Things in the Background

Video Conferencing and the Labor of Being Seen

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When your interlocutor excuses herself and exits the frame of a video conference, leaving the camera on, where does your gaze go? Is it drawn toward the bookshelf in the background? Toward the photograph or the poster on the wall? Toward an accidental cat walking past the camera? Or do you switch tabs and check your emails?

The background (fig. 1) is always involved as a silent or not-so-silent participant in the visual culture of video conferencing. A home office has been a long-standing feature in the rise of freelance and enterprise economies. Still, the Covid-19 pandemic forcefully launched the so-called work-from-home experiment on an unprecedented scale, making many homes visible to the public through video conferencing. The act of seeing directly into other people's homes brought a new, technological dimension of vulnerability to the idea of a home office, already a site of precarious domestic and immaterial labor. The background brings up the questions of choice, or an impossibility to choose a communicational setting; of information divulged or hidden; of symbolic representation; of labor of watching and labor of being seen; and of what these questions mean for seeing the video conferencing as a practice of social production and reproduction.

The background is also a witness to the complicated networked architecture of the gazes in video conferencing. As Anne Friedberg points out, the screen produces voyeuristic "virtual windows" (2006) between the viewer and the looked-at. The frames—the screen and the application window—introduce "the rectangle of perspectival rendering" (2006: 38) that alters the very conception of space the communication takes place in. It might seem that if each interlocutor is equally involved in the live-streamed process of *seeing* and *being seen*, the situation is equal, unlike in live-streaming, blogging, or surveillance where the gaze is one-sided and does not necessarily take place in real-time. But the seemingly stable and equalizing point where the two gazes meet—on the screen—inevitably produces insight *into* the other person's life, seen on the background behind them. Video conferencing does not equalize the two gazes but rather introduces a mutable and live architecture that involves each participant in the acts of seeing and being seen.

Figure 1: The backgrounds of a video call. 2021

Source: Author.

In this paper, I see the background as a symptom of power relations appearing between the interlocutors as they open the video conferencing software. The main locus is the background of a domestic space that accommodates video conferencing labor. What it makes visible are the questions of precarity and immaterial labor revealed through a range of aesthetic procedures and accidental markers. Hardt and Negri (2004) define immaterial labor as networked, decentralized, mobile, and rooted in sociality and affect. Producing "communication, social relations and cooperation" is its key characteristic (Hardt and Negri 2004, 113). Video conferencing is a type of immaterial labor that involves, at the same time, the labor of watching and the labor of being watched (Andrejevic 2002), as well as surveillance, as it is most often mediated by proprietary platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. As I argue throughout the chapter, the background also introduces a dimension of labor of being seen. Video conferencing produces asymmetries that are embodied and technologically situated, and the idea of the gaze as an act of looking is also, by default, networked as it is dependent on the processes of encoding and transferring information, bandwidth, and imperceptible delays, as well as inequalities in access to internet connection and hardware.

The professionalization of the background—the ways in which the users adapt their living and working spaces to the newly formed architectures of video conferencing labor—is visible evidence of a pressure of representation. The focus on the tactics chosen by the users is also a call to consider the professionalization of background as a larger shift in visual culture. The users make considered aesthetic decisions for their representation: they might conceal, hide, or perform the background differently. These daily practices, often disregarded, constitute the central focus of this chapter precisely because they reveal points of vulnerability and agency. And while there is a clear difference between the "two-sided" and "one-sided" architectures of the gaze, there are many instances in which tactics developed by live streamers and bloggers become adopted into the more generalized practice of video conferencing.

What does it mean to include or acknowledge this architecture? What does the "professionalization" of the background involve in terms of our changing relationship to privacy, pressures of self-representation, and labor conditions? The architecture of the gazes needs to be examined in the context revealed by lived experiences and instances of performative immaterial labor.

"Credibility Bookshelf," or Symbolic Capital in the Era of Visibility

The history of the background in Western visual culture is strongly linked to representations of power. In early photographic portrait, it served to underline and enhance the social status of its aristocratic and bourgeois subjects by putting them in an appropriate environment. The photographic ateliers of the nineteenth century widely used painted backdrops, which featured natural landscapes, architecture, ruins, pastoral scenes, sharing a common field of reference with theatrical backdrops and tableaux vivants[1] that recreated scenes from plays and classical literary narratives (fig. 2). In doing so, they produced an idea of what an elevated aristocratic portrait could and should be for the sitters: a symbol of status, but also a cultural imaginary that they could occupy by birthright. As Lucy Lippard notes,

> The backdrop portrait creates a spatial dislocation into a magical elsewhere not provided by ordinary portraiture. The subject, having (usually) chosen the setting, extends her of his identity to meet this invented context. (1997, 8)

1 A popular aristocratic pastime between theatrical performance and a parlor game, in which the participants wore costumes, positioned themselves among the props and posed for the viewers, to appear as if in a painting.

In the case of aristocratic portraits, the tasteful furnishings, staircases, and idyllic landscapes were the prevalent choice.

Figure 2: Princess Alice, Grand Duchess of Hesse by Camille Silvy, albumen carte-de-visite, July 4, 1861
Figure 3: A late-nineteenth-century painted backdrop. Interior of Stafhell & Kleingrothe photographic studio. Medan, Sumatra, Indonesia, 1898

Source Figure 2: ©National Portrait Gallery, Photographs Collection.
Source Figure 3: Collection KITLV.

A portrait of Princess Alice, third child of Queen Victoria, provides a great illustration to one such tasteful dislocation (fig. 3). It was taken in 1861 by Camille Silvy, a photographer who was very popular among the aristocratic circles of London in the 1860s. He kept a record of everything the studio produced in the daybooks; his range of backdrops and props is easily recognizable behind the clients' figures. Princess Alice's backdrop is a painting of a park. The prop, a large stand almost concealed by the ivy leaves, allows for a natural posture and blends into the background. The painted architectural detail on the left is adorned with a letter "A" which potentially indicates that the backdrop was made specifically for the portrait and would not be used by other clients: the members of the Royal family were not expected to share even the illusionary space with others. The photograph presents its elegant subject in a setting completely appropriate to her character and essence, and fitting the format of carte de visite portraits that were exchanged socially and collected in albums.

However, as Julie Codell notes, "while photographic images negotiated older portrait conventions of body posture, gestures, props, and dress borrowed from painting, they destabilized earlier notions of identity" (2012, 493) as later Victorian photography started to borrow the aristocratic props and backdrops for the

working class (Codell 2012, 494). Arjun Appadurai writes on colonial photographic backdrops being not simply passive props, but both instruments of creating imperialist cultural imaginaries and sites of experimentation with "visual modernity" (1997, 6–7). Already in that early era of photography, the increasing participation of self-portraits in the social processes underlines how the background reflects both the pressures and the defiances of self-representation.

Video conferencing inherits some of the symbolic procedures of this type of representation. In higher education settings, one can often see the bookshelf making an appearance in the academics' backgrounds. While the "virtual window" might simply be opening toward the working space of someone in research—a library, or its home-adapted version—within video conferencing, it also becomes a part of a portrait, a reminder of their credibility, a confirmation of books read (or at least bought). Such images, seen in various televised expert appearances, also contribute to a universalizing trope that the symbolic library is where academics belong, as if video conferencing from their kitchens would somehow undermine their expertise.

The pandemic has produced well-deserved sarcastic outlooks and popular analyses of such images, treating the background as the main site of reflection. The Twitter account Bookcase Credibility (@BCredibility), with the tagline "What you say is not as important as the bookcase behind you," tracks the appearances of experts, politicians, and other public figures on the backdrop of bookshelves. For example, to the news broadcast image of a British politician speaking in defense of a Downing Street party during the lockdown, the Twitter account enigmatically notes: "Michael Fabricant is going to need a lot more books than those if he wants to successfully defend the indefensible" (@BCredibility 2022) (fig. 4). Another Twitter account, Room Rater (@ratemyskyperoom), presents an equally sarcastic take, selecting as its objects of critique not only the bookshelves but also lighting, interior design, memorabilia, and decorative objects. The *New York Times* critic Amanda Hess takes note of the credibility tools in the age of working from home:

> It is remarkable how quickly the bookcase has become obligatory, how easily it has been integrated into the brittle aesthetic rules of authority. The appearance of the credibility bookcase suggests that the levers of expertise and professionalism are operating normally, even though they are very much not. (Hess 2020)

In some ways, the video conferencing background aligns with the art historical canon: visual studies scholar Mieke Bal observes that it is via the "cult of portraiture" in the Western European and North American contexts that ideological value systems are continually reified, and "the dominant classes set themselves and their heroes up as examples to recognize and to follow" (Bal 2003, 22). Where the figure in the foreground appears as an expert, as an authority figure, as the one who speaks

for others, the viewer can read the "aura" of expertise from the iconographic clues in the background.

Figure 4: "Michael Fabricant Is Going to Need a Lot More Books than Those If He Wants to Successfully Defend the Indefensible," January 11, 2022

Source @BCredibility.

Becoming Vulnerable

If the painted backdrop of portrait photography in the nineteenth-century ateliers served, for the sitters, as a way to commemorate the best version of themselves, the backgrounds in video conferencing follow the increase in working from home and the communicators' desire to appear appropriate: not as homely subjects in their pajamas, but as experts in their place of professional occupation. However, at home, the video conferencing backgrounds also reveal signs of living and moving, inhabiting space and sharing it with others—humans, animals, plants, and machines. As the home office becomes open to the gaze, these signs often reveal home as a gendered space and a site of reproductive labor. During the pandemic, the increasing

visibility of the background revealed a parallel increase in domestic violence and the unequal burden of domestic labor (Graham-Harrison et al. 2020). The backgrounds in the video conferencing become a witness to the tension between the public and the private, unfolding in the inhabited space altered by telecommunication.

As a form of virtual architecture comprising of screens, gazes, and backgrounds, video conferencing appears as an accidental and temporary apparatus that establishes itself only when connected. Anne Friedberg calls the screen a voyeuristic virtual window: "the screen is a component piece of architecture, rendering a wall permeable to ventilation in new ways: a 'virtual window' that changes the materiality of built space, adding new apertures that dramatically alter our conception of space and (even more radically) of time" (Friedberg 2006, 1). Likewise, there is accidental voyeurism in looking at someone's home, scanning for clues: like in the game genre "find a hidden object," the signs of life—shelves, possessions, photographs, pets, plants, the state of cleanliness or disarray—become socioeconomic clues to the person's life, hobbies, and interests.

The vulnerability of not being able or not wanting to reveal the contents of your home to the stranger can be directly seen in the ordinary gestures of telecommunication: Where does one position their camera preparing for a video conference? Unless a home office is already set up, it faces an inconspicuous corner of the room or a blank wall; rarely do we get to see the unwashed dishes, clothes on the sofa, and boxes left from moving. From my own remote teaching experience during the lockdown, students' reluctance to turn on their cameras is often connected to their living conditions. The home as a site of reproductive labor stands in stark contrast to the expectation to appear professional in a video conference in a work- or study-related setting. In shared flats, the lack of a quiet and neutral space makes the act of communication violent and intrusive.

Like reproductive labor, the labor of being seen is not always recognized as such, and therefore engaging in it often involves more of a grudging acquiescence than open consent. Video conferencing, in this sense, remains an architecture of intrusion, the presence of which can be felt every time we sit down in front of the computer screen and adjust its position slightly so that some of the elements of our houses are seen and not the others; set up the lighting so that our faces appear well-presented; double-check if the camera is off and if the microphone is on "mute." These subtle adjustments show how our bodies, our sources of light, and our significant objects become implicated in the lines of the gaze extending through the virtual window.

Furthermore, the architecture of gazes introduces an important consideration for the kind of vulnerable space it produces. While a two-sided act of communication, video conferencing connects two individual spaces. The two gazes meet, but they do not create a third, common space; they create two simultaneously existing situations of professionalization and vulnerability. In the following sections I also

draw on the situations that are one-sided: sex cam work, lifelogging, and streaming; however, the experiences of vulnerability and resistance to it are equally applicable to the video conferencing context.

Becoming Professional

The background becomes vulnerable when it becomes a foreground. This is very visible in the situations when the person leaves their position in front of the camera. A media artwork by Addie Wagenknecht and Pablo Garcia provides a great example of such reversal: the website brbxoxo.com "searches online sexcam sites and only broadcasts feeds when the performers are absent" (Wagenknecht and Garcia 2015). In an artist talk, Pablo Garcia says that during the work on another project with sexcams, they noticed that sometimes the camera would keep running when the performers left. They started to collect "little video clips of just … nothing … but it's not 'nothing,' these are people's actual homes around the world" (Garcia 2015).

The context of sexcam work only underlines home as a site of labor; it raises the stakes for the aspects that are normally disregarded as insignificant when one thinks of working from home. It makes the architecture of the networked gaze more visible: even the word "room" is used on many sexcam platforms to signify not only the real but also the virtual room in which the encounter between the performer and the viewer takes place. One aspect is privacy: the background becomes not just a vulnerability but a real security risk, as distinctive visual markers, such as a view from the window, mean that the home address of the performer can be identified and made public (Cunnningham et al. 2018, 54). Another aspect is the direct correlation between the sex worker's presence on the screen and the monetary value—the background on its own is worthless.

Finally, when the virtual "room" is located in an actual home and not in a studio, the background contributes to the illusion of authenticity. Writing about sexcam workers, Angela Jones notes that "their rooms are often their bedrooms, and from the perspective of a consumer, everything about the experience appears real" (Jones 2020, 6). One of the respondents in Jones's study streamed not only her erotic performance but also her morning routine and her preparation for the live stream. Even in studios, the rooms are often styled as bedrooms, performing authenticity for the encounter.

The cases of credibility bookshelf, sex work, and education already point toward the significant *professionalization* of the background, meaning that these contexts involve a commodification of personal space and individuality, a construction of either neutral or performative space. Already professionalized background practices, such as those of vloggers, private tutors, language instructors, therapists, and many others, give us a good idea of what such neutrality means. The construction of back-

ground, then, constitutes an aesthetic procedure: a conscious attempt to restage the architecture of the gaze and to diminish the vulnerability.

Furthermore, it is also necessary to point out the literal professionalization of the background in its technological frameworks and infrastructures. For example, the applications used to enact workplace surveillance employ a range of methods—from keystroke logging, messages, regular screenshots, user prompts, and remote control to facial recognition (Roe 2021, Abril and Harwell 2021). This draws a fine line between management and explicit surveillance: Zoom's "attention tracking" feature that identified if the attending person's gaze was fixed on the screen or strayed elsewhere only remained for a couple of months before being removed amidst privacy concerns (Yuan 2020). Further concerns of privacy and vulnerability arise if one considers how power relations inherent to the acts of visibility and invisibility can be exacerbated by algorithmic processing, opening the way to data-harvesting infrastructures. In video conferencing software, the identifiable background (for example, via blurring filters) appears *for* someone, for a person. The military techniques of differentiating between the figure and the ground to identify the target continue their existence in the contemporary practices of video conferencing.

The Labor of Being Seen

The professionalization of the background reveals that there are different modalities to being seen and to whether something becomes an object of conscious attention. The labor of being seen is not entirely equivalent to a continuous performance for the gaze. The construction of the background has to do more with the decisions made toward the person's own privacy (in revealing, concealing, or performing a particular type of space), as well as with the decisions that radically alter or extend the ideas of public and private. Through the aesthetic decisions made by users, the background reveals how these ideas are navigated.

For this reason, video conferencing should be discussed not as an equivalent of a face-to-face conversation but rather as a set of aesthetic and cultural practices that the users of video conferencing platforms adopt and share. Unlike practices such as lifelogging, where a conscious decision to document and share one's personal life in its entirety, the decision to be or not to be visible is a social pressure that is not always resolved straightforwardly.

Lifelogging, however, presents an interesting delineation of the border between the labor of being seen and acts of performance for someone's gaze. Lifelogging is an intentional sharing of a private life through recordings, live video, or photographs, often using a wearable camera that shoots continuously or takes photographs at certain time intervals. Lifelogging rarely contains extended narrativization, and its

defining categories are the date and time where the recording took place, making it closer to a public diary, a visual imprint of the person's life. The private lives on social media tend to give in to a pressure of representation, as the platform itself frames "performing the self" in specific ways (e.g., a "professional self" on LinkedIn, a lifestyle "self" on Instagram) (van Dijck 2013). Lifelogging, however, moves toward a documentary rather than a performative practice—even if we consider some degree of performing the self inevitable.

An important elaboration of the labor of being seen as opposed to performing for the gaze can be seen in the case of one of the early adopters of lifelogging—Jennifer Ringley, an American college student and web designer. Between 1996 and 2003, she broadcasted her life online uninterruptedly via her website, JenniCam. The webcam technology was based on updating the URL page with a new photograph every three minutes. The initial audience of JenniCam was only Ringley's friends, but quite quickly, the website's address went viral and started to receive millions of hits per day. In 1997 she added a paid subscription to cover the dramatically increased bandwidth costs. However, Ridley was adamant that the project, while self-supporting, should not be about revenue: "the site isn't up because I can make money and fame from it … The site is up because YOU continue to enjoy it" (Ringley 1997). At some point, JenniCam received four million hits per day (Banet-Weiser 2012, 51).

What is particularly interesting about Ringley's lifecasting project is her acute understanding of the processes unfolding in the architecture of the networked gaze. On the website, she described the project as:

> 1: a real-time look into the real life of a young woman
> 2: an undramatized photographic diary for public viewing via internet (Ringley 1999b).

Even this brief definition already describes the webcam architecture as constituted from two sides: a look *into* and a space *for* viewing. Furthermore, Ringley was firm in positioning it as an experiment rather than a commercial enterprise or an artwork. For example, when appearing on David Letterman's show, she pointed out that JenniCam, although similar to TV and other broadcasting, is "something that is made for the medium" of Internet ("Jennicam's Jenni on Letterman's Late Show" 1998).

JenniCam did not conceal nudity or sex scenes, and for this reason, the media of the time framed JenniCam as exhibitionist and attention-seeking (see, for example, Weeks 1997, Weisman 1998). Antonia Hernández in her doctoral dissertation points out the misogynist nature of these characterizations (Hernández 2020, 54). However, in her public statements and on the website, Ringley was very clear in defining JenniCam as a social experiment primarily aimed at documenting and not performing. For her, the question of privacy was not the central point of the project: "Just because people can see me doesn't mean it affects me—I'm still alone in my room,

no matter what. And as long as what goes on inside my head is still private, I have all the space I need" (Ringley 1999a).

There are, therefore, several salient points that we can glimpse from Ringley's descriptions of JenniCam that bear on the discussion of the backgrounds in video conferencing. First, she underlines the difference between the labor of being seen and performing for the gaze. Ringley stated: "I keep JenniCam *not* because I want to be watched, but because I simply don't mind being watched. It is more than a bit fascinating to me as an experiment" (Ringley 2000). Secondly, the authenticity of this encounter, while mediated and framed, remains, for her, a major reason to continue with the project:

> The concept of the cam is to show whatever is going on naturally. Essentially, the cam has been there long enough that now I ignore it. So whatever you're seeing isn't staged or faked, and while I don't claim to be the most interesting person in the world, *there's something compelling about real life* that staging it wouldn't bring to the medium. (Jennicam 1999a, my emphasis)

As Ringley herself points out, the duration of and commitment to her project change the conditions of engagement with her presence on the screen—both for her and for the spectators. She notes that for many viewers JenniCam acts as a shared space which they "put … in the corner of their monitor and it's like having someone in the next room" (Allen 1999). Here, the consent to being *seen* for a long time, at any given moment, seems a bit similar to the kind of consent we implicitly give when we open a video conferencing application. Apart from the pressure of representation, a space opens for other aspects: senses of connection and curiosity.

After six years of continuous broadcasting, Ringley shut down the site in 2003, as PayPal, which she used to accept donations, severed ties with her for the reason of images containing nudity. The archive.org reveals the last images accessible from JenniCam before its closure in 2003 (fig. 5). One is taken on Friday, November 29, 2002, at 7:30 p.m., and is captioned "Gone to San Francisco for a day to enjoy sun in the park" (Ringley 2002). It shows her bedroom, lit only by a small lamp; the empty bed occupies most of the image. Another image is from Thursday, July 31, 2003, 1:45 p.m. It reveals her working space: a chair; a shelf with boxes, folders, and books; and a table corner (Ringley 2003). Ringley is absent from both images. These backgrounds, probably incredibly familiar to the followers of her website, seem all the more relevant now that her absence from them is made permanent.

Figure 5: Left: JenniCam, November 29, 2002. Right: JenniCam, July 31, 2003

Source: ©Jennifer Ringley.

The empty background also forces the viewer to confront their own alienation. Like in slow cinema, where, because of the slow pacing and long takes, "seeing becomes a form of labour" (Schoonover 2012, 66), the background constitutes the part of the image that we start to notice only after a while. The slowness invites more effort, more ethical and political engagement and reflection on the part of the spectator than in an act of quick consumption of messages and narratives.

The labor of being seen, therefore, situates the background as a specific mode of being present and even copresent. The *New York Magazine* writer Michael Wolff points out,

> I know people who keep Jenni in the corner of their screens as they work—she's a background presence, like radio. The fact that she keeps going, keeps showing up, keeps doing whatever inconsequential things she does, is not only reassuring but instructive—this is how people deal with time, this is how people fill their days. (Wolff 1999)

This reassuring presence is increasingly easy to find in contemporary audiovisual networks. For example, one could think of the YouTube phenomenon LoFi Girl—a YouTube live stream with a looped animation of a young woman studying that broadcasts relaxing music to over 10 million subscribers ("LoFi Girl" 2020). The labor of being seen, as a *copresence* that helps to relax and focus constitutes a part of daily practices of video conferencing—for example, in online study groups and cowriting sessions. Not only *in* the background, but *as* the background, these practices operate around the explicit acknowledgment of the labor of being seen.

Background Aesthetics: Hiding in Plain Sight

The result of the lived-in spaces confronting the pressure of self-representation and self-commodification are the aesthetic procedures—tactics of revealing, hiding, or confronting the gaze without any modification. This can be seen both in the meticulous arrangements of the background, such as in streaming setups and in the complete refusal to let it be seen—either by turning the camera off or in using a virtual background. In this sense, the virtual background in video conferencing, while seemingly offering an infinity of options, from a tropical beach to a fictional location (and, therefore, interpretable as a site of symbolic representation), seems to be more of a curtain for the real background.

The background, therefore, becomes a contested visual space. The process of professionalization disrupts the home space as one of lived reality and flattens it into the space of representation. With this, individual tactics of resisting, concealing, hiding, distracting, and showing enter the aesthetics of video conferencing. The background is a symptomatic landscape of immaterial labor that records the changes in contemporary working conditions. As modes of digital labor expand to include digital nomads, workers who "give up on 'settled' living and embark on nomadic world travel, and perform work from different locations around the world, taking advantage of digital infrastructures and coworking spaces" (Schlagwein and Jarrahi 2020, 3), the background reflects the multitude of liminal spaces where such work takes place. A digital nomad can be calling from the airport, car, or train, cafes and coworking spaces, and those cyber-natural landscapes of parks, beaches, and forests that boast a good 5G connection.

On a different scale, the analysis of the background of our homes also invites attention toward the homogeneity produced by the supra-individual forces: the industries of construction and interior design, economic conditions, and even remnants of centralized planning. In a 2014 essay, writer and software consultant Paul Ford discusses the fact that many YouTube videos seem to share a common background—one that he calls "the American Room":

> The curtains are drawn. Some light comes through, casting a small glow on the top left of the air conditioner. It's daytime. The wall is an undecorated slab of beige. That is the American room. (Ford 2014, n.p.)

He notes that the American room appears in enough videos to make him think about the standardized nature of American suburban living, mass-production, and standardization in construction and housing. As Ford points out via Lawrence Busch's 2011 book *Standards*,

> the standard height of ceilings could vary considerably in a world in which walls were constructed of plaster and individually cut laths. But once standard building materials, such as (in the United States) 2 × 4s, and 4 foot × 8 foot sheets of plasterboard were made available, the variation in the height of ceilings was sharply reduced even as the speed at which wooden homes could be built increased. (Busch 2011, 34)

As the conditions of life, production, alienation, and labor open up in the inhabited spaces revealed in the background of our communication, the professionalized "selves" that are presented stand against it even more visibly.

An explicit example of a background that accepts the necessity of televised labor and capitalizes on the affective clues of the body is a game streamer's room. As a site of active performance of their professional selves, the game streamer's room is their workspace—sometimes dedicated solely to their labor. The introduction of new financial instruments that allowed vloggers to monetize their activities more consistently (e.g., advertisements on YouTube) and the increasing popularity of streaming platforms (such as Twitch) contributed to the professionalization of this occupation. A game streamer is in the center of the image, sitting in an ergonomic chair, facing several screens, often surrounded by branded items and symbolic objects, posters, figurines and featuring soft, well-distributed lighting in neon colors. She is, herself, more a character in our collective viewing fantasy rather than an interlocutor in a video conferencing setting. However, thinking about the increasing acceptance of work-from-home settings and the game streamers as early adopters of such practices, it is worth considering this particular background as a situation of speculative design with a potential for influencing other architectures of the gaze and the screen.

The videos that share the "setups" of the streaming rooms narrate, in a lot of detail, the hardware specifications, comfort, air quality, sound isolation, and other functional aspects. However, they are equally attentive to the aesthetics of the resulting techno-space, the symbolic objects, and the general ambience. The YouTube channel TechSource is dedicated almost exclusively to discussing various gaming setups hosted by Ed Oganesyan. In nearly three hundred episodes of the series called "Setup Wars," he showcases different environments submitted by the followers. The setup videos reveal that the American Room has not disappeared but was instead disguised with neon ambient light. Behind IKEA furniture and state-of-the-art hardware, the light-colored walls, sofa, blinds—all point toward this ruse. Another video deliberately makes the American Room its starting point, revealing the host standing in front of the beige walls and carpet first and then cutting the video sharply to the same angle, only lit up by a multitude of LED lights in blue, green, and purple (TechTesseract 2020).

Conclusion

As I have explored through a variety of possible architectures, the arrangement of gazes is always mutable and temporal; in each of various virtual "rooms" that reveal the precarious conditions of contemporary communication, it is structured differently. As a symptom, an environment, and a site of developing tactics and habits against its vulnerability, the background has opened up multiple points of entry into the consideration of video conferencing acts. The professionalization of the background bears on not only the notions of what constitutes the workspace and self-representation but also larger shifts in visual culture. The labor of being seen needs to be distinguished and acknowledged as a different modality from performative labor; interspersed with architectures and structures both human and technical, intra- and supra-individual, it reveals the specific background aesthetics, with a background as a witness to, and a trace of, a variety of tactics and attitudes that reflect the individual users' capacity to situate themselves within the architecture of the gaze.

Acknowledgements

The background became a central figure of this paper through the collective work with Mijke van der Drift and Neda Genova on the panel "Homing In, Zooming Out: Space Making as Pandemic Practice" for the 2020 annual conference of the German Society of Media Studies (Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft, GfM). My thanks go to them and to the editors Axel Volmar, Olga Moskatova, and Jan Distelmeyer for the comments and help.

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