, similar to Tinder, with an emphasis on visual content.

In contrast, Lex is a text-based app modelled after print media personal ads (Apple Inc. 2020b). Originating as an Instagram account circulating user

submissions, the standalone app launched in 2019, allowing users to submit and respond to personal ads and, optionally, link an Instagram account to supplement ads with images. Lex is crowdfunded and its userbase is specified in Apple's app store as "womxn, trans, genderqueer, intersex, two spirit and non-binary" people. While it also adopts the fluid but nebulous term "womxn," the further specification provides a sense of inclusivity toward a range of users.

As global response to COVID-19 began to mount in 2020, I worked collaboratively with other scholars to collect dating apps' press releases, blog posts, and social media while conducting non-participant observation of in-app messages and design changes from March until June. The following sections describe findings from a preliminary thematic analysis of these materials and discuss the bargains inherent in these different apps stepping into roles that appear to support forms of care, community, and sexual expression during crisis.

Discourses of Care

Following suit with other dating apps, Her and Lex circulated in-app messages advising users to change their behavior in light of COVID-19. Her stated, "Your safety is our priority. We recommend to keep things online, for now" while suggesting users *meet* through video calling apps and providing a link to the World Health Organization's website. "We encourage virtual lover + friend connections during this potentially isolating time," noted an in-app message on Lex, pinned to the top of the browse screen. These safety warnings were paired with further messages and imagery that positioned dating apps not as posing a risk but as a means of promoting healthy behaviors while caring for oneself and others.

Accordingly, these companies presented their apps as a remedy for social isolation and loneliness. Lex later pinned a message prompting users, "Check on all your friends!" while sharing users' stories on Instagram about connecting with each other for support. Her's Instagram account spotlighted a photo documentary series, *Queerantine*, to share queer people's stories of resiliency. Building on the notion that dating apps are central to connecting socially while distancing physically, Her offered a time-limited free trial of its premium features while Lex increased the number of posts users could make on the app. These changes to features and functionality reflect business-oriented decisions, with the capacity to attract more users and activity, as well as material reinforcement of discourses about app participation as an expression of care.

These app messages and material updates reflect the multiplicity of roles that care assumes within neoliberal capitalism. The framing of digital apps on individualized devices as mechanisms for self-care is tied to a broader ecology

of digital technologies sold as integral to the self-management of health (Hobart and Kneese 2020). In this sense, swiping on profiles may be akin to other individualized strategies peddled by wellness industries—from bubble baths to fad diets—to give a semblance of agency and distract from broader structures that constrain individual action. Such structures are steered by powerful actors, such as government and health institutions, which provide authoritative instruction during crisis that can overlook individualized needs, especially the needs of queer and other marginalized people. On the other hand, Hobart and Kneese (2020) remind us that care of the self and others can serve as a form of survival in light of institutional disregard and neglect. The apps' showcasing of horizontal and grassroots initiatives that provide caring bonds and resources in absence of institutional apparatuses for supporting queer resilience indeed publicizes and reinforces these more radical forms of care.

Community Support

The notion of dating apps as the solution to pandemic loneliness was further reflected in encouragements for users to connect as a community. Her's mobilization of community discourse resonates both with the strategies of popular platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which appeal to community to promote rule-abiding participation, and the app's existing approach to bolstering engagement by hosting queer events. Her redirected its ambassador network, comprised of volunteers and paid individuals who host events in urban centers, toward hosting a high volume of gatherings over the video-conferencing platform Zoom. Although some events were regional and others catered to North American time zones, all were free and open for anyone to attend. While many events replicated themes of speed dating and nightlife, common across Her's in-person events, the addition of stress management, financial education, and wellbeing workshops recognized the strain users could be experiencing while also providing individualized solutions (e.g. yoga, cooking class) for enacting self-care.

Coordinating and hosting affective, community-building events involves not only the dedication of time and energy but also emotional labor, especially in times of crisis. Her's job postings for paid ambassadors, "City Leads," indicate that these contracted individuals receive 50% of the profits they generate from events.[1] This raises questions as to whether and how much individuals are paid for hosting free, online events when emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) and immaterial digital labor often go uncompensated (Jarrett 2015), especially in the name of doing good or serving community.

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1   Described in the online application form: https://her.typeform.com/to/rfea2f.

Alternatively, Lex let users develop their own sense of community, publishing user-led initiatives to its Instagram account. These ranged from regional Zoom brunches to pen pal systems and the circulation of "mutual aid" resources. Lex also highlighted users' experiences and efforts to help others through an Instagram series called #QueerantineStories. Both apps contributed to political discourses and grassroots initiatives, circulating calls of support for rent relief as well as aid to local businesses and individuals affected by job loss. Such efforts promote decentralized initiatives led by existing communities and not artificially grouped under Silicon Valley's discursive umbrella of "community." They support the kind of longstanding coalitional care work organized by groups of queer, feminist, and racialized people (Cohen 2005), which draws strength from existing community connections to quickly redirect help and resources during crisis.

Sexual Expression

In a series of Instagram posts with the caption "WE 👏 STAN[2] 👏 ESSENTIAL 👏 WORKERS," Lex shared users' posts expressing thanks to essential workers and offering to send nudes as a form of stress relief, bridging the app's community-related communication with an acknowledgement that sexual desire endures even in crisis. Both Her and Lex posted content related to sex, including Instagram images featuring vibrators, and encouraged masturbation as a way to access sexual pleasure without physical contact. Her accentuated this message through a Zoom workshop on "Masturbation and Self Love" as well as Instagram photos of women in bikinis or underwear captioned "day-dream material" to help users pass time in quarantine and as inspiration for "sending socially distant pics." Lex circulated user requests for "nude swaps," identifying sexting as a viable means of connecting.

The apps' encouragement of sexual activity that respects physical distancing recognizes the role of these technologies in facilitating the fulfillment of sexual needs. Such a stance is more realistic than campaigns by apps targeting more mainstream audiences, such as Tinder and Match, whose blog posts discussed the postponement of physical contact as a means to deepening emotional relationships, messaging akin to abstinence-only approaches. This builds on mainstream apps' promotion of heteronormative courtship narratives, where marriage is the ultimate success story, to dislodge connotations of immorality and risk associated with being perceived as hook-up apps for casual sex (Albury 2018). Such contrasting approaches to sexuality reflect the association of apps like Her and Lex with queer histories of digital technologies as useful mediators in sexual encounters, especially by men seeking men leading the early uptake of mobile media and apps for partner-seeking (Mowlabocus

2   A term indicating enthusiastic support.

2010). Her and Lex helped users to identify modes of solo and partnered sexual expression, acknowledging sexuality as part of preserving one's overall health during crisis.

It is notable, however, that commercial arrangements intertwine with sexual content and permissible user activity. Her's sexual material often included product placements and brand sponsorships. Durex sponsored the self-love workshop, followed by a blog post recap with prominent placement of the brand's logo and links to product pages. Sexy Instagram posts tagged stores selling lingerie and sex toys. While this accords with Her's frequent product placement in its blog and email newsletters, and inclusion of ads in-app, it points to the uneasy tension that has long existed between commercialization and community-building in queer spaces, including online spaces (Campbell 2007). Commercialization can contribute to the mainstreaming and de-politicization of queer communities, reducing them to a market niche, but it is also often a necessary means of sustaining queer initiatives. Like many apps and platforms, Her carries a dual responsibility to its tech investors and users. However, its responsibility to not allow commercial content to crowd out community exchange is heighted by the app's aim to be welcoming for sexually and gender diverse "womxn." Although Lex's crowdfunded model has enabled it to be free from advertising, this raises questions as to how long such a model can endure. Further, Lex's reliance on app stores and its connection with Instagram render it unusable as a conduit for the sexts and nude exchanges the company supports, with these other businesses imposing restrictions that safeguard their ability to profit from pornography-averse advertisers and investors.

Digital Queer Alcoves with Tensions Heighted by Crisis

While monogamy may be preferable in terms of physical contact during the pandemic, isolation is not. As these apps play a role in care, community-building, and supporting sexual expression, their purpose deviates from being merely dating apps to serving as alcoves for queer connection and life. The diversification of these apps resembles the multiple queer uses of past digital technologies, from email to chat rooms and web portals, for forming social networks as hubs of overlapping sexual, social, and political action (see O'Riordan and Phillips 2007). However, these apps function within existing platform ecologies and social, political, and economic structures that raise tension with regard to their role in such activities that are vital to the survival of often-marginalized people. The embedding of these apps within neoliberal capitalist structures means that the kind of care and community-building they seek to reinforce may also perpetuate individualized, illusory solutions,

initiatives reliant on unpaid and under-recognized labor, and commercial interests disguised as sex-positive politics.

Nonetheless, these apps also have the capacity to support existing initiatives of coalitional care. They can provide technological scaffolding for meaningful connection and the reinforcement of efforts to address gaps in institutional and normative responses to crisis. For this reason, we must hope that such digital queer alcoves find ways of sustaining both their operations and their diverse communities, as they provide an alternative to the monopoly of mainstream platforms narrowing our outlets for interpersonal, social, and political connection. As their responses to COVID-19 progress, these apps have the opportunity to reinforce this shift from a focus on location-constrained dating toward serving as digital queer alcoves for restoration, mobilization, and thriving both in times of crisis and the everyday.

> *This essay reflects elements of a larger research project conducted with Dr. David Myles (Affiliate Professor, Université du Québec à Montréal and Postdoctoral Researcher, McGill University) and Christopher Dietzel (PhD Candidate, McGill University).*

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PHENOMENOLOGY

SERIALITY

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

VIDEOCONFERENCING

"Thus isolation is a project." Notes toward a Phenomenology of Screen-Mediated Life

Shane Denson

The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly shifted the parameters of our lives, focusing much of our activity onto screens as we communicated with one another online. Videoconferencing took on an unprecedented importance in many peoples' daily lives, drawing attention to paradoxes of screen-mediated interactions, which serve at once to connect and to isolate. This essay foregrounds these paradoxes for the purposes of a social and existential phenomenology of screen-mediated life.

[Figure 1] Screenshot of Zoom conversation with Vivian Sobchack, Scott Bukatman, Elizabeth Kessler, Karin Denson, and the author (Source: Shane Denson 2020)

"Thus isolation is a project." I encountered these words again in May 2020—a good two months into California's statewide shelter-in-place order during the COVID-19 pandemic but still a week or so before video of George Floyd's brutal murder at the hands of the Minneapolis police would spark tremendous protests, bringing millions of people back into the streets across the US and around the world. In this fragile, liminal moment I found myself confronted with what felt like an illuminating paradox as I repeated the words: "Thus isolation is a project."

This sentence, originally published in 1960, appears in the middle of Jean-Paul Sartre's massive *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre 2004, 258)—a later work in which the philosopher turns from the apparently individualistic, subject-centric approach of his early existentialism to a more socially oriented project, one that is explicitly Marxist in its politics. The book's central problem can be summed up in the question of how the modern subject, existentially free and yet structurally and materially alienated, can overcome its isolation and establish robust forms of political collectivity that would embrace radical freedom for liberatory projects. For Sartre, the problem is that all too often we choose not to even attempt this endeavor, instead embracing isolation or anonymity as an existential "project" in a social form of bad faith. Under conditions of quarantine and social distancing, however, isolation had become a different kind of project: one designed to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus. There was something paradoxical, if not downright tragic, afoot: being "together apart"—despite the prosaic propaganda of such slogans—had become an important political project, but a wedge was thereby driven into

the heart of social reality, complicating the conditions of collectivity by making our collective well-being depend precisely on the alienation of social distance that Sartre had hoped to overcome.[1]

Thus, some six decades after Sartre discovered the project of isolation, many of us re-discovered it in a new form. We began distancing ourselves physically while at the same time accelerating and multiplying the connections we made via screens—communicating with one another over Skype, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and Hangouts, and the suddenly omnipresent Zoom. Life itself suddenly took place on screen. We held virtual meetings, Zoom-based happy hours, video calls with distant friends and family (fig. 1). For academics, teaching and advising was abruptly shifted online, much of it taking place in the form of videoconferencing. In this new world, the screen both connected us and kept us apart, driving home Stanley Cavell's insight that the screen had always led a double existence as both a window and a shield, simultaneously extending our perception out into the world while also *screening us from the world* (Cavell 1979)—in this case, serving as a physical barrier, a virtual face shield. The multistability of the screen now became even more apparent as we found our vision bouncing around between the many faces arrayed in grids across our screens, shifting from box to box, frame to frame, peering into others' apartments, and quite often winding up looking at our own faces as if in a glitchy digital mirror. Phenomenologically, this also meant that we were constantly oscillating between what philosopher of technology Don Ihde calls "embodiment relations," in which we look *through* the screen as if through a window, and "hermeneutic relations," in which we re-focus our perception to look *at* the screen (Ihde 1990)—for example, when we relax our focus on a speaker and scan the screen as a whole to see who's talking now, alternating from figure to ground and back again.[2] The screen's duality, as both communication device and as personal protective equipment, requires rapid shifts of focus and attention.[3] This new project of isolation, we quickly learned, was utterly exhausting.[4]

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1   "Together Apart" is the title of a *New York Times*-produced podcast: https://www. nytimes.com/column/together-apart. Similar slogans, such as "together at a distance" or "together at home" (the title of an event organized by Lady Gaga in support of the World Health Organization), abounded in the early days and weeks of social distancing and foregrounded these paradoxes.

2   For an application of Ihde's concepts to cinema, see Sobchack 1992. See also Denson 2020 for an application to digital images.

3   As my references to the screen's function as "personal protective equipment" or a "virtual face shield" suggest, the screen in question here—at least in the context of the pandemic—must be seen in relation also to the face mask and its own oscillations between visibility and invisibility, distance and proximity. Both the screen and the mask are at the center of simultaneously phenomenological, epidemiological, and sociopolitical transformations.

4   A variety of popular articles and op-eds have dealt with the phenomenon of "Zoom exhaustion" or "Zoom fatigue." See, for example, Bailenson 2020; Fosslien and Duffy

Nevertheless, safety demanded it, and "thus isolation is a project." I had read this sentence many times before without taking much notice. But now it positively jumped out at me while re-reading Sartre's *Critique* in preparation for a directed reading class with a graduate student—conducted, of course, remotely via Zoom. The sentence, previously unobtrusive but now commanding all of my attention, itself oscillated like my screen between transparency and opacity and thereby illuminated the screen's paradoxical role as both a condition of and an obstacle to collective life in the present. Sartre's sentence thus raised a crucial question about media, but this was also a question about a radical transformation in the function of media in the constitution of our experiential and social worlds.

In order to appreciate this transformation, consider the sentence's original context. Sartre is describing a modern city, presumably postwar Paris. He suggests that the city is a "medium" rich with agency, the "exigencies" of its infrastructure shaping our comportment towards the world and one another (Sartre 2004, 257, 187–96). He conjures a mundane scene: people are waiting for the bus at a bus stop.

> These people—who may differ greatly in age, sex, class, and social milieu—realise, within the ordinariness of everyday life, the relation of isolation, of reciprocity and of unification (and massification) from outside which is characteristic of, for example, the residents of a big city in so far as they are united though not integrated through work, through struggle or through any other activity in an organised group common to them all. (Sartre 2004, 256)

In short, the assembled people just *happen* to be at the same place at the same time; they have no common project, though their individual projects require that they share a common relation, instrumental in nature, to the built environment—in this case, to the bus stop and the bus that they await to take them, each individually, where they need to go. Sartre terms this loose, anonymous collective a "seriality," as opposed to a proper "group," which involves a common goal and operates more like a collective subject.[5] In the seriality, individuals are obstacles to one another, not categorically different from the dumb materiality of the built environment itself—what Sartre calls the "practico-inert" in recognition of the way structures and technologies store human *praxis*, or past living labor, while condensing it into

2020. The present essay intends to add a phenomenological dimension to such analyses.

5   As examples of the seriality, in addition to the queue at the bus stop (Sartre 2004, 256–69), Sartre also considers radio broadcasts (270–76) and markets (277–93). In Fredric Jameson's opinion, in his 2004 foreword to the *Critique*, "the notion of seriality developed here is the only philosophically satisfactory theory of public opinion, the only genuine philosophy of the media, that anyone has proposed to date" (Sartre 2004, xxviii).

inert objective form.[6] In the practico-inert, the active component of praxis carries over into the present and towards the future, as the built environment and its technologies present themselves as instruments to be utilized towards the realization of our goals; but the *inertia* of the material object and its rootedness in the past (the time of its manufacture) stands as an obstacle, resisting the facility of use with a "coefficient of adversity"—a term that Sartre, as early as 1943 in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*, had borrowed from Gaston Bachelard in recognition of the friction that materiality and embodiment introduced into phenomenology (Sartre 1992, 324). In the circumstantial collective of the seriality, the individual Others gathered at the bus stop similarly tend to present themselves instrumentally, oscillating between coefficients of utility and adversity, and thus standing out quite often as obstacles to the realization of my goals. There are a limited number of seats on the bus, and everyone else becomes a competitor for a seat. But the competition is anonymous and passive, the individuals ignoring rather than confronting one another while occupying the same physical space. Alienation is therefore not just a psychological shortcoming, but materially enforced by way of the built environment, with its underlying exigencies and scarcities. And in this situation, one might embrace anonymity and further materialize it: a newspaper serves as a shield, protecting me from the other's gaze—and "thus isolation is a project," as I choose to wield the practico-inert and reinforce the separation constitutive of the seriality (Sartre 2004, 257–58).

Today, of course, this familiar fact of public transportation persists, but with a difference: Sartre's newspaper has now become a mobile screen, e.g. a smartphone or a tablet. The gestural cliché (inauthenticity-become-habit) of shielding one's vision persists, but the medium is radically different, both technically and existentially.[7] Rather than an inert object that, like the newspaper, simply records or preserves past labor, the screen is dynamic and changing; importantly, its dynamism is based in a feedback loop that incorporates present use, the casual or incidental labor of clicking and

6   Sartre identifies an "anti-dialectic, or dialectic against the dialectic (dialectic of *passivity*), [which] must reveal *series* to us as a type of human gathering and alienation as a mediated relation to the other and to the objects of labour in the element of seriality as a serial mode of co-existence. At this level we will discover an equivalence between alienated *praxis* and worked inertia, and we shall call the domain of this equivalence the *practico-inert*" (Sartre 2004, 66-67). For Sartre, in other words, this "anti-dialectic" describes the force or exigency of matter, which constrains existential freedom and commingles human and inanimate agencies in the serial production and consumption practices of industrial capitalism and the anonymous collective life of urban environments.

7   Various accounts of digital media foreground their isolating effects; see, for example, Turkle 2011. What is missing from most such accounts, however, is close phenomenological attention to the spatial and temporal vicissitudes of these new technical and existential forms.

scrolling, into the ongoing production of value.[8] Moreover, screen-phenomena are generated out of predictive, future-oriented processes, like autocorrect algorithms, that actively anticipate and thereby shape the subjectivity of the user.[9] This anticipatory logic is also at the heart of our videoconferencing sessions, which depend on compression protocols that predict changes at the level of the pixel, microtemporally generating images on the basis of which parts of the scene are expected to remain static (e.g. the background) or change (e.g. the figure of the speaking subject). As a technological artifact, the screen remains a practico-inert object, storing the labor of factory workers and engineers while embodying a dumb physicality: it sits there, inert on my desk or in my lap, a material barrier between me and my interlocutors. But in operation, the screen instantiates a new temporality that transcends its physical inertia. Its protentional, predictive processes endow it with greater agency as its anticipatory dimensions intertwine with my own being-towards-the-future.[10] Engaging with one another through these digital mirrors, our reflections warped both by microtemporal delays and by predictive generativities, the present of our subjectivities—and the conditions of life itself—are radically altered. Life now takes place in what Vivian Sobchack has called the "screen-sphere" (Sobchack 2016).

Importantly, this condition does not end when we leave the bubble of the video chat, when the world "re-opens" and we emerge from quarantine. For what the pandemic-induced project of isolation reveals to us is a more basic transformation: the practico-inert, while still very much a condition of our social existence, has given way to a new condition that might be termed the *practico-alert*. Alertness, always being ready, is both a technical fact of predictive computation and a constant demand on our attention; present experience no longer takes place against a neutral background of the past distilled in the form of inert objects and built environments, but in concert with "smart" devices, even "smart cities" that anticipate our every move.[11] Our predictive technologies, always alert to the contingencies of the ever-shifting future, demand that we too are always alert—and it is exhausting.[12]

8   See, for example, Pasquinelli 2009.
9   These generative, future-oriented processes, which distinguish computational media from the past-oriented recording processes common to cinema, photography, and phonography, for example, are a major focus of my book *Discorrelated Images* (2020).
10   As I argue in *Discorrelated Images*, this intertwinement means that computationally rendered images affect us on a pre-personal, "metabolic" level.
11   On smart cities and the way their computational infrastructures enforce new forms of governmentality, see Halpern 2015. For an argument that cities have always, in a sense, been "smart," see Mattern 2017.
12   This shift from the practico-inert to the practico-alert, along with the phenomenological, aesthetic, and political implications of the transformation of media technologies from a recording-based or retentional to a predictive or protentional functionality, is the topic of my next book project, tentatively titled *The New Seriality: Political Aesthetics in a Digital Lifeworld*.

Returning to the streets, for example to protest police brutality and proclaim that Black Lives Matter, is thus hardly an escape from screen-mediated life. Rather, we subject ourselves to increased state surveillance and media scrutiny, thus appearing as bodies and biometric data on countless screens. But mobile screens can also serve, in this environment, as literal shields, when the camera is turned towards the police for purposes of accountability and deterrence. And our screens are of course essential to organizing. Thus, the duality of the screen, which the project of isolation foregrounded in dramatic fashion, might be seized upon as the basis of reversal, from seriality to solidarity, from passive alienation to active resistance. This more deliberate form of union will require hard work and redoubled alertness—but perhaps there is a sliver of hope for a more just future amidst the horrors, injustices, and isolations of screen-mediated life.

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SOCIAL MEDIA

VIRAL IMAGES

DISCURSIVE SPACE

MIRGRANT WORKERS

Mapping Mutations: Tracing the Travel of a Viral Image

Amrita Biswas

This paper seeks to map the circuit of travel of an image that went viral on social media during the pandemic-induced lockdown. The viral image pervaded the Indian mediascape, triggering its mutation into diverse media forms that critically commented on the socio-political context of the viral image. Analyzing the social media circulation of the viral image and the subsequent media texts that it inspired, this paper studies how social media was employed as a site of discourse generation during the pandemic.

Saturating the sensory regime of Indians, remaining locked down in their homes during the pandemic, was a familiar image: of millions of migrant workers clinging on to their scant possessions, while covering distances of hundreds of kilometers on foot. As a preventive measure for flattening the curve of the spread of the coronavirus disease, the Prime Minister of India announced a nationwide lockdown on the 24th of March, 2020. Ironically, the announcement was made only four hours in advance of its imposition, triggering a mass exodus of migrant workers who formed the backbone of the urban informal economy.

Acquiring Visibility: The Plight of Migrant Workers

With the lockdown triggering a massive humanitarian crisis, the dehumanized "hidden, silent underbelly" of the city, who mostly "appear as lifeless statistics or as problems to be tackled," erupted as a potent visible force to reckon with (Pendse 1996, 4). The apathy of the state towards the migrants necessitated various solidarity networks, media organizations, civic volunteers, and oppositional political parties to bear the responsibility of providing relief to the stranded migrants. The afore-mentioned collectives, by tracing and mapping the narratives of the laborers' experiences through images and videos, significantly contributed to an awareness about the severity of the exodus crisis. These haunting visuals, on being uploaded to social media, gripped the national imaginary by acquiring an affective virality. In this paper, I study a specific image that went viral on social media and analyze its circuit of travel as it mutated into several allusive media texts that were also circulated on social networking sites as a response to the initial viral image.

[Figure 1] The image of the toddler tugging at the shroud that covered his mother in a railway station in Bihar, India. (Source: Online article by Aljazeera 2020, https://www. aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/india-toddler-waking-dead-mother-highlights-migrants-misery-200528043019019.html)

A video that went viral on social media showed a toddler playfully tugging at the shroud of his dead mother, in an attempt to wake her up, while she lay motionless on the Muzaffarpur railway platform in Bihar (fig. 1). The woman

had boarded the *Shramik* Special train[1] along with her family to reach home but had collapsed due to extreme heat and lack of food and water. The video, which had first been uploaded to social media by Sanjay Yadav, political advisor to the leader of opposition in the Bihar State Assembly, punctured the conscience of netizens and evoked an affective response from them. The specific moment of the child's pulling of the shroud became crystallized in people's memory as the image was extracted from the video and ossified, with all it's tragic overtones, in several media texts.

[Figure 2] Screenshot from the Facebook page of Bollywood actor Taapsee Pannu where she shared the film *Pravaasi*. (Source: Facebook page of Taapsee Pannu 2020, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=542005483133079&extid=DOgPT2vasBL5TmBs)

This viral video formed one of the many viral visuals that were collated in a short animation film by Kireet Khurana, titled *Pravaasi/Migrant*, in which Bollywood actor Taapsee Pannu lent her voice in an apologetic tone (fig. 2). In his adaptation of the viral video, the filmmaker strategically stripped the visual of all situational and background information to carefully direct the audience's attention solely towards the individual tragic incident. Using potent red, black, and white, the film captures the specific moment of the toddler tugging at the shroud while earnest infantile wails are heard on the soundtrack. Assuming the identity and the collective voice of the community of migrant workers, the voiceover pierces through the personal moment of loss, pleading that the community only demands to be treated as dignified humans. The image of the toddler is suggestively followed by a haunting refrain that creates a rupture in the intimate tragic event by evoking the socio-political context of the tragedy:

1   After migrant workers protested against their inability to go home, the government allowed the operation of special trains to allow the workers to travel. However, faulty planning and lack of co-ordination among states resulted in a number of trains reaching wrong destinations. This made the train journeys arduous, resulting in a lack of food and water during the duration of travel, which triggered further deaths.

"*Hum toh bus pravasi hain /* We are just migrants/

Kya iss desh ke vaasi hain? / Are we citizens of this nation?"

This subtle conjunction was aimed at making people conscious of the strategies by which the state had deprived the internal migrants of their dignified subject position of a citizen of the nation. The film offers an insight into the notion of citizenship as conceptualized by the state, besides critiquing the nexus of class-caste privileges that the state ensured for the urban elites and the international migrants. Being marginalized by structural injustices that are operative along class-caste co-ordinates, migrant workers have been doubly oppressed. This is because they "are not formally recognized either as citizens nor as workers" by the state with the lack of legal employment protection guarantees gnawing at their precarious urban existences (Ahmed and Deshingkar 2020). Realizing how urban elites had condemned the migrants for being carriers of the virus, Khurana wanted to offer a counter-perspective by empathizing with the ordeals that the migrants underwent (quoted in Sebastian 2020). In an interview with *HuffPost*, Khurana stated that his motivation behind making the film was to ensure that the harrowing viral images were never erased from the collective memory.

Reading through the comments section on Facebook where Taapsee Pannu had shared the film, it became evident that the video had enabled the initiation of a discursive realm on the website. While a section of users trolled the Bollywood actor for criticizing the government from the comfort of her home, others supported her right to voice her opinion about the migrant crisis. Further, some users slammed the video as a publicity stunt while others stated that the video exposed the dehumanization that the migrant workers had been subjected to during the pandemic. What is significant is that the viral image of the toddler inspired another media text, the circulation and subsequent virality of which triggered social media users to further engage with and reflect on the tragic incident, thereby fostering a discursive space (Abdo 2018). Irrespective of how individual users reacted to the toddler's personal loss, what is crucial is that the image of the toddler could not be unseen. The molding of the initial viral image into subsequent media texts also points towards how the image had attained a visual pervasiveness, suggesting that the image and its context would be common knowledge among the people of the nation. Besides depicting the incident with all its affective textures, the filmmaker imbued the viral image with a critical value by associating the personal tragedy with the statist conception of citizenship. That the video resonated with netizens who were touched by the apologetic voiceover and the evocative refrain is evidenced by its virality.
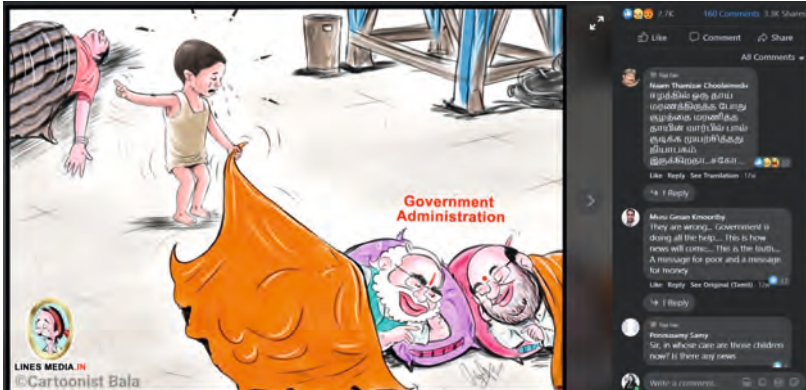
[Figure 3] Screenshot from the Facebook page of Cartoonist Bala, where he shared his rendition of the viral image of the toddler. (Source: Facebook page of Cartoonist Bala 2020, https://www.facebook.com/167570143299823/photos/a.385032944886874/3103293496394125/)

The viral video of the toddler also inspired a cartoon by cartoonist Bala, where those in power are seen sleeping peacefully, unaffected by the plight of the toddler while he tries to wake them up from their apathy (fig. 3). The artist uses the frozen moment of the toddler tugging at the blanket but he shifts the focal point of attention from that of the deceased mother to the Prime Minister and Home Minister of India who occupy the foreground of the image. This shift provides a crucial vantage point to critique the statist response to the lockdown-induced migrant exodus. By associating the heads of state with the crisis of the toddler, the artist punctures the intimate moment of personal loss to comment on the institutional indifference that was meted out to the community of workers. Simultaneously underlining the individual tragic moment that befell the toddler and the apathy of the government administration, the cartoon resonated with netizens. Attempting to understand netizens' reaction to the artist's rendition of the viral image, I read the comments on the Facebook page of the cartoonist where the cartoon was uploaded. A user stated that he could not imagine the pain that the mother underwent before her death, being unable to provide food for her hungry son. Another netizen commented that the woes of the migrants would be overlooked by the television channels that would proclaim the financial aid offered by the government to the migrants. With arguments and counter-arguments, political responses and emotional outcries, the comments section emerged as a powerful participatory interface.

Social Media Websites as a Site of Discourse Generation

The plethora of ocular and aural signifiers of the migrant crisis encoded an emotive dimension that acted as a catalyst for their virality (Berger and Milkman 2012). The image of the toddler is, thus, one of the many evocative images that went viral on social media during the pandemic. With the subsequent mutation of the viral image into multiple media objects (such as illustrations, video essays, cartoons, and animation films) that were further circulated on social media, the virtual platforms sustained a dialogic engagement with the context of the image. This can be significantly attributed to the fact that social media users recognized the virtual domain as a potent interface with the external social world while being locked down in their homes (Pybus 2013). This virtual communicative network was crucial to the process of discourse generation where users reflected on the viral image and its specific contexts that were being critically addressed by the allusive media texts (Schröder 2007; Roese 2018). While the artists referred to the viral image to offer a sociopolitical critique of the exodus, the users collaborated to foster a "space of interpretation that has the power to make meaning through its ability to privilege certain discourses over others" (Pybus 2013, 140). Thus, with the development of such "collaborative" processes, where artists and users both participated in adding critical meaning to a viral image, social media emerged as an active discursive domain (Jackson 2020, 93). It has already been suggested that the socially marginalized community of migrant workers acquired a media visibility during the pandemic (Chatterjee 2020; Dharker 2020). I argue that the visibility of the community of migrant workers was sustained by the employment of social media websites as an active site of discourse generation. This was achieved by the social media circulation of viral images as well as media texts that critically commented on the viral images. Both the processes helped build networks of sociality during the lockdown, ushering in the possibility for netizens to circulate, engage with and respond to the viral media objects on social networking websites.

Social media, therefore, contributed to an ever "evolving tableau of public memory" by ensuring that the viral image of the toddler left an indelible mark in the visual and discursive regime of the nation (Haskins 2015, 49). Significant to the process, however, has been the employment of social media as a crucial discursive arena that has helped attribute critical value and meaning to a viral image by ushering in an interactive and participatory interface. Interestingly, the social network witnessed analytical reflections on not only the viral image but also its multiple mutations that were circulated as a commentary on the viral image. This paper, thus, analyzes the virality and ocular centrality

of the image of the toddler by tracing the trajectory of its social media travel through a mapping of the different media adaptations that it engendered.

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K-POP

SOCIAL MEDIA

PROTEST

FANDOM

Pandemic Media: Protest Repertoires and K-pop's Double Visions

Michelle Cho

Starting in late May of 2020, following the protests that erupted after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, fans of Korean idol pop (K-pop)—a loose coalition of individuals identified by their sub-cultural consumption of South Korean youth-oriented pop performance culture—found their collective identity shifting from one of an often denigrated, caricatured fandom into an activist bloc, best-equipped to respond to the intertwined conditions of police violence and the COVID-19 pandemic's intensification of structural and environmental racism in global cities in North America and Europe. This essay recounts two forms of pandemic media: K-pop fans' online, antiracist protests and transmedia K-pop content on YouTube and Twitter that has afforded K-pop a new visibility as a crossover youth culture throughout 2020, to query the ways in which COVID-19 has reoriented the global media landscape, to both

**create new modes and spaces of protest and assem-
blage online, while also ensnaring K-pop fan protest
further in a commercialized platform ecology that
commodifies fans' attention and activist impulses.
Overall, K-pop fan protest repertoires illustrate
the ways in which contemporary media structure a
dialectic of reification and resistance that delimits
forms of mediated "direct action" in the U.S.—the
region hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic.**

2020 began with a bang for the Korean pop group BTS. Following weeks of
anticipation and record-breaking pre-sales, their album *Map of the Soul: 7*
was released to great fanfare in February 2020, becoming the biggest selling
album of all time in South Korea, and topping pop music charts in over twenty
countries, including Billboard's illustrious albums chart in the U.S. Despite
alarmingly fast spread of a South Korean cluster of COVID-19 cases, and the
government's large-scale containment efforts there, the group released
multiple music videos for the album's two lead tracks, and promoted the
album and forthcoming world tour on several American television shows and
media outlets during February and early March.

But as the pandemic spread through North America (mainly via Europe, rather
than East Asia), BTS and its powerful fandom called ARMY had to shelve their
plans to gather on the group's tour, forgoing the excitement of the mass
spectacles that have become a feature of live, K-pop performance. Instead, the
group's international fandom were left to cling to the digital intimacies that
the group has fostered with fans through a steady and robust stream of social
media content on Twitter, VLive (South Korean tech company Naver's celebrity
live-streaming app), and the proprietary fandom platform Weverse, developed
and owned by the band's management company Big Hit Entertainment.

The period of pandemic self-isolation not only heightened digital connections
between fans and their favorite groups, but also brought new initiates into
the fold. One might argue that pandemic conditions have increased the power
of media companies, whether broadcast or digital, since captive audiences
under lockdown have grown increasingly dependent on forms of mediated
connection. The prolonged period of homebound isolation seems also to have
channeled vital energies of critique, especially among the young, who have
been forced to suspend their lives in the face of a bleak economic forecast and
public health crisis, with no relief in sight. This growing critical consciousness

erupted in the uprisings that followed the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25, 2020. As protesters surged into the streets to express their grief and rage at the unmitigated cruelty and injustice of Floyd's death, many fans across the globe contributed their efforts through the conversion of fan activities into a repertoire of anti-racist protest: hash-tag activism, attention-jacking, and online fundraising and organizing, many in the name of K-pop fandom and the BTS ARMY.

This essay proposes two forms of pandemic media: first, media released and consumed during the pandemic, which has kneecapped most brick and mortar enterprises, but invigorated digital teleconferencing, streaming, and content-sharing platforms. Indeed big tech has seen its profits grow handsomely from the shift of work and leisure, alike, to online platforms, and K-pop entertainment industries, which already cultivate multi-sited, mediated intimacies through technological means, have emerged as leaders of remote, live-streamed pop concerts that will likely transform the business of pop performance. The other form of pandemic media that I address is media that responds specifically to the intertwining pandemic conditions of the public health crisis caused by COVID-19 and the latter's unveiling of the necropolitical intersection of structural inequities of race and class, specifically the way that K-pop's media fandom swiftly joined the coalition of anti-racist protesters through their hashtag and attention-jacking activism. The first section of what follows details the citation practices characteristic of K-pop content. As a cultural form that moves across media regions and platforms, K-pop innovates on a model of polyvocality best enacted by American culture industries. Specifically, I look at BTS's music video output, released in the early days of the pandemic. In the second section, I discuss the transformative use that fans have made of the first form of pandemic media, to use the legibility and ready-made networks built through their fandom to make a deft pivot to activism.

K-pop's Double Visions

The first single from *Map of the Soul: 7* to be released with accompanying music videos was an EDM/R&B track called "Black Swan." BTS's content is famously dense with intertextual citations, and this wasn't the first time that the group paid homage to a cinematic inspiration.[1] The reference here is unmistakable—Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010)—cited in the song's title, accompanying live performance choreography, and official music video. Aronofsky's film is of course itself an adaptation of Tchaikovsky's 1877 ballet *Swan Lake*, a work centered on the trope of the doppelganger/evil twin that is found in numerous

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1   The group released a series of albums in 2015–16 called "The Most Beautiful Moment in Life" trilogy. This is the English translation of the idiom *HwaYangYeonHwa,* the Korean version of 花樣年華, which is also the Chinese title of Wong Kar Wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000).

works from the romantic period, as well as SF, fantasy, and psychological thriller genres in Hollywood and abroad.[2] Aronofsky is known to be a fan of the virtuosic Japanese animator, Kon Satoshi, a fellow doppelganger-obsessed auteur, and BTS's Black Swan also ports works like Kon's *Perfect Blue* and *Paprika,* alongside Aronofsky's film.[3] The group's official music video for the single was filmed at the Los Angeles Theater, the art deco movie house that was the last to be built in the city's historic downtown in 1930, before the center of film exhibition moved to Hollywood Boulevard. Closed as a screening venue since the mid-1990s, the Los Angeles Theater now only opens its doors as a filming location and special-event rental space, serving as a dramatic setting for BTS's theatrical concept, while signaling the layered significance of inter-mediation, Hollywood's displacement, and cinema's fading glory.

Yet, if Black Swan presents an elegiac image of cinema, as defined by nostalgia for Old Hollywood glamour and its high-modernist, split psyche, the music video "Daechwita" released as a solo venture by BTS member Suga (Min Yoon-ki) in May, 2020 after months of COVID-19 isolation and just three days before George Floyd's murder, announced an altogether different approach to cinema, history, and identity. Daechwita looks to South Korean cinema for inspiration, especially its fabricated scenes of Korean history, which have been worked and reworked through the film and TV genre of *sageuk,* or Choseon period historical drama.[4] Set in the Choseon era, Daechwita is named after the highly codified, ceremonial musical accompaniment (the characters in the word Daechwita are "Dae"—large, grand, great; "Chwi"—to blow (a horn or wind instrument); "Ta"—to hit (a drum)) to the Choseon king's procession. The story told by the video is adapted from the 2012 Korean film *Masquerade* (dir. Choo Chang-min), also known by its Korean title *Gwanghae: The Man who Became King.* Constructing a doppelganger story on the scaffolding of the historical account of Gwanghae, the fifteenth ruler in the long Choseon Dynasty, *Masquerade* suggests that the cruel and paranoid King Gwanghae

2   For an incisive analysis of the doppelganger as a hallmark of Japanese film and literature, from the period of interwar modernization through the present, see Posadas 2018.

3   Fans of BTS are skilled close-readers and detectives, and often share their analyses of the group's work in articles such as Nakeisha Campbell's "All the Details You Need to Know About BTS' 'Black Swan' Music Video," which finds the visual matches from Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) and the group's music video: https://www.distractify.com/p/where-was-bts-black-swan-filmed. Accessed June 16, 2020.

4   The *Choseon* (also romanized as *Joseon* or *Choson*) period refers to the era in which the Korean peninsula was governed as a dynastic kingdom under the Choseon Dynasty from 1392 to 1897. The culture of the Choseon period is widely accepted today as synonymous with Korean traditional culture and history; the latter owes in large part to the meticulous court records that were kept in almost continuous daily logs throughout the dynasty. Most period dramas involve historical figures from these court chronicles, though a genre of "fusion *saguk*" has emerged since the mid 2000s, which fuses elements of *sageuk*—historical drama—with fictional elements.

used a commoner double in his official appearances, for fear of assassination. *Masquerade* was a major box office hit in South Korea that swept the Grand Bell Awards, South Korea's equivalent of the Oscars. Given the signal boost garnered by South Korean cinema when Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* won Hollywood's greatest accolade earlier in 2020—the Academy Award for Best Picture—it is now clear that U.S. culture industries eye South Korea, just as K-pop's double visions center Hollywood and the US market.[5] Embedded in *Masquerade's* thoroughly commercialized revisionist history is a tense contradiction between the desire to place populism at the core of Korean culture and a move to affirm the pageantry and grandeur of the royal Choseon court, the acme of a feudal society structured by caste hierarchies.

Pop Protest

Ultimately, *Masquerade's* retelling of King Gwanghae's story advocates a populist message, in keeping with South Korea's hard-won status as a dazzling twenty-first century beacon of democratic reform across a region that is otherwise overshadowed by right-wing xenophobia in Shinzo Abe's Japan and repressive Chinese state action in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, home to China's Muslim Uighur community. South Korea's emphatically liberal national character was consolidated by 2016's Candlelight Protest movement that led to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye, the daughter of the dictatorial President Park Chung-hee, who governed the country during its postwar industrialization from 1961–1979. However, despite the public's decisive rejection of Park's dynastic presidency and its embrace of direct-action protest as national character, South Korea remains deeply implicated in a neoliberal order that keeps its citizenry in a state of individualized alienation. Although South Korea and its liberal leader Moon Jae-in have been lauded for the country's swift response to the coronavirus, the management of COVID relies on a surveillance system unrivaled in the world, which operates through the ICT infrastructure of ubiquitous computing ushered in by the dream of global cities and special economic zones.[6] Pandemic conditions put a paradoxical, benevolent face on a system of control that recalls the dictatorship era and shores up the profits of multinational big data, like the mirror image of Odette and her evil doppelganger.

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5   As others have also noted, *Parasite*'s story of lives of underground confinement and the crushing weight of poverty also seems to have foretold the coming catastrophe, as COVID-19 laid bare the pervasive, systemic injustices of late capitalist life. See Suzy Kim's post for the *positions* blog, "Parasites in the Time of Coronavirus," http://position-swebsite.org/episteme-2-kim/.

6   See Orit Halperin and Joseph Jeon's discussions of the smart city project of Songdo in the Prologue and Conclusion of Halperin's *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason Since 1945* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2015) and Jeon's *Vicious Circuits: Korea's IMF Cinema and the End of the American Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 116–21.

In Daechwita, BTS's Suga (Min Yoon-ki) plays two roles as both the tyrannical king and the commoner double. While the actual King Gwanghae was dethroned and exiled in a coup d'etat perpetrated by an opposing faction of court officials, Daechwita's Gwanghae is deposed in a populist revolt by his double, the commoner. Daechwita thus chooses to stage a fantasy of Choseon-era rebellion, whereas the close to 500-year dynasty dealt with intermittent peasant rebellion with a brutal hand; instead, it was definitively overcome by a modern world order that brought Japanese colonial incursions by the end of the nineteenth century, as students of Korean history will know quite well. Daechwita's fantasy scenario also turns the pauper-against-prince antagonism into a psychological struggle between Suga's current, chart-topping celebrity persona, full of arrogance and bluster, and his prior, hard-working rookie self. Daechwita's ambivalent approach to populist resistance is clear in the ways that it uses the latter as an allegory for the integration of the artist's dual image as both K-pop royalty and humble underdog that serves as the core of BTS's star text.

[Figure 1] Screenshot from *Daechwita* MV

During the first week of June, when the protests against systemic racism in the US were raging on the streets of most American cities, K-pop fans quickly mobilized to spam police snitching apps like iDallas and take over hashtags like #whitelivesmatter and #calminkirkland, the latter of which asked citizens to surveil each other and publicize video evidence of criminal activity by protesters.[7] What I saw in screenshots of K-pop fans' takedowns of the iDallas app and later instances of K-pop twitter hashtag activism on behalf of Black Lives Matter were images and clips from the Daechwita video, especially scenes from the fiery moments preceding the overthrow of the sadistic ruler. The scenes from Daechwita were often, at first glance, plausible scenes of youthful

7   For an overview of online anti-racist activism attributed to K-pop fans, see "QAnon followers melt down after K-pop fans take over their hashtags" by Parker Molloy, June 5, 2020, on the *Media Matters* site: https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/qanon-followers-melt-down-after-k-pop-fans-take-over-their-hashtag?fbclid=-IwAR3fhki32yB13VhUy2c6Dd5tRVwV0-nKftWdiGuam54pNnVMo4xP6VZs3D8.

revolt (fig. 1), and seemed to serve as foils to the more satirical and playful stream of "fancam" clips—fan-recorded footage of pop idol performances—and GIFs of pop idols cutely mugging for the camera. The protest gesture of attention-jacking racist hashtags or snitch apps with Daechwita images conveyed both the seriousness of activist intent and an ironic, disaffected stance that adopted Daechwita's ambivalence towards revolutionary collectivity. Perhaps this is the best that commercial pop culture can offer as a source of resistance to the social institutions that preserve and protect the circulation of pop commodities in the first place.

By adapting Daechwita's commercialized images of populist, youth rebellion into the repertoire of contemporary protest techniques in pandemic conditions, BTS fans politicize their fandom and convert fan networks into a form of activist organizing. Wrestling hashtags away from white supremacists constitutes strategic fan participation in spaces that are not expressly intended as platforms for such gestures, yet there is also a potential for these activities to revert to mere amplification for the sake of promoting the celebrity idol. This seems to be the outcome of the summer of 2020, when K-pop fans became interpellated as Tik-Tok and Twitter warriors against white supremacy. In the months since the upsurge of street protests led by the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S., K-pop fans have resumed their regular activities of promoting K-pop artists' releases on global and US-based singles and albums charts. Notably for BTS, "Dynamite," their follow-up single to the *Map of the Soul: 7* album, made history as the first K-pop song to reach the #1 spot on the Billboard Hot 100 chart, demonstrating that the ARMY's growth through the summer of COVID and the consciousness-raising activities of K-pop fandom has led to the group's convincing commercial breakthrough on the pop charts. This is hardly the political victory that BLM and activists calling for defunding the police are looking for. Yet, this is perhaps an unsurprising demonstration of the power of publicity. The notion of youth rebellion against authority is both inspiring and trite, and Daechwita's incitement against authority can be both at the same time, as is the case with youth culture, at large. Nonetheless, what BTS's COVID-era music video aesthetics confirm is the mutable, and always uncertain pull of co-option in pop protest, especially the sort that coalesces around fan identity as the basis for coalition-building. What we may see from K-pop fans in the future is not fixed, however, as the duality that is built into the form continues to make the urge to visibility of the fandom available to future collective actions. The lessons of K-pop's pandemic media have coalesced into a fan-activist repertoire that may yet be mobilized, long after the resolution of COVID-19.

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MEDIA AND GOVERNANCE

TELEVISION STUDIES

PARASOCIAL INTERACTION

HOME SHOPPING

How to Fight a Pandemic with Status Elevation: The Home Shopping Governance of Donald J. Trump

Vinzenz Hediger

In the last few months, US president Donald J. Trump has repeatedly scandalized observers by applying the presentational modes of home shopping television to his public pronouncements on the pandemic. This contribution argues that Trump's home shopping mode of address is not another in a long series of tasteless aberrations and breaches of protocol. Rather, it is an intrinsic element of his television personality, a source of his political leverage and a key to understanding his mode of governance.

On Monday, after peaceful protesters were dispersed with tear gas, the President stood before St. John's Episcopal Church and held a Bible like a product on a home-shopping network.

[Figure 1] The Bible Salesman (Source: Screenshot of https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/an-abuse-of-sacred-symbols-trump-a-bible-and-a-sanctuary)

If Trump gets blown out, Trumpism will be remembered as a luxury good for well-off white people and less a response to economic desperation.
Matthew Zeitlin, July 7, 2020

I

On June 2, 2020, *The New Yorker* published an article by Evan Osnos entitled "'An Abuse of Sacred Symbols': Trump, a Bible, and a Sanctuary" with the above photograph and caption (fig. 1). On June 1, had Trump ordered a teargas attack on peaceful protesters to clear the way for a photo opportunity at St. John's Church across from the White House. Standing in front of the church, Trump presented a Bible to the camera, a signal to his core constituency, racist white southern evangelicals. The stunt was widely condemned, among others by Mariann Budde, the Episcopalian bishop of Washington D.C., who expressed her outrage that Trump "felt he had the license … to abuse our

sacred symbols and our sacred space in that way." Osnos expressed his dis-
approval not least through his framing: Trump "held up a Bible and posed with
it for the cameras, clasping it to his chest, bouncing it in his hand, turning it to
and fro, like a product on QVC." Describing the photo-op as a "crude simu-
lation of leadership," Osnos continued: "He assembled a pageant of symbols
that he knows have power over others—the Bible, the gun, and the shield. And
he tossed them together in a cruel jumble of nonsense."

QVC, a cable shopping channel founded in 1986—the acronym stands for
"Quality Value Convenience"—reaches 360 million households in seven coun-
tries: the US, UK, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, and China, i.e. the G7 minus
Canada plus the PRC, where QVC operates a joint-venture with state TV. On
QVC slick hosts—often celebrities like comedian Joan Rivers—plug fashion,
household appliances, and jewelry for phone and online orders. If *The New
Yorker* represents the apogee of cultural prestige in American media, QVC is
located near the opposite end of that spectrum.

From the height of his standing, Osnos wields the QVC reference for cultural
leverage and moral condemnation. But in his indignation, he misses out on
its heuristic and analytic power. What the current pandemic throws into high
relief is that the home shopping template is not another tasteless aberration
or breach of protocol, but an intrinsic element of Trump's television per-
sonality and, therefore, his mode of governing. Foregrounding, as it does, the
intimate space of home shopping to obfuscate the macro sites of maintenance
and care, the teleshopping template also helps us understand the limitations
of Trump's governance in the face of a global health crisis.

II

In a keynote titled "Poor Old Television" at the 2010 Istanbul NECS conference,
Charlotte Brunsdon, a key figure in television studies, offered an ironic paean
to what was arguably still the most powerful audiovisual medium, and how
it had fallen out of academic fashion: linear television. Trump's win in 2016
revealed this to be a problem. "Quality TV" had turned television into a safe
subject for professors of English. But the real story of the twenty-first century
was the global ascendancy of reality TV. Much has been witten on *Big Brother*,
Survivor and *The Bachelor*. But *The Apprentice*, which turned a failing tycoon
into an emblem of business acumen, only attracted scant attention, mostly
as a cautionary tale about neoliberalism (e.g. Couldry 2008; Windle 2010;
Couldry and Littler 2011).[1] Only when it was too late, i.e. with Trump well on the
way to the White House, did television studies really start to pay attention. A
dossier in *Television and New Media* in the summer of 2016 assembled short
"ruminations on Trump" as "apotheosis of the new culture of promotionalism"

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1   E.g. Couldry (2008), Windle (2010), Couldry and Littler (2011).

(Negra 2016, 646). One title spelled out the field's sin of omission—"Don't misunderestimate the Donald (like we did)"—while Laurie Oulette highlighted "reality TV's long-established role in governing practices" and its resonance with the "illiberal pressure points of free market political rationalities" to circumscribe the work that should have been done (Ouelette 2016, 649).[2]

Maybe Trump managed to fly under the radar of critical media studies for so long because he has no secret and is "just boring," as Stephen Colbert recently put it. This may also be why *Audience of One,* the one book so far on Trump the TV character, thoroughly researched and engagingly written by *New York Times* TV critic James Poniewozik, reveals nothing really new (Poniewozik 2019). Still, scholars should have paid attention. After all, there are prominent historical templates. For instance, Mussolini's similarity with Bartolomeo Pagano's strongman film hero Maciste suggests that both "drew on common discourses, images, and commodities" including "the cult of the muscled male body, nationalism, colonialism, stardom, and fashion" (Rich 2015, 188). But then, analogies with twentieth-century fascism only go so far, as they distract "us from how we made Trump over decades" (Moyn 2020).

Considering the fields' feminist origins, it would be a sexist joke to blame television studies for not saving the world from Trump. But it is not too late for smaller things – for instance to understand why Trump has resorted to the home shopping template with increasing frequency in his response to the pandemic.

Apart from the photo-op, which brought QVC to Evan Osnos's mind, four episodes offer points of attack: After winning primaries in Michigan and Mississippi on March 8, 2016, Trump plugged Trump products including vodka, steaks, water and wine, some of which had long gone out of production, at his press conference (fig.2). During the early briefings on the pandemic, Trump promoted the malaria drug Hydroxichloroquine, in which he owned shares (Voytko 2020). On March 29, he bought Mike Lindell, a teleshopping bedroom gear tycoon known as "The Pillow Guy," to the Rose Garden to celebrate Trump's leadership (fig. 3). And on July 15, Trump posted a photo of himself at the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office promoting Goya products, a company which, according to its website, offers "authentic Latino food" and became the focus of a boycott after CEO Robert Unanue delivered another Rose Garden paean to Trump's leadership (fig. 4). If we further consider that a pro-Trump book from 2016 is called *Planes, Steaks and Water: Defending Donald J. Trump* (Pruitt 2016) we see, as Trump himself would say, the need to "get to the bottom of this."

2   Interestingly, one of the first collections of in-depth critical studies of Trump and television was published in Germany, where Trump has taken von Stroheim's succession as "The Man You Love to Hate" across the political spectrum: Maeder et al. (2020).

[Figure 2] Trump products on display at the press conference after Trump's primary wins in Mississippi and Michigan on March 8, 2016. (Source: Mychal Watts/WireImage/Getty Images)

[Figure 3] Mike Lindell praising Donald Tump in the Rose Garden, March 30, 2020 (Source: Alex Brandon/AP, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/30/trump-nudging-mypillow-lindell-run-office-156195)

[Figure 4] Gawking Goya Products to Chase Latino Votes: Trump at the Resolute Desk on July 2015 (Source: @realdonaldtrump/Instagram 2020)

III

"I admit that I am a QVC shopper": David Gudelunas opens his essay *QVC: Retail and Ritual* (2002) with a confession, a performative illustration of his main claim that teleshopping is a "media ritual of status elevation" tied to status anxiety.

Teleshopping starts out on local TV in Florida but enters the mainstream in 1986 with QVC, a company founded in West Chester, an affluent suburb of Philadelphia. Hollywood executive Barry Diller, who built Fox TV and came to teleshopping through his wife, fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg, turned QVC into a multinational company in the 1990s. Sales were USD 11 billion in 2019 (up from 8.7 in 2017, and 1.5 times more than Paramount Pictures), 70% of which came from the US market (Statista 2020). Unlike that vanishing hallmark of twentieth-century consumerism, the mall, QVC has adapted well to online retailing and now streams three channels on a mail order website. Like the "weepies" of 1950s Hollywood, teleshopping pimarily targets relatively affluent white suburban middle-class women, who represent close to 90% of QVC's audience.

Gudelunas argues that QVC was "a more successful home shopping channel than its now defunct competitors because it was able to establish a high level of para-social interaction by interacting with guests" (2002, 108). Para-social interaction is a form of impersonal intimacy which television personalities develop as they address absent audiences as if present (Horton and Wohl 1956). QVC's trademark features include call-in segments introduced by the phrase "let's go to the phones," which has become part of the American lexicon. In these segments viewer-shoppers chat up the hosts and gush about products. As Gudelunas argues, "QVC viewer-shoppers are clearly members of a congregation as opposed to an audience" (2002, 110). Studies of language and behavior in up-scale department stores like Saks Fifth Avenue show that sales personnel strive for the prestige of their wealthy customers. As Mary Bucholtz argues, in the QVC congregation the roles are reversed: the host becomes an aspirational figure and customers "strive for the prestige of the sales representative" (Bucholtz 1999, 356).[3] QVC prices allow for impulse buying, making viewer-shoppers, who often reference their bank balance in calls (Ridgway and Kukar-Kinney 2005) "able to rise up from their current economic position and renew themselves as members of an elevated class" (Gundelunas 2002, 112–13). QVC holds up so well against more prosaic online retailers like

3   This role reversal provides a storyline in Amy Sherman-Palladino's amazon prime series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017–), whose main character is modelled in part after Joan Rivers. To earn a living after the break-up of her marriage, the eponymous budding comedienne and daughter of well-to do parents takes a job at B. Altman on Fifth Avenue selling cosmetics, a job at which she excels because she used to be a customer there herself.

Amazon precisely because it offers a "media ritual of status elevation" with a focus on non-essential luxury goods.

Status elevation through consumption is also the core of the Trump brand. It should not surprise us that the extended Trump family has long-standing ties with QVC. In 2007, Trump marketed Trump Steaks through QVC and the mail order service The Sharper Image. On QVC, Trump personally appeard against a backdrop of black boxes with Trump Steaks in gold lttering to signal that the "Trump brand was masculine, decadent, upscale." Trump Steaks sales failed to exceed five figures after two months and were discontinued, with the trademark expiring in 2014. The Trump women have been more successful. Raising breast cancer awareness while selling shoes and handbags from her Trump Tower apartment, Ivanka has been a familiar face on QVC for years (fig. 5).

[Figure 5] Ivanka signing shoes for QVC Shoppers in her Trump Tower Apartment, and also supporting breast cancer research (Source: YouTube 2014, https://youtu.be/-ge99mf0540)

Melania Trump's collection of timepieces and jewelry, which she herself described as "something that you could afford and easily buy on QVC" (HollywoodLife 2012), reportedly sold out in 45 minutes during the first QVC broadcast in 2010 (fig. 6). Melania's line of caviar-infused skin creams was less successful and remained at the conceptual stage. On "Celebrity Apprentice" former basketball great and personal friend of Kim Jong-Un Dennis Rodman got fired for misspelling Melania's name on a caviar skin care ad. When Trump became president, Melania continued to cross-fertilize her business with a link

to her QVC online shop on her personal White House page, until public outcry forced her to take it down (Hardy 2017).

[Figure 6] Something that You Could Afford and Easily Buy on QVC: Melania, Timepieces, and Jewelry (Source: YouTube 2012, https://youtu.be/ID0KKalefqw)

The Trump family has in other words been occupying the community space of the teleshopping congregation for years. Ivanka and Melania may well have contributed to Trump's political success by attuning QVC's white middle-class audience to the brand. S.R. Srinivas has shown how in Southern India film fan clubs become political parties, paving the way for film starts to run for office, with long-time Tamil Nadu governors M.K. Ramachandran or Jayalalithaa as the prime examples (Srinivas 2006). A similar form of fluid mobilization could be said to be at work in Trump's rise. As the authors of a study on Trump as a "networked political brand" write, "the experience of community that emerges from [the convergence of branding and political communication] gains increasing importance" (Billard and Moran 2020, 589). While Lisa Kelly is right to insist that television continues to be central to Trump and political culture even in a "post-TV" age (Kelly 2019), a crucial driver of this experience is Trump's twitter game, which closely replicates the relationship of host, caller and viewer-shopper that produces the QVC congregation. Poniewozik describes Trump's twitter personality as a Hobbesian Leviathan. By inter-acting with followers Trump makes them feel that they are "all part of on mighty body of which he was the head." In particular, retweets signal "I am not ashamed of you. I am simply *of you*" (Poniewozik 2019, 191). Similarly, Trump's brand—status elevation through consumption—thrives on himself being an avid consumer. This is why news about the President spending his days at the White House watching TV and gobbling up fast food strengthens, rather than undermines, his legitimacy with his followers. And while Trump's frequent calls into his favorite morning show "Fox and Friends" are a breach of presidential protocol, they redefine the presidency in terms of the teleshopping protocol

by demonstrating the soothing, egalitarian ease with which the leader of the free world can move from host to viewer-shopper and back.[4]

Far from a "cruel jumble of nonsense," the teleshopping template boils the brand of Trump the politician down to its essentials. As I will argue, it also defines his limitations as a leader in a global health crisis.

Parading Trump products after primary wins is not just a rebuttal of criticisms of his track record of business failure: it is a reminder that he is the candidate of status elevation, and he is winning. Inviting Mike Lindell to praise him in the Rose Garden is not just an attempt to stroke his ego: it is a move to strengthen his legitimacy in a moment of crisis through the endorsement of another teleshopping star. The template serves to mobilize the home shopping con- gregation for political ends. Nowhere was this more glaringly obvious than in early July 2020, when Trump first enlisted QVC star Ivanka and then himself to plug Goya products from the White House, accidentally repositioning Latino staples as white middle class luxury goods in the process (fig. 7).

[Figure 7] From Shoes to Beans: Ivanaka joining her father's boycott of the Goya Boycott through her social media accounts (Source: Twitter/Ivanka Trump 2020)

The shopping channel template also sheds light on Trump's speaking style. Barack Obama put himself on the path to the presidency with a soaring Emer- sonian speech about unity at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston. Trump's rally speaking style is famously disjointed and free-flowing, and prepared notes are the death of his appeal. Where Obama strives to enlist

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4   The extent to which the Trump organization operates as a TV company became clear when they trademarked the term "Telerally" after the cancellation of the Republican National Convention in Jacksonville, Florida, to charge customers, like the Repub- lican Party, for "organizing events in the field of politics and political campaigning" (Fahrenthold and Itkowitz 2020).

the entire citizenry in the arduous task of building a more perfect union (to quote his 2008 speech on race), Trump's colloquial mode of address offers a ready-made community experience in a congregation that is both open and exclusive. In 2016, CNN and the networks streamed Trump rallies not because they were news, but because they were low-cost, instant gratification reality programming for white middle-class audiences with status anxiety—not good for America, as then CBS head Les Moonves put it, who has since been fired for sexual harassment, but great television (Bond 2016).

And the teleshopping template may even help to explain the cruelty. If your promise is status elevation for your in-group rather than opportunity for all,[5] and if you believe the economy is a zero-sum game—an idea Trump learned on the Manhattan real estate market, as Josh Marshall points out (2017)—then the out-group has to lose, and making the out-group suffer for all to see is an indicator of your success.

Mary Trump, a clinical psychologist and the president's niece, describes Trump as a Frankenstein monster sewn together from his father's pathologies (Trump 2020). He can also be described as a self-made Frankenstein of American television and new media, stitched together from the dominant modes of twenty-first-century television. He draws his lifeblood from formats which appear as mere dregs and refuse from a patrician critical point of view but which have considerable purchase with audiences, with teleshopping most strongly resonating with Trump's personal brand. Trump's legitimacy, rather than vertical and reasoned, is fluid, mobile, and horizontal, based on affectual ties of instant gratification which are impervious to the deferred satisfaction calculus which political science models usually assume. It is not coincidence that Trump voters are often described as fans rather than party loyalists (Einwächter 2020; Hediger 2020). Trump voters are, in any case, affluent: They had twice the income of Clinton voters (Silver 2016) and were typically the rich people in poor places (Blum 2017). Their status anxiety is not existential, and their politics are quite literally luxury politics: Not government of, by and for the people, but governance of status elevation for the already safe and secure who can afford to impulse-buy cruelty to others.

The limitation of Trump's teleshopping governance in a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic is this: In it, the only way to care is to care for yourself through consumption. This is why rather than let experts speak and assume the role

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5   Trump favors oligarchs and has notoriously decorated the Oval Office with a portrait of Andrew Jackson, a genocidal racist, but the president whom his teleshopping govern-ance of status elevation through consumption most strongly echoes may be Theodore Roosevelt. As Heather Cox Richardson writes: "While Lincoln called for a government that helped workingmen rather than oligarchs, Roosevelt's vision inherently privileged upwardly mobile white men over people of color, independent women, or anyone mired in poverty" (Cox Richardson 2020, 126–27).

of comforter-in-chief, the president used the briefings on the pandemic as a teleshopping platform for products that would make the virus go away, up to, and including, bleach. When Boris Johnson brandished his new-born baby boy about in the tabloids just as the failure of his COVID-19 strategy became apparent, he engaged in diversion. When Trump projects the para-social intimacy of home shopping where a public space of care and grieving should be built, he is just being himself. But the pandemic is one problem shopping won't solve. Once that became clear Trump, being Trump, was left with a choice of wishing the virus away or ignoring it. Ever the glutton, he picked both.

"The television culture that Donald Trump grew up with, thrived in, and embodies is not the only kind of television," writes Poniewozik (2019, 273), trying to keep our hope for a better kind of television, and thus a better world, alive. Home shopping, we can infer, is not that kind of television. Considering QVC's robust business, it is also not going away any time soon. Which may have political repercussions even after Trump no longer occupies the White House. Ivanka has been derided as a mere "handbag designer" who erroneously got to be in the same room with Angela Merkel. But being a handbag designer is what got her there in the first place. In the age of home shopping governance, a QVC pedigree confers political standing. And Trump has encouraged the "Pillow Guy," Mike Lindell, to run for office (Lippman and Nguyen 2020). In the future, America may well be governed by dynasties of home shopping hosts rather than the Adams, Kennedys, Bushes, or Clintons of yore.

Is the world's last, best hope, then, for a teleshopping host who understands that the economy is not a zero-sum game?

Mary Trump argues that we need to focus not on her uncle but on those who surround and enable him. This includes the whole congregation. It has been said that supporting Trump is a moral choice. Home shopping governance also makes it a matter of taste. And taste, as John Ruskin once said, is not a question of morality. It is the only morality.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Trump contracted COVID-19 in September 2020. He was treated at Walter Reed Medical Center with the REGN-COV2 antibody cocktail developed by Regeneron Pharmaceuticals, a company run by a major Trump donor. Upon returning to the White House, Trump praised the treatment in a brief television address and said: "That's what I want for everybody". The "Lincoln Project", a Political Action Committee of disgruntled Republican operatives known for their well-crafted anti-Trump TV ads, edited and framed the key parts of the speech as a 1980s style home shopping ad (https://vimeo.com/470748710/b93b5371d4). The Enyclopedia Britannica defines satire as a

genre "in which vices, follies, abuses and shortcomings are held up to ridicule, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals, corporations, government, or society itself into improvement." As satire, the Lincoln Project video fails because Trump knows no shame, and because he has no room for self-improvement. He is exactly what the video says he is. What the video does show is a breakthrough in the home shopping governance response to the pandemic: Trump has finally found a product which, different from hydroxy-chloroquine and bleach, appears to work, reflects his lifestyle and can be sold, with his personal endorsement, on television.

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CAPITALISM

DE-COLONIZATION

ARCHIVES

COLONIALISM

IMPERIALISM

A New Period in History: Decolonizing Film Archives in a Time of Pandemic Capitalism

Didi Cheeka

26 years ago, carried away by the bourgeois euphoria over the fall of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama made the now infamous prediction that history had ended—its final expression, the capitalist mode of production. But, unfortunately for Fukuyama, history is not easily disposed of—by merely proclaiming its demise on the pages of a book. It has re-asserted itself with vengeance and its funeral orator was forced to re-edit his oratory. Things, as Hegel said, become their opposite: statues and monuments erected in celebration of slavery and colonization are being pulled-down and, rather than an end, what we are witnessing is the opening of a new period in world history. My attitude, as a researcher of (de)colonial film archives—in a time of the pandemic crisis of capitalism—is to theorize and historicize this study within the ongoing political struggle for decolonization.

All that is solid melts into air
Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels

A specter stalks the world: the specter of the COVID-19 pandemic. To further deploy the words of Marx and Engels set down in *The Communist Manifesto*, "The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe." It is this, the establishment and exploitation of the world market, that has given a cosmopolitan character not just to production and consumption but also to epidemics. The same instruments—improved and immensely facilitated means of production and communication—by which the bourgeoisie, in its nascent period, had drawn ex-colonial societies into capitalist civilization have become, in the period of its senile decay, facilitators of newly-emerging infectious diseases from country to country.

No doubt, referring to Marx and Engels evokes, already, the question of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Whereas I subscribe to the Marxist ideology, I particularly reference Marx to evoke the capitalist phase of primitive accumulation—I deploy this to the coloniality of imperial archives, that is, as owing their existence to the violent extraction of visual raw materials from ex-colonies. The extraction of colonized bodies from colonies and subsequent enslavement in imperial countries, the extraction of raw materials from colonies to feed imperial industry were complemented by the extraction of artefacts and visual [human] raw material framed in celluloid to feed imperial anthropological museums and audio-visual archives.

In a sense, then, it is correct to say that colonial [film] archives—as sources/sites of knowledge—are not, to reference Azoulay, "benign sites of research," and to uncritically engage with these sources/sites is to "take part in the conflation of violence and scholarship." To treat them otherwise leads, further referencing Azoulay, to "easily inhabiting the scripted roles offered to us as scholars, curators, photographers, and spectators." In the wake of growing protests over the latest racist police killing in the US, Afua Hirsch has written in *The Guardian* that "the racism that killed George Floyd was built in Britain." While agreeing with the body of the writing, I insist that the racism responsible for the recent killing was built in ex-colonies. It is through this prism that I will engage with researching, theorizing, and historicizing colonial cinema and archives in a time of pandemic capitalism.

I was already engaged in this task before the new coronavirus achieved pandemic level. In foregrounding the problem posed to this task by the pandemic, my intention is to reference, not the earlier phase of research but the period just before the viral wave—which took shape during the Everything Passes,

Except the Past - (De)colonial Film Archives workshop held in Lisbon. (I'm referring to the archival workshop in Lisbon, 2019, when a group of filmmakers, activists, and researchers from Africa and Europe gathered to discuss the past, present, and future of archives with film material from colonial and anti-colonial contexts. The workshop, run by Goethe Institut Portugal, was intended to initiate a platform for a call to action and reflection on decolonizing film archives.)

As both fall-out and follow-up to the workshop, a Call for Action & Reflection on Decolonising Archives was migrated digitally at the Latitude Festival - Rethinking Power Relations due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The digital festival, involving readings and panel discussions via Zoom video meetings, revealed digital possibilities and, at the same time, sharply underlined geographical inequalities and limitations inherent in usage—for instance, I experienced technical difficulties participating from Nigeria.

The spread of the virus will dramatically accelerate protectionist tendencies on a world scale—I mean this not in reference to international trade, but rather, to cultural exchange, since travel barriers would seriously impact international research and residencies. Digital migration, triggered by the pandemic, will likely increase, ushering in less reliance on humans and more on automation—an increase in remote working, videoconferencing, and other new workplace communication technologies will further widen the north-south abyss and bring into sharp focus the (neo)colonial structures responsible for the cultural-historical circumstances in the ex-colonies.

Under the impact of the new coronavirus, which has set in motion a rapidly unfolding chain reaction on a world scale—from protests against systemic racism to the struggle for decolonization of monuments—all the contradictions of capitalism are coming crashing to the surface. Necessity, to reference Engels, expresses itself as accident. The virus is only an accidental trigger for all the accumulated tensions of colonization—expressed in Black Lives Matter, the Monuments Must Fall movement, and demands for decolonization and restitution. These movements and demands are part of the crisis of the capitalist system heightened by the pandemic.

Writing about the far reaching and enduring effects of May '68 on film criticism and theory, Donato Totaro has stated: "*Cahiers du Cinéma*, once an auteurist journal, became politically surcharged... *Cinéthique*, which began publication in January 1969, took a more radical position than Cahiers by abandoning narrative cinema and championing marginal cinema (documentary, avant-garde)" (Totaro 1998). What would (de)colonial archives look like post-pandemic—what new life and meaning would they acquire? What form would researching, theorizing, and historicizing these archives assume? Who will have access to

these archives—from the standpoint of power relations inherent in ownership and interpretation?

In this period of politicization of artistic and academic life—with calls to decolonize film studies, cinema, and archives—researching, theorizing, and historicizing (de)colonial film archives demands a terminological approach previously mostly specific to political economy. I turn to Marx, therefore, who wrote in the pages of *Capital* that "the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins... are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation." Activist author Naomi Klein has described what she calls "disaster capitalism"—a profit-driven approach to natural and man-made disasters. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, the world seems set for the shock doctrine to strike again.

To elaborate: Among the first films made in Nigeria as part of the colonial enterprise is the film *Anti-Plague Operations* (1929), on the effort to curtail an earlier pandemic—the bubonic plague. Much like the method, in primitive accumulation, of appropriating colonial raw materials for private imperial profit, colonial audio-visual productions have been privatized in commercial film archives in the UK—commodifying colonized bodies visually and effectively denying ex-colonial users access to their visual bodies. The continuing holding of films from former colonies in commercial archives, especially in the current pandemic, preventing non-commercial access in imperial countries smacks of Klein's label.

So, to refer to the violence of primitive accumulation archived in colonial audio-visual sites means more than actual physical violence—it is in reference, also, to the violence inherent in its presumption, the violence of presuming the sole right of ownership of images of colonized people and excluding them, in practice, from right and access to these images. The violence is not, therefore, solely in the method of acquisition, but also in the power relations inherent in the repository, on what to archive, and who has access to them. This violence extends to research: how do we research films from (de)colonial archives in a time of pandemic crisis of capitalism?

To consider the question: Contrary to claims by the archives, most, if not all, European archives have only a fraction of their archival holdings online—so research, even if digital possibilities permit, can hardly be conducted online. This, again, underlines the restrictions imposed by the pandemic on scholars from the south—research requires on-site presence, rendered impossible by travel restrictions. Distance research, via digital possibilities, is further encumbered by power relations—the imperial power to name colonized people. For instance, researching Angola's struggles against colonization in Portuguese archives turns up nothing like revolutionaries or freedom fighters—except under the imperial label of Angolan terrorists.

Perhaps, related somewhat to the above, it would be possible to mention a colonial production, Daybreak in Udi, which won an Oscar (1950) at the Academy Awards for Best Documentary and also received a BAFTA Award for Best Documentary Film, without much digression—*Daybreak*, filmed in eastern Nigeria about the building of a community health center, is a fictional film presented as documentary. I mention this film to highlight how the imperial camera's access to colonized human raw material could produce a regime of truth for scholars, curators, artists, and researchers to consult as benign sites of knowledge.

It is possible to say that these issues are only tangentially connected with the problems of researching (de)colonial film archives in a pandemic. I connect one with the other, however tenuously, to highlight an ignored aspect of the pandemic—ex-colonies handled the outbreak better than imperial countries. This speaks to the fight to decolonize film archives: the cliché is that ex-colonies are incapable of handling their own archives, hence, the refusal to restitute.

To end by posing questions that go to the heart of the struggle to decolonize archives, questions calculated not to provide ready-made answers but serve, rather, to trigger discourse: how would films from (de)colonial archives be presented post-pandemic, so as not to reproduce the violence inherent in their production? What new truth, in terms of speculating and repurposing these materials, would post-pandemic researchers of these archives bring to bear? And how do we decolonize archives when colonialism still exists in a different form? Perhaps, then, as Marx said, the thing is not to theorize decolonization but, rather, to overthrow the very structure that periodically gives rise to pandemics.

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COLONIALISM

CO-RESISTANCE

EPISTEMIC PRIVILEGE

HORROR

INDIGENOUS FILM

RECIPROCITY

Anticipating the Colonial Apocalypse: Jeff Barnaby's *Blood Quantum*

Kester Dyer

This article considers how Jeff Barnaby's Indigenous zombie feature *Blood Quantum*, released online during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores long-standing Indigenous viewpoints which anticipate the tensions magnified by this crisis. Drawing on the film's reception in the media as well as interviews with creative personnel, this essay frames its analyses within Indigenous theoretical paradigms while mobi-lizing the feminist concept of "epistemic privilege." Thus, it argues that *Blood Quantum*, partly through intertextual allusions to earlier anti-racist horror cinema, highlights the convergence of Indigenous responses to colonialism with interventions that oppose anti-Black racism. In addition, this essay finds that *Blood Quantum* innovates with genre in ways that mirror the emphasis placed on reciprocity by Indige-nous thinkers, while firmly rejecting the recenter-ing of Indigenous struggles around white allyship.

Although *Blood Quantum* succeeds in stressing the crucial significance of Indigenous perspectives for contesting injustices compounded by COVID-19, mis-comprehension yet remains about the link between the lived realities of Indigenous peoples and the film's aesthetic choices. This essay concludes that such persistent biases confirm the vital urgency of ensuring the increased prominence and broad influence of Indigenous viewpoints to counter the homogenizing tendency of Eurocentric culture.

Introduction

Mi'kmaw director Jeff Barnaby's much anticipated second feature *Blood Quantum* portrays an apocalyptic contagion in a strikingly topical way. Premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2019, its theatrical release, planned for spring 2020, was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, *Blood Quantum*, fully exploiting the allegorical potential of the zombie subgenre, remarkably echoes current global health and political crises. Premised on the spread of a horrific disease that turns non-Indigenous people into zombies but to which Indigenous people are immune, the film's narrative, coupled with an online release coincident with racial tensions in the wake of COVID-19, intensifies engagement with the history and legacy of colonialism in North America. As such, *Blood Quantum* illuminates the crucial significance of Indigenous perspectives for contesting flawed hegemonic social and political structures, and urges viewers to more incisively critique the bases of colonial violence long denounced by Indigenous artists, scholars, activists, and leaders.

Set in 1981 on a fictional reserve that stands in for Barnaby's home community of Listuguj, which was raided by Québec provincial police that same year, *Blood Quantum* builds on this historical moment.[1] This approach correlates with patterns observed by Grace L. Dillon, who notes that Indigenous genre authors often imagine alternate histories to "well-known cataclysms" where

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1   On June 12 and 20, 1981, Québec minister for Recreation, Hunting and Fishing Lucien Lessard ordered two provincial police raids on the Mi'kmaw community of Listuguj, aiming to forcibly limit their fishing activities. These events are documented in the 1984 NFB documentary *Incident at Restigouche* by celebrated Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin. Barnaby has credited Obomsawin's work, and this film in particular, as having had a profound impact on his filmmaking career.

historical circumstances are inverted, with Indigenous figures either coming out as victors or at least being at the center of the narrative (2012, 9). In Barnaby's case, the 1981 Restigouche raids clearly correspond to such an event and are combined in *Blood Quantum* with the history of decimating epidemics following Indigenous encounters with Europeans. In the film, Indigenous characters, led by Traylor, the reserve's head of police, Joss, his ex-partner and mother of his youngest son Joseph, and Traylor's father Gisigu, a sword-wielding elder, do battle with the zombified white population and struggle to deal with white survivors seeking refuge on their territory. In parallel, the group also contends with internal discord catalyzed by Lysol, Traylor's troubled older son from a previous relationship, who opposes the accommodation of white survivors. By deploying the zombie, a figure associated with the history of Black enslavement, *Blood Quantum* aligns itself with other non-white peoples oppressed by European colonialism, a move consistent with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's call for Indigenous activists to form "constellations of co-resistance with other movements," including "radical communities of color" (2016, 27). Meanwhile, *Blood Quantum* focusses firmly on a struggle over land in accordance with Glen Coulthard's concept of "grounded normativity," which emphasizes connections between land, knowledge, and ethical relationships (2014, 13). Thus, drawing on the film's reception in the media and interviews with creative personnel, this essay argues that *Blood Quantum*'s basis in Indigenous thought, redeployment of genre, and thematic relevance highlight the perspicuity of Indigenous concerns and the vital importance of scholarly, pedagogical and cultural spaces that center on and heed unobstructed Indigenous viewpoints and epistemologies.

Epistemic Privilege

Several film critics describe *Blood Quantum*'s unsettling relevance as "timely" or "prescient" (Crucchiola 2020; Tallerico 2020; Yamato 2020), but the film rearticulates core ideas long held by Indigenous scholars, leaders, and artists. Accordingly, though he acknowledges the film's timing in terms of reflecting the current sociopolitical moment, Barnaby himself distinguishes this from prescience. "What I am doing here isn't even prescient," he explains, "because it's a pulse that was already in the culture. It's always been in the culture" (Bramesco 2020). Indeed, global human and environmental crises anticipated by Barnaby's film constitute lived reality for Indigenous peoples. The film thus brings perspective to the broader effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Barnaby downplays *Blood Quantum*'s insight in anticipating the wide-ranging consequences of the virus as a mere reflection of longstanding Indigenous realities (Monkman 2020), and points out that "what's interesting about this virus is … it's the way Native people have always lived. It's nothing new for

a Native community to face record unemployment while at the same time dealing with large amounts of diseases" (Crucchiola 2020). Indeed, Dillon's analysis of Indigenous futurism confirms that "it is almost commonplace to think that the Native Apocalypse, if contemplated seriously, has already taken place" (2012, 8). Likewise, Simpson describes her own nation's experience of colonialism as "four centuries of apocalyptic violence in the name of dispossession" (Simpson 2016, 21). Echoing these views, Michael Greyeyes, who plays Traylor in *Blood Quantum*, describes the colonial settler state as "another kind of apocalypse," noting that "his community knows only too well what it feels like to fight against annihilation." Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers, who plays Joss, concurs with Greyeyes. Indigenous people live with "the daily reality of state-sanctioned systemic violence," she explains, "zombie apocalypse or not, our realities wouldn't be all that different" (Wong 2019). And, although some critics fail to comprehend the film's dialogue and acting choices (Ehrlich 2020; Hertz 2020; Tallerico 2020), others recognize the appropriateness of Indigenous actors' performances, acknowledging, for example, that Traylor's father Gisigu (Stonehorse Lone Goeman) reacts to events in a manner that is suitably horrified, yet composed, evidence that this elder has "seen and survived plenty before zombies" (Yamato 2020) (fig. 1). As Greyeyes summarizes, "We're survivors. We totally get it …. Who would be the best survivor in an actual apocalypse? Us" (Wong 2019).
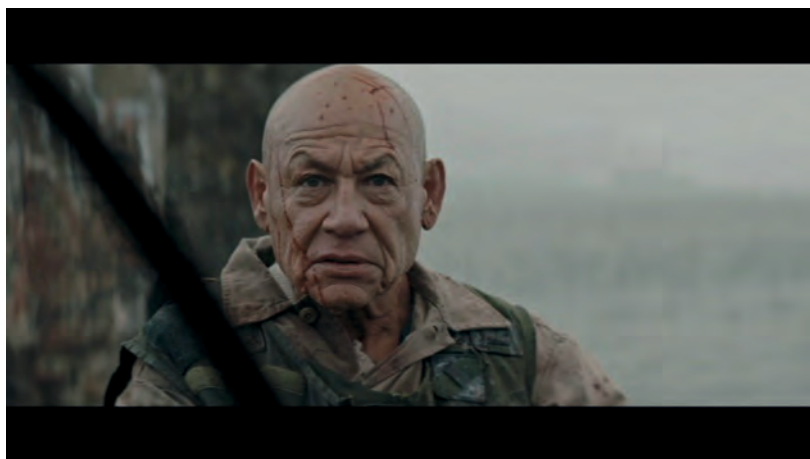
[Figure 1] Gisigu (Stonehorse Lone Goeman), composed as he prepares to defend the land against white zombies (Blood Quantum (2019), Jeff Barnaby).

These views speak to the notion of "epistemic privilege," which, contrary to economic, social, and political privilege, transpires as the possession of a deep understanding of systemic inequalities through one's material disadvantages and the lived experience of discrimination. The concept of epistemic privilege was developed most notably by feminist standpoint theorists and applies to

any marginalized group. Starting from the basis that knowledge is socially situated, it posits that the lived experiences of marginalized groups enable them to discern the deep structural patterns of systems that oppress them, which tend to remain invisible to those in positions of social, political, and economic privilege. Thus, according to Sandra Harding, "standpoint theories map how a social or political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemological, scientific, and political advantage" (2004, 7–8). *Blood Quantum* combines this idea with an innovative take on the zombie movie that links it to analogous Black struggles. Indeed, the film recollects and builds on the resourcefulness attributed to Ben (Duane Jones), the Black hero of George A. Romero's classic *Night of The Living Dead* (1968). Like his Indigenous counterparts in *Blood Quantum*, Ben proves better equipped than white characters to withstand the zombie apocalypse, having personally experienced the legacy of slavery (fig. 2). Likewise, in Barnaby's own allegory, Indigenous characters have developed a physical immunity to the contagion, presumably due to their prior exposure to colonialism and its ongoing iterations. No Black characters appear in *Blood Quantum*, just as no characters from other non-white groups appear in *Night of the Living Dead*. Yet, Romero's film has been compellingly read as a critique of other forms of oppression and imperialism due to the sociopolitical context of its release (the same year as the Tet offensive in Vietnam, and of the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy), and also because of the interconnectedness of class and ethnic conflicts implied by the film, as well as an "absent presence" of other oppressed peoples in its narrative and aesthetics (Higashi 1990). By extension, the absence of non-Indigenous, non-white characters in *Blood Quantum* reciprocates Romero's far-reaching condemnation of white supremacy. Thus, *Blood Quantum*'s implicit reference to its legendary precursor suggests co-resistance against European colonialism manifested as hordes of ravenous white zombies.

[Figure 2] Ben (Duane Jones), better equipped than white characters to withstand the zombie apocalypse (*Night of the Living Dead* (1968), George A. Romero).

Indigenous Reciprocity

Eurocentrism posits western knowledge as inherently superior, obscures its own contradictions, and encourages intrinsically dehumanizing attitudes that preclude reciprocity (Shohat and Stam 1996, 1–3). Its limitations prove not only destructive to those it oppresses, but also to itself. In contrast, many Indigenous thinkers value reciprocity for sustainable life. In *Red Skins, White Masks*, Coulthard draws on anticolonial thinker Frantz Fanon and adapts Marxist theory, rendering the latter compatible with core Indigenous principles. These enriching exchanges mirror Barnaby's genre innovations. Both *Blood Quantum* and *Night of the Living Dead* depict the warning Jean-Paul Sartre directs to Europeans in his introduction to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. "In these shadows from whence a new dawn will break, it is you who are the zombies" (1963, 13), Sartre writes. But *Blood Quantum* enhances the portrayal of (self-)destructive and (self-)dehumanizing colonialism. Shifting the emphasis of Marxism, Coulthard specifies that the settler state primarily targets Indigenous land over Indigenous labor, and that Indigenous struggles are "not only *for* land in a material sense, but also deeply *informed* by what the land *as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations* can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms" (2014, 13). *Blood Quantum* dramatizes this conflict as white survivors covet reserve space above the bodily protection afforded by their Mi'kmaw hosts. Survivors hide the truth to enter the reserve as an emergency measure, not as an opportunity to fundamentally redefine their relationship to the land and others. This epitomizes the west's persistent unwillingness to discern and genuinely tackle the root cause of global crises. Indeed, white survivors and some Mi'kmaq, like Traylor's oldest son Lysol (Kiowa Gordon), replicate the brutality of the colonial system, and end up polluting Indigenous territory as a last viable refuge (fig. 3).

[Figure 3] Lysol's (Kiowa Gordon) anger, though warranted, comes to replicate colonial brutality (*Blood Quantum* (2019), Jeff Barnaby).

By continuing to ignore and suppress Indigenous ideas, *Blood Quantum* suggests, the Eurocentric capitalist and colonialist worldview, unless effectively countered by the very epistemologies it occludes, will destroy itself and others. This aspect of the film's social commentary echoes recent real-world conflicts such as the Wet'suwet'en land defenders' protests against the Coastal GasLink Pipeline through unceded Indigenous territory in British Columbia, a project oxymoronically justified as ecologically progressive ("Trudeau Touts"), and coercively enforced by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, an organization that has now finally acknowledged its own systemic racism (Ballingall 2020; Walsh, LeBlanc and Tait 2020). Indeed, it is telling that certain conservative politicians see the COVID-19 pandemic as a unique opportunity to press on with pipeline building unimpeded by protestors during confinement (Bracken 2020). Seemingly mirroring such issues, *Blood Quantum* memorably visualizes elders' struggles to protect the land when, in his final scene, Gisigu refuses to abandon Mi'kmaw territory again and, filmed in a long shot that emphasizes his tenacious struggle against overwhelming odds, single-handedly battles a swarm of zombies.

Implicating Non-Indigenous Viewers, Decentering White Narratives

Barnaby does not underestimate white society's stubborn refusal to recognize the need for spaces where Indigenous knowledge can flourish unimpeded. Indeed, his hard-hitting style and adoption of the zombie subgenre astutely communicate, through irony and excess, the destructive contradictions of Eurocentrism and the imperative to listen to Indigenous ideas. Barnaby

openly expresses his desire to deploy genre filmmaking to reach "younger and broader audiences," and admits to deliberately instrumentalizing the current hyperpopularity of the zombie film to encourage viewer engagement with difficult issues, both historical and ongoing (Black 2020). Indeed, the premise of *Blood Quantum* is inherently edifying. As lead actor, Michael Greyeyes recognizes, the "idea that colonial history has been reenacted subversively is a message that even the most non-political, non-socially informed person will understand right away" (Yamato 2020). At the same time, *Blood Quantum* heeds Simpson's warning against recentering Indigenous struggles around white allyship (Simpson 2016, 30). Non-Indigenous characters remain largely peripheral. Only Charlie, the pregnant girlfriend of Traylor's and Joss's teenage son Joseph, takes up significant narrative space. Barnaby's initial difficulties in getting his project funded (Lipsett 2020; Wong 2019), however, reflect an ongoing reluctance to support Indigenous-centered stories.[2] Commenting on why he found no takers when he proposed the project to financiers in 2007, Barnaby explains that "nobody was ready to hear that the great capitalist dream was falling apart and colonialism was going to help usher us into destruction. So it was the culture that took catching up to the script. Nothing changed, just the cultural perception of it" (Yamato 2020). In *Blood Quantum*, signs of an attitudinal change are barely perceptible. Only in Charlie's dying moments do we sense a recognition of the West's absurd self-destructiveness. Having just given birth to a daughter, but doomed to die of a zombie bite, Charlie protects the child from herself by handing her over to Joseph and Joss. Charlie then asks to be killed before turning into "one of those dead people." Her child's entrustment to its Indigenous family ironically upturns Canada's genocidal education and childcare policies, a reversal that is underscored in the film's final shot of Joss holding the baby.[3] Here, it is white society that is deemed "unfit" to educate the next generation (fig. 4). Hope for humanity amid the chaos rests partly on the decentering of whiteness signaled by Charlie's self-effacement.

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2   In spite of these initial difficulties, *Blood Quantum* was announced as boasting "the largest-ever production budget for an Indigenous film in Canada," according to a 2019 imagineNATIVE report (Black).

3   Residential schools formed a central part of Canada's policy to assimilate all Indigenous people (an aim explicitly stated in 1920 by Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs). This system forcibly separated Indigenous children from their families and communities, placing them in church-run institutions often located at great distances away from their homes, and exposing them to institutionalized neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and high death rates. It is estimated that 150,000 Indigenous children attended residential schools in Canada from 1883 to the late 1990s (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 4). The "Sixties Scoop" is the term popularly attributed to the disproportionate, and largely non-consensual, removal of Indigenous children from their families into provincial childcare, foster care, and adoption programs, a phenomenon intensified in the 1960s but not limited to this decade, and which arguably continues today (Hanson 2009, Vowel 2016).

[Figure 4] Joss (Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers) holding her newborn granddaughter. (*Blood Quantum* (2019), Jeff Barnaby).

Conclusion

With *Blood Quantum,* Barnaby reiterates viewpoints long-expressed by Indigenous commentators, but his innovations with genre and their implicit alignment with co-resistant communities find new ways of challenging western assumptions about the political crises surfacing with global pandemics like COVID-19. In his own words, Barnaby Indigenizes horror (Bramesco 2020). However, not all mainstream critics understand or welcome the stylistic imperatives of these innovations. Unused to sharing communicative space with works anchored in other traditions, these critics blame the author's creative choices for their own inability to follow narrative patterns or empathize with characters (Ehrlich 2020; Hertz 2020; Tallerico 2020; Vincentelli 2020). Such dissent doubtless rests in part with a disproportionate investment in individualism rather than in reciprocity, and with a lack of awareness of the lived realities of marginalized groups. Barry Hertz, for example, reproaches Barnaby for overemphasizing Lysol's complexity, and describes this antagonist as a "side character," thereby failing to grasp Lysol's centrality to the film's exploration of the legacy of colonial policies. Astonished that certain viewers fail to understand the motivations for Lysol's anger even though the film makes clear this character's traumatic experience of the childcare system (Crucchiola 2020), Barnaby elaborates on the considerable burden of informing non-Indigenous audiences about the historical roots of colonialism and white privilege. "A lot of people are not 'getting' the film because they don't know the contextual history underlying the ideas," he observes. "That's always the issue when you're dealing with a non-Native audience; they're not going to understand where you're coming from" (Black 2020). In contrast with the above-mentioned commentators who divorce their appraisal of the film

from anything beyond a superficial understanding of its historical resonance, Joe Lipsett, whose article probes the historical and sociopolitical significance of the film more incisively, praises its character development as well-crafted and its performances as compelling and soliciting audience investment. Thus, although meaningful understanding of Indigenous narrative and its aesthetic logic is attainable for viewers open to non-hegemonic worldviews and approaches, continued miscomprehension only confirms the urgent need to counter the homogenizing tendency of Eurocentric culture.

Meanwhile, *Blood Quantum* also signals its solidarity with parallel interventions opposing anti-Black and other forms of racism. Tellingly, not only is Lysol a character whose complexity exposes him to being misunderstood, he is also the character who most explicitly articulates co-resistance with non-white allies when he stresses the threat posed by white survivors seeking shelter and describes them as "never [having] seen a brown person since their grandparents owned one." In light of recent Black Lives Matter protests, fueled also by the exposure of racial injustice during COVID-19, this alignment further augments the film's apparent prescience. And while enduring Eurocentric stereotypes of Indigenous ghosts tend to mobilize such supernatural figures as a way to "disappear" Indigenous presence from the territory now known as North America, for Michelle Raheja, works by Indigenous artists deploying Indigenous ghosts conversely "draw attention to the embodied present and future" of Indigenous peoples (2011, 146). As such, even though *Blood Quantum* engages with the zombie rather than the ghost, the clairvoyance attributed to this film appears to correlate with Raheja's theorization of Indigenous prophecy. Indeed, *Blood Quantum* combines the zombie's origins in the idea of eternal Black slavery with the parallel idea of eternal Indigenous dispossession. Appropriating both of these tropes, *Blood Quantum* instead casts the white population as eternally (self-)enslaved to boundless systems of accumulation and (self-)dispossessed of the rich reciprocal possibilities of learning from non-western epistemologies.

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Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger,
and Antonio Somaini (eds.)
Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

With its unprecedented scale and consequences the
COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new con-
figurations of media. Responding to demands for infor-
mation, synchronization, regulation, and containment,
these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces,
and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration
of media technologies and the cultures and polities with
which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptabil-
ity, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of
a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and
analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in
response to the global crisis and provide elements toward
an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.

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