Sociospatiality between Agency and Fixation

Framing the Fixed View in Video Conferencing Arrangements

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What Pandemic Zoom Pranks, Fails, and Glitches Can Tell

When I search the internet for keywords on "Zoom pranks," "fails," or "glitches" uploaded during the world's first pandemic-driven lockdown in March to June 2020, numerous results pop up. On the one hand, these derailments prove the technical and social insufficiency to cope with the exploding requests for video conferences (and their digital tools) since the pandemic's outbreak. On the other, they also point directly to the most basal construction principles and infrastructures of those new video environments: they mirror the way video conferences (should) work or do not. One well-known incident was the case of Will Reeve, a *Good Morning America* anchor, who was uncovered by his laptop's camera angle to be wearing only shorts under his jacket, tie, and shirt during a real-time and home-conducted interview on April 28 (fig. 1).

Figure 1: Will Reeve in shorts on Good Morning America on April 28, 2020

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HlNKLiI9h3g (accessed: October 26, 2022).

He afterward dealt with his globally distributed fail in a relaxed and self-reflexive manner, posting a screenshot of it on his Twitter account, adding "I have ARRIVED*, *in the most hilariously mortifying way possible."[1] Multitudes of colleagues, friends, and strangers reacted supportively, nearly praising him through reenacting his habitude[2] and through comments like "You're a legend, man!" (@RandomWhig, April 28, 2020) or "This should be the new standard. Do not let the world shout u down, u are a hero and a prophet" (@Kwite, April 28, 2020). Will could have easily avoided his presumed faux pas, for example, by carefully following advice many online Zoom manuals published during the first weeks of video conferencing in 2020—ranging from suggestions to adjust what can be seen by tilting the laptop camera and covering up one's untidy background to the creation of an office-like desk arrangement.[3]

While Will's "framing carelessness" was just an unlucky coincidence, other transgressions of Zoom's spatial arrangements were intended ones: a little earlier, on April 12, 2020, TikTok influencer Samuel Grubbs had uploaded a video of a Zoom prank on his account, fueling an international hype during times of homeschooling.

His short clip displayed a school class "passing around" a pencil through different video tiles (fig. 2)—an arrangement that could technically only be managed through (1) different pencils and (2) manually arranged Zoom windows in a previously discussed spatial order. For someone not involved in the prank's construction, the project created the impression that an object can transgress formerly separate (and only digitally connected) spaces. Grubbs's video, which was watched over 40 million times and emulated on the same platform as well as on other ones,[4] kept subsequent Zoom users busy (re)arranging and trying out themselves in relation to the new digital constraints, redefining the margins of their spatial configurations.

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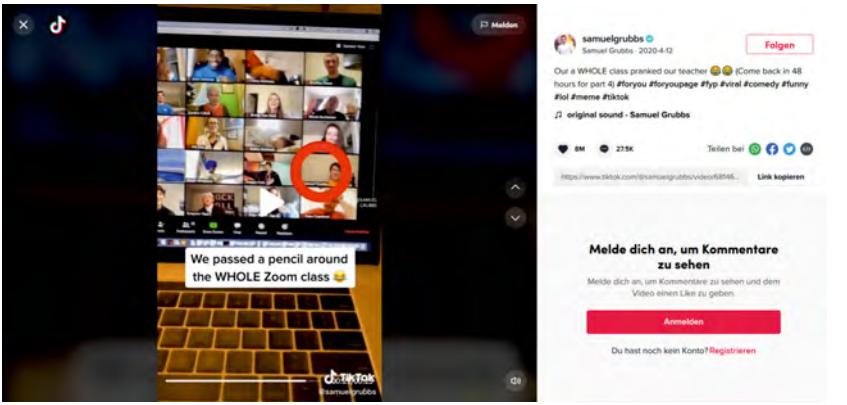
1 For Will's Twitter post and related comments, see https://twitter.com/ReeveWill/status/1255141549450473473 (accessed: October 26, 2022).

2 The anchor's appearance on GMA and some reenactments can be found in a short clip compiled by *Entertainment Tonight*, which was already uploaded on April 29, 2020. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HlNKLil9h3g (accessed: October 26, 2022).

3 For examples of online manuals and supposed dos and don'ts related to Zoom, which were published during the first lockdown, see https://blacknight.blog/12-tips-for-having-a-successful-video-conference-call-zoom-office-365-teams-meeting.html and https://www.thewrap.com/fox-news-dana-perinos-tips-for-working-from-home-keep-a-schedule-step-away-when-you-can (accessed: October 26, 2022).

4 A video compilation uploaded on YouTube on October 31, 2020, shows many of the TikTok-Zoom pranks done during online school classes. The video has (until now) been watched over seven million times. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACkJivTdmgA (accessed: October 26, 2022).

Figure 2: One of the first TikToks on Zoom pranks that influencer Samuel Grubbs (@samuelgrubbs) uploaded: a school class "passing around" a pencil



Source: https://www.tiktok.com/@samuelgrubbs/video/6814652084529466630?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1 (accessed: October 26, 2022).

Both Grubbs's TikTok challenge and Reeve's appearance without trousers refer to various spatio-ontological, social, technological, and infrastructural layers of what the pandemic's instant move to a fully mediated conversation culture in 2020 (and beyond) has demanded: new kinds of digitally connected solidarity. Even if video conferencing had technically been possible since the late 1960s and commonly used since the late 1990s, during the pandemic video calls replaced most social interactions worldwide. Face-to-face meetings were restaged in both working and private contexts and, despite the complications for technically not well-equipped or well-educated people, video conferencing became *the* standard mode and needed expertise to audiovisually stay in touch with others—to gather in shared virtual spaces and experience the urgent feeling of copresence as telepresence during the hardest times of isolation.

In media studies, the immediate need to cope with the fundamental social changes has, as Jan Distelmeyer recently (2021) remarked, accelerated discussions about how new spaces of digitalization and the internet could be integrated in our thinking about "living environments"[5] in general. Video conferencing as a scientific topic had until now been assessed mainly from the fields of social science and communication studies (see, e.g., Dickson and Bowers 1974 and, for a

5 I use the term *Lebenswelt* in the meaning Jürgen Habermas has borrowed it from Alfred Schütz and Edmund Husserl: as the socioculturally driven conglomerate of evidence, which emerges out of specific and unspecific interrelations between subject's agency and its discursive system. See Habermas (1982, 209).

quick historical overview, Held 2020). But their often descriptive and quantitative-empiric framing is not helpful for speaking about the sociospatial transformation that daily, exhausting video meetings demand today. Moreover, the corona crisis seems to have brought back some fundamental onto- and epistemological thoughts that had already been diversified during the past decades—especially nostalgic longings for the analog world as well as thoughts about face-to-face closeness and virtual distance, which seemingly went missing in "the pandemic world." The political implications within those well-known topics point to much broader current discussions about mediated spheres, such as on fake news, the power of images and technology, platform politics, and privacy settings—making questions about spatial rearrangements and orders of dispositives pressing again.

In the following, understanding the pandemic predominantly as a media-based social and/as *spatial crisis*, I will focus on sociospatial arrangements of video conferencing by primarily using genuine film studies concepts instead of referring to social sciences. I am interested in the politics and aesthetics of video conferences' spatial interrelations and their new framings of usership and spectatorship, social relations, platforms, infrastructures, and technologies as well as the way they affect and interact with our current ways of communicating and thinking. Based on my introductory examples, I will describe the interlocking of public and private spaces in video conferences through Adrian Martin's (2014) concept of *social mise-en-scène* in its paradoxical relation to Susanne Lummerding's (2005) political term *suture*. Because while *screening and being screened*, *seeing and being seen*, we are confronted with an inevitability of the fixed frontal camera perspective as both aesthetic concept and political corporeality. Accordingly, I will examine the new powerful scopic regimes (see Jay 1999) of visibility and invisibility, movement and fixation, and foreground and background. They bring with them the necessity to refocus on the precarious ephemeral and corporeal position of the person in front of the screen/camera, as well as on social and political negotiations of spaces themselves. I treat these (con)figurations as techniques of governance that accompany every video conferencing meeting we conduct. To have a specific video conferencing arrangement in mind, I will develop my argument referring to Zoom, as Zoom's metaphorical *spatial wording* seems the most fitting equivalent of my argument. Additionally, I will shortly reflect on the more play-like platform Gather.town, which offers some presumably different spatial conditions.

Distant Socializing and Personal as Public Spaces

As sociologists Hubert Knoblauch and Martina Löw have recently claimed, the pandemic has shown how fluid territorial demarcations in "networked spaces" had become:

> Territorial spaces follow logics of positioning and arrangement, which means to have clear-cut borders to external spaces and accept the restriction of the diversity in its inside. Usually, they are perceived as static constructions. In contrast, networked spaces follow logics of relationality and heterogeneity. In networked spaces, distant elements can be put in relations and their diversity is one of their main characteristics.[6] (Knoblauch and Löw 2020, trans. LKM)

According to their view, the pandemic has first and foremost entailed ruptures in spatial experiences. During the pandemic, "the physically delimited territories of the people, who are forced to retract themselves in their close private spaces, meet the boundless and body-less network of communication,"[7] which entails a contradictory logic. Considering this perspective and conceptualizing video conferencing spaces therefore with theories on pictorial spaces and visual experience, Shane Denson's reminder of Stanley Cavell's bifurcating the meaning of *screen* as "protective shield" *and* "world-accessing window" seems reasonable (2020, 317). When we enter a video session, our (visual and auditive) depiction becomes, paradoxically, an access to other windows of people accessing our window. At the same time, we can feel protected as we do not need to worry about real metaleptic entrances of others into our own window. That this protection can even become a severe obstacle has unfortunately been proved through several sad stories about Zoom participants helplessly watching someone die during a meeting.[8] Despite those sad happenings, the dialectic between Cavell's shield and window serves as tipping point for a complex fact: viewed from a phenomenological perspective, our witnessing of others is unavoidably linked with displaying ourselves within the bigger spatial arrangement of the tiles. This uncomfortableness of not primarily wanting but needing to *become a picture* is a condition that has immediately been written about—for example, in Kerim Dogruel's (2020) observation that most students switch off their cameras during class. This mere fact becomes even more paradoxical as many people wished to gain back analog encounters during the first lockdown: situations that depend on exactly those configurations of simultaneously seeing and being seen. Especially, the essays of Bill Ayers (2020) and Emmanuel Alloa (2020), which were published among

6 German original: "Territorialräume folgen einer Logik des Platzierens und Arrangierens, der zufolge klare Grenzen nach außen gezogen werden und eine Beschränkung der Diversität nach innen akzeptiert wird. Sie werden in der Regel als statisch wahrgenommen. Dagegen folgen Netzwerkräume einer Logik der Relationierung des Heterogenen. In Netzwerkräumen können distante Elemente in Beziehung gesetzt werden und die Differenz der Elemente ist ein wesentliches Kennzeichen der Netzwerkräume."

7 German original: "[Da] treffen die physikalisch begrenzten Territorien des Selbst von Menschen, die sich mehr und mehr auf den Nahraum zurückziehen und zurückziehen müssen, nun auf die entgrenzte und körperfreie Vernetzung der Kommunikation."

8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKJ3n8YNC_g (accessed: October 26, 2022).

many other pandemic-related texts in *Critical Inquiry* between March and June 2020, bemoaned the loss of analog encounters. Alloa proved his argument by complaining that the "disappearance of shared public space also corresponds to a disappearance of surprise"—as if it were not surprising and sharable enough to be confronted with a forced self-view while encountering others.

Against such proclaimed feelings of unsafety in becoming a constant picture, German sociologist Sascha Dickel, who coedited one of the first quickly published, Covid-related edited collections in social science in Germany in 2020, emphasizes the outdatedness of this bemoaned "society of presence" in evenly criticizing the oft-used term *social distancing*:

> [The] term social distancing is misleading. It is the outcome of a society, which is still misperceiving itself as a society of presence—and which interprets presence as co-presence of bodies in a physical space. (Dickel 2020, 80, trans. LKM)[9]

Dickel instead proposes to name the social condition during pandemic lockdowns *distant socializing*—a term that also gets new dimensions in thinking about shielding and screening as digital social categories. In describing closely what happens during video conferences from a spatioaesthetic perspective, in this article, I also aim to overcome those nostalgic separations of analog from digital spaces mentioned above. Focusing instead on the complex intersections of shielding and displaying, hiding and looking, private and public, and close and distant spaces, I want to grasp the tension that operates between the seemingly different spatial arrangements of one's own (felt) physical space and the other's (perceived) transmitted space. It is the Italian philosopher Chiara Cappelletto (2020) who adds in her contribution to the *Critical Inquiry* collection the call for a "new aesthetics of presence." To think about collective copresence as evenly assembling telepresence becomes here a new way to conceptualize societies as disperse but simultaneously connected groups. Via Zoom, spectators are now copresent in two ways at the same time: as spectators and as persons being screened. Presence thus becomes a term to elaborate on how we can relate to each other even digitally. Cappelletto reminds us of the consequences of those "new" sociospatial constellations. For example, she queries why even our home space, which should work as comfy private space and steady orientation, "suddenly becomes the cutoff point where our experience of near and far, neighbor and stranger, collapses."

9 German original: "[Der] Begriff des Social Distancing ist irreführend. Er ist das Produkt einer Gesellschaft, die sich immer noch weitgehend als Anwesenheitsgesellschaft selbstmissversteht—und dabei Anwesenheit als Kopräsenz von Körpern an einem physischen Ort interpretiert."

What Is Visible within the Video Conferencing Picture?

It is thus the spatial arrangement of the screen before us and the display of others that reframes our sociospatial perceptions. If able to switch my camera and mic on, I principally agree to the conditions of *being visible as being captured* within the window of a horizontal (medium) rectangular close-up frontal camera perspective. At the same time, I need to be prepared to display everything behind me, which is technically ensured by my laptop camera's depth of field. In adjusting the space appearing in my tile—in becoming "zoomable" (and Zoom can zoom!) I need to "customize" my *being-with as being-viewed* to the usually laptop-associated integrated webcam.[10] To change the visible part of my picture, I can only tilt my laptop's monitor on a vertical axis, for example, to hide what is in front of me[11] or right above my head. In the meantime, I am mostly forced to accept that anything visible can become witnessed. This implies that what appears in the space depictured behind me can be (or become) even more important than myself—a fact that offers a theoretical rebuttal of image theories emphasizing the importance of objects in the foreground over objects in the background of an image.[12] Also, my Zoom's background reveals much information about the situation and terrain I currently occupy. The social determination and individual side effects (and affects) of such uncalculated backgrounds are self-evident, as can be proven by another widely distributed Zoom fail, in which a girl becomes ashamed for her supposed boyfriend as he stumbles half-naked through the background of her official video meeting, bangs against a glass door while escaping from the frame, and bounces back into it.[13] But Zoom's

10 The evidence that many people used additional hardware to create a different spatial recording setting does not override my argument. Leaving aside the fact that this different setting had been affordable only for better-institutionalized people and became rarer with the increasing prices of external webcams (see, e.g., https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/9/21199521/webcam-shortage-price-raise-logitech-razer-amazon-best-buy-ebay [accessed: October 26, 2022]), I take the fixed view of the integrated camera as standard constellation because most calls (even the ones during train rides and the ones conducted through smartphones, etc.) are held in this fixed setting.

11 For example, I often witnessed mothers tilting the laptops to a higher angle while breastfeeding their babies. I consider this as a political act.

12 This perspective adds a new dimension on speaking about the close-up as an intimacy-inducing and highlighting perspective because it opposes the argument that what is in front of the screen counts for viewers always as most important. See Persson (2003, 130).

13 The video became very popular. See https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11249319/coronavirus-lockdown-man-underpants-conference-call (accessed: October 26, 2022). The auditive signals in Zoom's surroundings are equally important to account for during video conferences. This is quickly explained by another Zoom fail: the story of Scott Connell, chief meteorologist for KSDK St. Louis, who tried to record the actual weather forecast multiple times because each take was disturbed by his distantly barking dog. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v

technical dealing with those unwanted intruders in letting better-equipped laptops insert a so-called virtual (or blurred) background is equally prone to disturbance. First, virtual backgrounds create a nearly planimetric and weird appearance of dislocation of the body. Second, they make the integration of objects other than human bodies impossible because their technology is based on the AI principle of predictive "portrait segmentation"—which had been developed as a one human body–centered tool. The predictive blurring of all potential background objects then leads, for example, to the scenario that even other objects like books in front of the camera (to show them to others) just become rendered invisible.

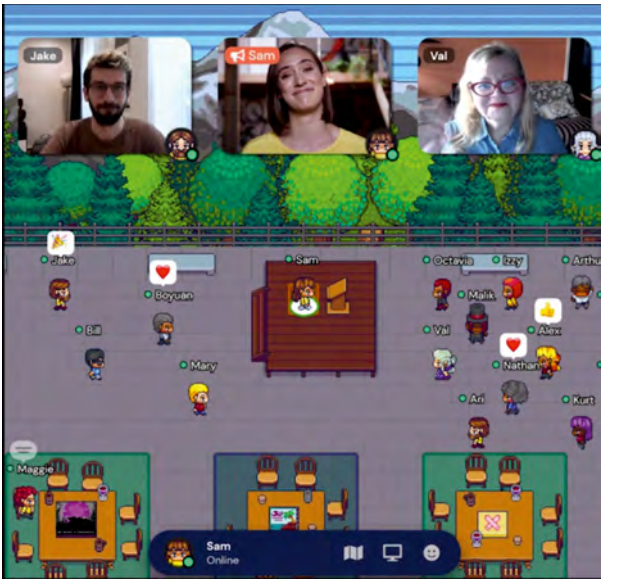
As a reminder of this need to constantly and consciously (re)arrange and design one's spatial visibility to a rectangular window while video conferencing, Zoom comes with a prearranged quasi-*spatial structure*: Zoom meetings are metaphorically named "rooms," their "entrance" is modulated through "waiting areas" (see also Alexander 2020), and "leaving" the main session to small group spaces is called a "breakout." The entire vocabulary of video conferencing thus simulates sociospatial setups, even though those "spaces" are visually constructed only through the multi-split-screen and two-dimensional, side-by-side-arrangement of the tiles (see Hagener 2020). How little social liberty or *agency* those layouts offer can be shown in a brief approach to an alternative video conferencing tool that is considerably less known: Gather.town.

Besides its visual and ludic resemblance to a *Super Mario* world, Gather.town provides pixelated colorful spaces (fig. 3) instead of parallel tiles. Designed in particular for bigger groups of 10 to 50 people, Gather.town seems at a first view to serve a different concept of sociospatiality. Its social interactions are navigated by each participant's creation of an avatar and their walking through the computer game–like world each meeting is bound to. The usual video tiles of other participants, then, only pop up when one approaches other avatars spatially (and vanish when one walks away), mimicking the same adjustment of spatial closeness and distance through the sound layers as talking avatars become louder or softer in relation to their "spatial distance." Thus, Gather.town offers more flexible parameters for sociospatial orientation than Zoom. On the first view, its spatial pre-structures let users play with their locatability during meetings. Thus, it opens up navigable spaces of liberation and domestication.[14]

=Xg9IxTAE8qI. The incident became popular as well—so popular that even Ellen DeGeneres invited the meteorologist and his dog onto her show. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uTv8Aw9WD4 (accessed: October 26, 2022).

14 Discourses on the domestication of the screen become important again in talking about the intersection of home and working spaces in video conferences, as three nearly simultaneously conducted studies during 2020 in Singapur, Rotterdam and Sydney proved. See Lim and Wang (2021); Harteveld (2020); Watson, Lupton, and Michael (2021).

Figure 3: Gather.town advertising picture on the company's website



Source: https://www.gather.town/about (accessed: October 26, 2022).

On a second view, even Gather.town is tied to an interface of video tiles as *fixed frontal views* because what remains is that users still need to sit in front of their computers (and cameras) to operate their avatars and talk to others. The fixed frontal view of the camera is inevitable—even older spatial configurations of video conferences had them, as manuals on video conferences' technical arrangements from the 1980s can tell (fig. 4 and 5).

Also, video conferencing platforms in general already tend to *calculate* with this artificial modeling of a social space: Gather.town aims at a reconstruction of the displayed space in adjusting each user to a twofold ego, as avatar and as frontally viewed camera image. And Zoom has recently figured out a remodification of its spatial arrangement: the new "immersive view" function repositions viewers without a background into a drawn or technically layered environment. How nefarious this supposed freedom to collaborate can be is the topic Naomi Klein called attention to in focusing on the capitalist interests that "tech companies" hide behind these modelling of (infra)structure, calling it the "Screen New Deal":

> Far more hi-tech than anything we have seen during previous disasters, the future that is being rushed into being as the bodies still *pile up* treats our past weeks

> of physical isolation not as a painful necessity to save lives, but as a *living laboratory* for a permanent—and highly profitable—no-touch future. (Klein 2020, emph. LKM)

That those new sociospatial freedoms are primarily accessible by privileged groups of people sharply contrasts with the advertising slogans that Zoom Video Communications—the company behind Zoom as program—uses.

Figures 4 and 5: Even early manuals to analog video conferences depict the inevitability of a fixed frontal view

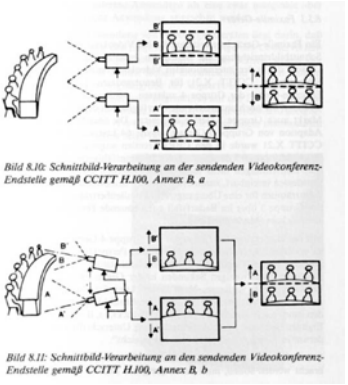


Bild 8.10: Schnittbild-Verarbeitung an der sendenden Videokonferenz-Endstelle gemäß CCITT H.100, Annex B, a

Bild 8.11: Schnittbild-Verarbeitung an den sendenden Videokonferenz-Endstelle gemäß CCITT H.100, Annex B, b

Bild 13.1: Öffentlicher Videokonferenzraum der Deutschen Bundespost in Hannover (Foto: PKI-TEKADE)

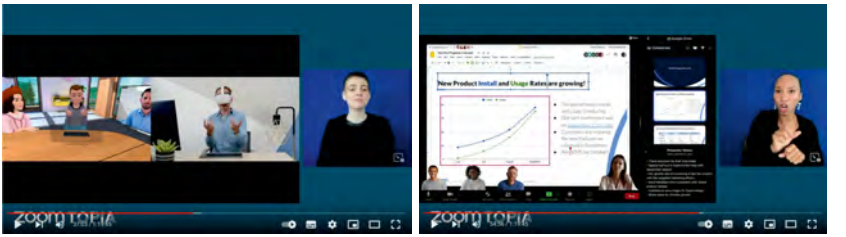
Source: Gerfen (1986, 73, 157).

Fixed Frontal View versus Spatial Liberty

It is necessary to point to those techno-ideologies and capitalist privileges as Zoom Video Communications is currently working on upgrading "our future" into the next level of sociospatial experience. Their big annual Zoomtopia event, a Virtual Zoom User Conference, mainly gives the impression that their users hold democratic agency because the company promise them especially more *spatial* liberty during a Zoom meeting.[15]

15 Zoom's style to give their users the feeling to be their protagonists appears as their main neoliberal selling strategy. On Zoomtopia's website, one finds written the following: "Zoomtopia 2021, the annual celebration of our customers, takes place virtually September 13–14, and we'd love to 'see you' there! This year's theme—The Imaginarium—highlights all the ways you've used Zoom to embrace change, enable hybrid workforces, and continue to grow

Figures 6 and 7: Two animated examples shown during Zoomtopia 2021 for future spaces in Zoom meetings via Oculus and VR



Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2SBVnafMSI (accessed: October 26, 2022).

At their 2021 event, Zoom announced among other things its future cooperation with Oculus, planning to invent VR-Zoom meetings as the standard mode for digital encounters. They presented how those spatial enhancements would liberate users' decisions to move quasi-physically through the meeting space as the new hardware tools would enable them to virtually gesticulate and walk to the front of the virtual room. This is told without mentioning that special hardware requirements would exclude everyone who cannot afford them. And it thwarts Zoom's alleged wish to be "more inclusive," to "have room for everyone here on Zoom," or to "bring more capabilities to you"[16]—to control social collaboration by providing spatial flexibility. But even in their simulation of these future plans, one characteristic of video conferencing remains the same: the fixed view of the frontal camera (figs. 5 and 6).

I call this characteristic a fixed view because the frontal camera perspective can and will probably never be deleted from a video conference setting. Its basic condition is the already mentioned coercion to appear within the picture while operating the laptop. Because people are mostly unable to operate their computer from elsewhere, they become automatically screened as a rectangular, medium-close-up extract of their surrounding reality. Therefore, the fixed view serves as a specific *dispositive of watching while being watched*. In practice, it forces Zoomers to adapt to the Cavellian window magically and abruptly popping up in the middle of private spaces. In theory, this concrete requirement offers potential to also approach very basic film theories like apparatus theory from a new perspective: from both, a production *and* a reception-oriented point of view, as the question of the governance of the screen becomes conditional while coproducing the image.

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your business in the face of immense challenges." See https://zoomtopia.com/zoomtopia-2021-spinifex.

16 These and similar phrases can be heard in the recorded introduction to the 2021 Zoomtopia conference on YouTube. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2SBVnafMSI (accessed: October 26, 2022).

Zoom forces their operators into specific bodily situations,[17] which has social consequences: users are kind of trapped within their computer's camera window. If they want to move around and be seen during the meeting, they need to carry the laptop and at the same time move in a still screenable way. In this manner, users also need to deal with a specific closeness of the camera. To look as good as possible, it suddenly seems to become important to worry about pimples, eye bags, and the smallest (even unintended) facial reaction, none of which would be visible if users could handle their keyboard from farther away. In this situation, switching the camera off, tilting the laptop's screen high up or down, and deciding not to operate the computer while being seen become the only options (even if they are not real options) for circumventing this unscrupulous fixed frontal view.

All these configurations become seriously problematic for new digital framings of visible social spaces, for example, since a 2021 Stanford study has already "proved" that the widely known phenomenon of "Zoom fatigue" can be explained by spatial reasons: by the "excessive amounts of close-up eye contact," by "seeing yourself during video chats constantly in real-time," and because "video chats dramatically reduce our usual mobility" (Bailenson 2021; see further Lovink 2020).

The Frontal View as Picture: Personal Spaces, Social Mise-en-Scène, and the Close-Up

From the perspective of a film scholar, these spatial ambivalences between seeing and being seen, simultaneity and non-simultaneity, and mobility and fixation are well known. That is why in calling attention to previously researched perspectives on enabling and impeding *agency* through camera angles and framings, I want to shed light on some overlooked aspects of the visual *appearance* of this inevitable fixed frontal view. My argument is that the collapsing of personal and private space can, through such a discursive approach, be explained—as it also brings with it, for example, new social conditions for spaces of fear, criminality, violence, protest, or party (see Sayman 2020). Before I proceed to this, it needs to be emphasized that, theoretically, the mediality of video conferencing can also be approached through many more media (and not only film aesthetic) genealogies—for instance, its close connection to such televisual characteristics as liveness and transmission as well as its recordability, which relates Zoom to tape recorders.[18] Still, film studies' visual

17 Anyway, other—and not just digital or filmic—dispositives are meanwhile at work since the most comfortable body position while zooming seems to be "sitting" (which also works here as dispositive), see the submission by Winfried Gerling in this volume.

18 I thank the participants of the author's workshop of this edited collection for pointing to this fact.

concepts, such as composition, shot length, and allocation of depicted spaces, better serve my concern for sociospatiality and a socioaesthetic analysis of the video conferencing image as *a screened image* in the first place. Medialities are anyhow characterized by their general hybridity, which invites us to view them beyond their essentialist ontologies (Creeber 2013, 3).

Strangely enough, such an approach to technical visibilities and their social consequences is relatively new even to film studies, as Adrian Martin has shown in his book chapter on *social mise-en-scène*. In calling attention to the fact that our social world is "already relatively strictly organized, codified, subject to a multitude of rule-sets that govern (or at least regulate) behavior, posture, gesture, level of emotion" (2014, 131), Martin states that we always need to relate questions of technical arrangements to social constructivism.[19] Kyle Stevens (2020) stated in another *Critical Inquiry* essay that the pandemic has led him to view movie scenes containing many closely interacting people now through the lens of his own fears of contagion. Also for Martin, social mise-en-scène "engineers a specific shift in critical/analytical perspective":

> With social mise en scène, rather than going directly or primarily to the unique, idiosyncratic sensibility or world-view of the maker, we attend to the newly grasped raw material of social codes, their constant exposure and deformation in the work of how a film articulates itself. In particular, it allows us to zero in on something specific: known rituals that are recreated, marked, inscribed in the flow of the film. (2014, 134)

Referring further to the felt "awkward arrangement of bodies that are positioned too closely" during the scene in the listening booth in *Before Sunrise* (1995), Martin highlights the "micro gestures" taking place during film experiences, which are directly connected to our felt sociospatial staging while watching someone so close via Zoom. Before Martin, it was mainly Per Persson in his 2003 book on "personal space" who had connected social with aesthetic theories in defining "variable framing" in film by pointing out its ability to also change the profilmic space, and as a powerful device "to create hierarchies" (2003, 101). Even if Persson has described his ideas without any connection to a theory of the "really felt closeness" of the viewers, as Guido Kirsten (2019, 51) has lamented, *or* to video conferencing tools *or* to the question of experiences of digital copresence, he spends much time describing especially the close-up as dense and "isolated" situation of "social communication" (123).

19 Martin states that even if big-name film and art scholars have mentioned this connection of form and sociality—such as Michel Mourlet ("Mise en Scene comme langage," 1987), Umberto Eco ("Articulation of the Cinematic Code," 1967), Pier Paolo Pasolini (2007), and Jean-Louis Comolli (1980)—it has never found its way into the main discourses of film analysis. See Martin (2014, 131–133).

He borrows his social perspective from Edward T. Hall's book *The Hidden Dimension* (1966), which is interested in the nonverbally expressed but culturally framed (and for Hall: clearly racially used) spatial conditions managing intimate communication situations. In describing the film's potential to "simulate personal-space behaviour," he equips the close-up with clear social consequences:

> the cut-in gives guidance and provides time for thinking, enabling spectators to attribute mental states, establish causal relations, and speculate about future events and their relevance to this character. (Persson 2003, 123)

The sociotechnical dimension of the close-up has already been linked to the pandemic by Guilherme da Silva Machado in his contribution to the edited collection *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes toward an Inventory* (2020). There, he writes about the visual proximity of the close-up as a recognition pattern and semantic field of the facial expression, leading to a probable self-voyeuristic experience of "seeing myself at work" (201) during Zoom meetings. But, phenomenologically speaking, the close-up is more than a question of the semantic field: it is an embodied experience.

The Frontal Perspective as Viewing Position and the Politics of Suture

The focus on the *embodiment* inscribed in social mise-en-scènes and close-ups at work during video conferences is neither the main goal of Persson or Martin nor of de Machado. But as Zoomers view close-ups while *experiencing* themselves as a *screened close-up*, questions about the experience of this strange double-framing-POV rise to the forefront. Embodiment can especially be elaborated in relation to film phenomenological positions that had thought about camera's inability to simulate a "perfect" viewer experience with a prevalent use of a subjective camera perspective, such as *Lady in the Lake* (1947) or *Le scaphandre et le papillon* (2007). Several times, this discussion has pointed to the inability of the viewers to relate empathically to those film's protagonists because of the inadequacy between the camera's work and *all* bodily perceptions (see Hanich 2016). Even if this discussion on POV shots seems different from my paper's interest, the elaboration on a "double inability" gives important hints for the (in)congruency between the doubled viewing-as-being-viewed position of the viewer on Zoom. The viewer's position, then, seems to be akin to Matthias Wittmann's (2020) outline of the ghostly standpoint users are bound to in 360-degree and VR settings. Wittmann describes the VR helmet–wearing user as seeing but having nothing unseen behind their back while simultaneously being unable to see themselves when looking down at their body. For Wittmann, the new technically fixed positions urge us to reconsider theoretical questions about the spectator, the imaginary, and the power of filmic spaces (as

diegetic spaces) in relation to what Jean-Pierre Oudart has called *suture*—the subject's way of stitching itself and being stitched into the film's space. His description helps to deal with the volatile and precarious position that *viewers as users* occupy during video conferencing.

I want to follow Wittmann in stating that it is especially the concept of suture that "bridges" this double positioning of a Zoomer's body as seeing and being seen. I consider suture helpful, even if I am, here, not interested in the term's psychoanalytic background at all. I think, I can refer to the tension between different forms of (in)visibility, or off-screen spaces, that co-agitate during video conferencing in only remaining with suture's subject theoretical background. On Zoom, especially the *negotiations* of visible sociospatialities become blatant. In knowing now how socially perceived pictorial spaces are constructed and how fixed as well as connected the subject on Zoom is, we should further consider which forms of communication and social relationality emerge from it.

Hence, I prefer the conception of suture which had been developed by Susanne Lummerding (2005) in her book on agency with its political dimensions of technological visions. Lummerding evaluates Oudart's film-theoretical conceptualization of the relation between on- and off-screen spaces as a genuinely *discursive* term. Drawing now on Chantal Mouffe, Ernest Laclau, and Jacques-Alain Miller, Lummerding understands suture as the relation of a subject to the network of a discourse, letting questions about visibility as well as positionality appear as political *negotiations*. According to Lummerding, suture as theoretical concept always becomes crucial again when new technologies redefine our perception and experience. Thus, its politicalness is marked by its possibility to negotiate meaning, *through* new configurations of present and absent spaces, along the media's promise to capture reality (161). This understanding of suture as a process negotiating the political calls into question how strong tools of fixation and variability, visibility and invisibility, participate in framing us as socially located subjects.

In this perspective, in the last section of my article, I want to go back to the Zoom pranks and fails I described in the beginning as empowering examples of a (self-reflexive) negotiation of video conferencing's fixed framings. I therefore stick to Sascha Dickel again who points to the genuine advantages that virtual conferences bring, such as the maintenance of political "zones of informality" in all those parts of the picture that remain invisible (Dickel 2020, 83). The consideration of those "zones of informality" is inspiring for turning my thoughts about the aesthetics of the fixed view and the spectator as user to a more political reading of video conferencing infrastructures—a political reading that is based on all the presets I have discussed until now.

Politics of (In)Visibility as Zones of Informality

Also according to Katharina Block and Michael Ernst-Heidenreich (2020), the corona crisis is characterized particularly by the corresponding *in*visibility, *non*availability, and *in*accessibility of social spaces and the world as a whole. In this respect, it can be assumed that knowledge practices need to be reconfigured through new relata of the spatial in sociodigital environments. Thinking about suture in video conference dispositives, therefore, can mean to consider empowering zones of informality.

And maybe this is exactly what happens discoursively in my two starting examples, in Grubbs's idea and Reeve's fail. Both violated or declined some spatial "rules" of video conferencing programs: Reeve applied clothing etiquette only to his visible frame—and nowhere else. With this, he made it thinkable for others to also keep up zones of informality that they as private persons would "deserve" even during publicly screened private zones. The comments he got prove how welcoming and liberating his presumed faux pas had become. Samuel Grubbs's group took hierarchically focused attention away from the teacher, the break of the frame here seemed to create a feeling of collectivity lacking students in pandemic times. Important is that both cases became popular examples of "playing around" with new and old spatial structures. In their behavior, both Grubbs and Reeve not only emancipated themselves from the space provided by the screen and digital tool but also collected many encouraging and sympathizing reactions from others—as if they fulfilled wishes people enjoyed testing out while public spaces were locked down and amid a lack of face-to-face contact. Technically put, they seem to have done their fail and prank only because *they were (sociospatially) able to*.

In an environment of the private as a merely public space, Grubbs's and Reeve's derailment have gained back the twofold function Cavell assigned the screen: its abilities to connect people and to shield them indeed from each other by maintaining undefined/invisible areas of contingency and uncertainty. Both ways of dealing with the fixed view of video conferencing formats means acquiring agency as well as literally turning around the original concept of suture as imaginary placeholder of the subconscious. Rather, Grubbs's class and Reeve face the tightness of Zoom's tile arrangement with a very visible habitus of ambiguity, taking responsibility for the single and connected new *shared* spatiality they insert in "official" video conference meeting—even though, in Will's case, the incident was not caused on purpose. It is right there between visibility and invisibility, on-screen and off-screen, private and public space that this formerly *fixed agency* is negotiated again. Or finally, as Chiara Cappelletto (2020) puts it,

> We need to queer the dominant narrative and finally abandon the regime of "natural iconicity," with its divide between presence and absence, which has unfortu-

> nately withstood decades of academic studies; we need to think about how embodied and gendered minds perform freely in spaces where the affective values of near and far have taken on enormous political relevance.

To start approaching questions of "near and far," of closeness and distance, and of "right" and "wrong" in digital public spaces, it is worth reflecting on destabilized categories and framings of the (in)visible and on sociospatiality in video conferencing in general. At the same time, we should keep in mind Naomi Klein's abovementioned impulse to be conscious that staying home is as much of a privilege as appearing in a Zoom tile. Because everyone who does not possess (anymore) the soft and hard skills that digital environments require or whose jobs bind them to reality and to an enhanced risk of getting sick from Covid is excluded from doing so. So, also: negotiating sociospatiality is a privilege. But in facing the fact that media environments will definitely not leave us alone in the future, complaining about their inability to replace analog worlds and their withdrawal from face-to-face spaces seems anachronistic and pointless. Instead, this article has proposed some theoretical linkages to aesthetic concepts that connect technological and aesthetic forms to their discursive role of communication and society. Thinking about the negotiations of those new sociospatialities can offer a starting point also for looking beyond our familiar onto- and epistemological categories.

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