

Techniques of the face – on video conferencing art and politics

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Abstract

This paper analyses three ‘Zoom’ performances that were included in the 2021 online conference of the Electronic Literature Organization: *Perfect Movement Engineering for Better Everyday Zooming* (Katie Schaag and Andrew Salyer), *Corporate Poetry, Room#3* (Alexandra Saum-Pascual), and *The Tenders* (Judd, Morrisey, Mark Jeffrey, and Abraham Avnisan). Drawing on Marcel Mauss’ article “Techniques of the Body”, it argues that the three works articulate how the video conferencing face operates as a technical object. The technical management of the video conferencing face has become a familiar phenomenon to many during the pandemic (the attentive face (much too close), the face we pin, the face of a colleague glaring at the screen, the face we decorate with filters, and so on.), and the performances remind us of how the face, in all this, has become a site for struggles over power and control: the subtle changes in our facial gestures, in our facial performances, and in the filters that we apply reflect a much larger politics of the face.

Introduction

On March 29, 2020, the media theorist Shannon Mattern asked on Twitter: “Might anyone know of artists whose medium is Skype, Zoom, or some other videoconferencing platform?” Prior to the Covid pandemic a call like this would probably mostly have resurrected memories of teleconference and satellite art, such as the famous “Hole in Space” from 1980 by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, and indeed the ‘live video feed’ is by no means a strange medium to artists. But the pandemic, forcing artists online, also marks a shift within the performing arts. Musicians, actors, performers, and others, were inclined to re-think the live performance. Although the artistic endeavor of working on a video conferencing platform might be to explore ways of using video conferencing as a medium for artistic performance, it is evidently also clear from many of the responses that the platform somehow does the same thing to our conferences, meetings, teaching, and also artistic practices as slide shows have previously done to our presentations: they install some kind of bureaucracy. Faces are presented in tiles, only one can speak at the time, the network means that sound is delivered with a slight delay (which poses certain challenges when playing music or singing together), and so on. In return, the users have developed new cultural practices of performing in front of the camera, turning sound on and off, using the chat function to express concordance (“+1”), and so on.

This kind of ‘technicity’, as Gilbert Simondon once framed it (Simondon), was also the subject of three works at the 2021 online conference of the Electronic Literature Organization; namely, *Perfect Movement Engineering for Better Everyday Zooming* (Katie Schaag and Andrew Salyer), *Corporate Poetry, Room#3* (Alexandra Saum-Pascual), and *The Tenders* (Judd, Morrisey, Mark Jeffrey, and Abraham Avnisan) (although none of them were eventually part of Mattern’s list). With an outset in the three works, this article argues that the video conferencing platform imposes a particular view of the body, and more specifically the face, as a technical object. There is a certain type of corporeal and facial management taking place in the video conferencing platform: The face we must learn to read and manage on camera, the face that we ‘pin’, the face that lurk at us and our homes, the face that can be detected by the software and decorated with filters, the face of colleagues that are there at our table top, and so on. The management of the video conferencing face has, in other words, become a familiar phenomenon, and the works, in each their way, remind us of how the face, in all this, has become a site for struggles over power and control: the subtle changes in our facial gestures, in our facial performances, and in the filters that we apply reflect a much larger politics of the face. This will be the subject of this article; and how the three performances reflect different aspects of the techniques of the face – from our facial gestures, to the interface and its internal networks.

The techniques of the face: *Perfect Movement Engineering for Better Everyday Zooming*

To frame a non-psychological and technical understanding of the video conferencing face, I begin at the final day of ELO2021 where the performance artist duo SALYER + SCHAAG posed as Kristin S. Wiley and Alfred S. Fox, CCOs ('Chief Corporeal Officials') of 'Good Movement, Inc.' present their latest invention *Perfect Movement Engineering for Better Everyday Zooming*; in short, a live instruction tailored to help the conference participants optimize their bodily behavior in front of the camera. The performance builds on a former piece, *Perfect Movement Engineering for Better Everyday Living* from 2014 in which they suggest a systematic analysis of the participants' gestures in order to "determine those cases where assistance to the user on performing the gesture us appropriate." (Fox and Wiley) In the original performance this could, for instance, be holding a glass at an artist opening, but the context of the video conferencing platform brings particular attention to the face. For instance, they invite the performance' audience to practice "the attentive nod", which they break down into specific facial mechanic features: the correct movement and tempo of the head ("continuously, and even", "not too much", "not too fast"), the position of the eyebrows ("not too much, you don't want to seem surprised"), the leaning forward towards the camera (again, "not too much"), etc. All of which convey subtle differences (and failures) of the nod. As Kristin S. Wiley reminds the audience, "be careful to manage the micromovements of the face, your eyebrows and your cheekbones. People will notice what is happening across your entire face". (SALYER+SCHAAG [28:00-])



Kristin S. Wiley and Alfred S. Fox performing variations of 'the attentive nod'. Screen shot from *Movement Engineering for Better Everyday Zooming*.

The 'attentive nod', along with other micro movements of the face, practiced in the performance, belong to what the French sociologist Marcel Mauss has labelled 'techniques of the body'. Mauss notes how different cultures, genders and generations 'move' in different ways. As an example, he explains how Maori women (quoting the ethnographer Elsdon Best) acquire a "loose-jointed swinging of the hips that looks ungainly to us, but was admired by the Maori. Mothers drilled their daughters in this accomplishment, termed onioni [...]" (73) In Mauss' thinking lies the assumption that the technical cannot be entirely separated from the human bodily. In fact, "The body is man's first and most natural instrument. Or more accurately, not to speak of instruments, man's first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means, is his body." (75)

The facial habitus: *Corporate Poetry #3*

The micromovements of the face are techniques that can be acquired, as Wiley and Fox demonstrate. To Mauss, this lays the ground for considering them as ‘habits’. As he explains, this is not merely a question of ‘habitude’ in French (a “mysterious memory” of the body), rather it is a question of ‘habitus’ in a Latin sense: In the habits “we [...] see the techniques and work of [...] practical reason rather than [...] the soul and its repetitive faculties.” (73) In other words, they express a mode of being, and of reasoning and acting in the world. One could also say that they are not just personal habits, but that we are ‘inhabited’ by them, and that they point to a culturally specific logic of sensemaking that also defines us, as human beings. As also Wendy Chun has argued, media seem to matter the most not when they are new, but when they structure our lives. (Chun) Or, as Slavoj Žižek phrases it: “Belonging to a society involves a paradoxical point at which each of us is ordered to embrace freely, as the result of our choice, what is anyway imposed on us.” (Žižek 676) Habits are ideology and politics in action, embraced and yet also enforced.

Historically, media technologies play a significant role in putting ideology into action; and in the development of an appropriate ‘habitus’. This is only sporadically touched upon by Mauss, who notes that “American walking fashions had begun to arrive over here [in France], thanks to the cinema.” (71) However, media technology (such as cinema) not only presents a mirror in which one can develop a bodily habitus, the bodily habitus itself mirror a larger system of industrial production. In an elaboration of techniques of swimming, he notes: “In my day swimmers thought of themselves as a kind of steam-boat. It was stupid, but in fact I still do this: I cannot get rid of my technique.” (71) One can easily envision Mauss’ arms striding the waters, and in this sense his bodily habitus reflects a more general conception of the body as an industrial machine mastering the elements by pure mechanical force. In contrast, he explains, swimming has turned into a question of adapting to a milieu, where children, for instance, are taught to control their ocular reflexes as a way to adapt to the water. (71) This new swimming technique is perfected in aqua musicals, ballets, and synchronized swimming, a term coined the same year as Mauss’ text, 1934. (Sydnor 255) As ‘mass ornaments’ they function as aesthetic reflections of capitalism’s production processes and a new organization of the masses – everyone performing the same synchronized movements at the assembly line, and unable to see the larger picture of the mass, unless staged aesthetically, as outlined by Siegfried Kracauer, also in 1934. (Kracauer)¹

The grid view of the video conferencing faces can in some sense be compared to a mass ornament – an aesthetic ‘show’ of the habits of platformed production (all of us, nodding attentively; or more commonly, glaring into the screen).² However, what is characteristic (yet difficult to see) is that platform production feed on the statistical prediction of shared habits – what a group of people under certain conditions are likely to do. In other words, there is a strange and paradoxical relationship between the corporeal habits (such as, the movements of the face) being inhabited by corporate platforms (such as, video conferencing): whilst inhabiting our lives, platforms feed on reading our bodies as technical objects and predicting our habits. This strange relationship between the corporate and the corporeal is also the center of attention in Alexandra Saum-Pascual’s *Corporate Poetry*. (Saum-Pascual "Corporate Poetry")

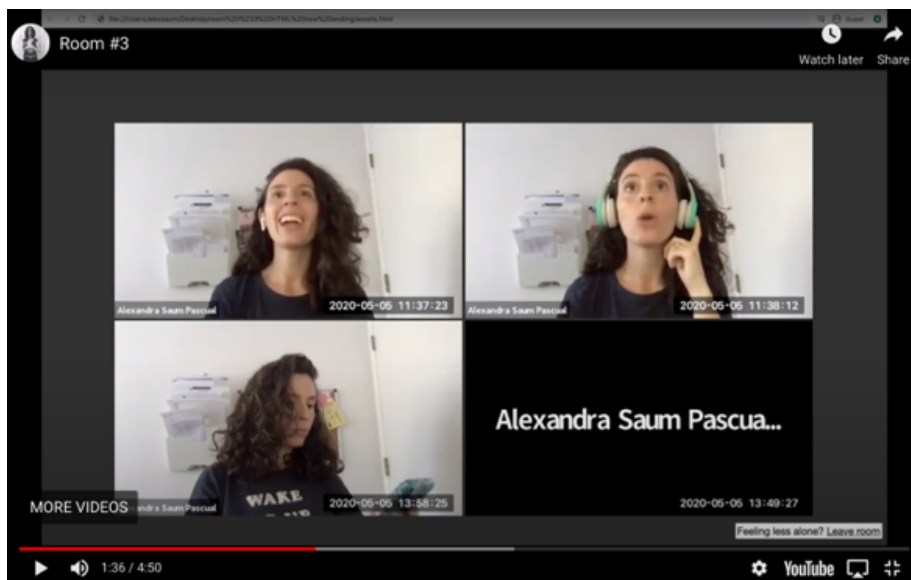
The work consists of a number of ‘rooms’ that repurposes corporate software such as Google Forms, Survey Monkey, and also Zoom “in order to domesticate the neoliberal intent of these data gathering technologies,” which are “unintentionally brought into our homes

¹ As history has taught us, Nazi-Germany took advantage of such shows to put their ideology into action and nurture a shared Arian ‘habitus’.

² In this sense, there is a certain irony in the (revolutionary) face of user empowerment being stationary and motionless (glaring into a screen), and only distinguishable in its micro mechanics (the movements of the eyes and subtle muscular contractions that are almost invisible to human perception).

whenever we participate in an online survey or take a video conferencing call.” (Saum-Pascual "Rooms #1 and #2") In other words, she draws attention to how corporate software ‘inhabits’ the intimate and corporeal in certain utilitarian ways (e.g., reading it as data). As a response, Saum-Pascual reverses the relation between body and software by letting the corporeal inhabit the software, pointing to how we can inhabit software differently.

In “Room #3”, created in 2020 during the Covid pandemic, she turns to how Zoom instigates a juxtaposition of the corporate (formal software infrastructures) and the corporeal (intimate space of the ‘room’). The work is an offline website where “webness is stripped from the global network to be rooted, deeply, at home.” (Saum-Pascual "The Offline Website Project") To actually witness the work means that one has to visit Saum-Pascual (in itself a paradox, as the pandemic prevents most people from doing this). The offline website presents a series of recordings from Zoom where Saum-Pascual appears in different versions of herself. In the first window she enacts the technique of forgetting to turn on the sound; in the second, the technique of asking the host of the meeting to unmute herself; in the third, the technique of notifying the other that her camera is off; and in the fourth as the one appearing only by name, forgetting to turn on the camera. The final gallery-view then runs continuously in a loop.



Corporate Poetry, Room#3 by Alexandra Saum-Pascual.

The Zoom interface can thus be seen as emblematic for a contemporary condition built on the technical capture of the user by the camera and microphone (and also in other ways, as exemplified in the other *rooms*). The four techniques are mirrors of how users act in front of a camera (smiling, gestures of ‘no sound’ (pointing towards the headphones), surprised eyes, etc.), but they also expose the techniques of the software, vis-à-vis how the software surfaces, inhabits and *becomes* us – how the corporate body is embraced by and yet also imposed on the user’s bodily habitus.

Contrary to conventional assumptions this means that the face is not simply a mirror of the soul or one’s inner identity, feelings or emotions. Rather, it is a mirror of a shared habitus, and a site of subjectivation. Without entering deeply into philosophical elaborations, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari also argue for an understanding of the face as ‘facility’: “The face is a surface: facial traits, lines, wrinkles; long face, square face, triangular face; the face is a map, even when it is applied to and wraps a volume.” (Deleuze and Guattari 170) But at the same time, it is not without signification. As Michael Hardt notes in his reading of

their text: “The face is [...] a field or a milieu on which signification or subjectification can take place [...] It is constructed so as to make certain meanings and subjectivities appear.” (Hardt) The face as a ‘milieu’ or ‘sur-face’, resulting from a process of subjectivation is exactly what Saum-Pascual tries to flee from by her parodic performance. And, if a face, like this, corresponds to a corporate neoliberal ideology that becomes us, then, as Michael Hardt also notes, “Dismantling our faces will be to a large extent dismantling ourselves. We have no choice but to start out from our faces on our lines of flight.” (Hardt) Or, as put by Deleuze and Guattari, “If the face is a politics, dismantling the face is also a politics involving real becomings. [...] know your faces; it is the only way you will be able to dismantle them and draw your lines of flight.” (188)

The queer user: *The Tenders*

The subjectivation that takes place in video conferencing interface follows an ideological trace that dates further back in the history of the graphical user interface. The graphical user interface originates in a design ideology of user empowerment, marketed as revolutionizing life in all its aspects. For instance, the marketing video for the first Macintosh computer and graphical operating system in 1984 (directed by Ridley Scott) shows an Orwellian society where ‘Big Brother’ speaks through a screen to a community of users (or slaves of the machine), and ends with a young athlete smashing her sledgehammer through the screen. With voiceover and text, the advertisement reads: “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like ‘1984’”. (Scott) As noted by hypertext and literary scholar Gregory Ulmer, this vision compares to former cultural industries (such as Hollywood cinema) in that it expresses “the twin peaks ‘of American idealism’ – realism or media transparency and individualism, now built into the computer as an apparatus of production. (Ulmer)

The ideology that frames the user is also the attention of Judd, Morrissey, Mark Jeffrey, and Abraham Avnisan’s performance *The Tenders*; a series of theatrical performances in Zoom, following the Covid 19 lockdown in 2020. As announced by the artists: “*The Tenders* [...] is a series of in-person and zoom-native mixed reality performances that engage with the cover song as a means of exploring the ways in which personal and political histories are written, re-written, and written over.”(Avnisan et al.) In the performance they recite:

*I was sitting on my bedside,
just as lonesome as can be,
and I said to my grandmother:
“Give me something to make me strong”
And it may seem unbelievable,
but my father replied:
“Make you an outfit”*

Presumably, this is a cover of the so-called ‘Original Rhinestone Cowboy’, Loy Bowlin from the small town of McComb in Mississippi, who built a career on ‘covering’ Glenn Campbell’s 1975 hit song *Rhinestone Cowboy*. Bowlin, in a response to feelings of isolation, began decorating everything in his life with rhinestones, glitter, and ornamented paintings to become “The World’s Most Famous Entertainer,” as he proclaimed himself. (Jameson 80) In fact, his house, the decorated interior and his belongings (including a number of ornamented suits and also his bejeweled dentures), are now exhibited at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Wisconsin, and also function as a key scenography in the performance. Bowlin was also famous for his off-key singing, and commissioned a series of theme songs set to popular

country styles. (81) One may speculate if *The Tenders* presents a cover version of one of these songs.

As the lonesome cowboy, The Original Rhinestone Cowboy represents a version of American idealism where individualism is coupled with ornamented fairy tale of dreams, rather than realism and transparency. As such, he represents an alternative history of the lonesome cowboy, and also of the 'ideal user'; an ornamented, opaque and also queer version of 'cowboy individualism'. One might say that, faced with the isolation of a lockdown, he becomes emblematic for a queered ideal of a user in the Zoom performance.

Faciality filters: *The Tenders*

An important part of the ideology that frames the user is also the software's technical gaze on the body and the face of the user; more specifically, this is addressed in *The Tenders* widespread use of filters.

Image filtering, as explained by Théo Lepage-Richer in an elaborate analysis of Snapchat, is related to a distribution of the visible, which "appears to be directly linked to how both users and advertisers conceive vision as a service provided by Snapchat, thus linking the infrastructure of vision on which the app relies to the changing needs and expectations of those contributing to, and benefiting from, the app economy." (Lepage-Richer) Image filtering in Snapchat generally express two competing perspectives on the face. One group of filters incline users to express emotions of sadness, joy, etc. to trigger a particular filter ("e.g., joy to provoke a rain of Kraft macaroni and cheese"). In these cases, the face is treated as a, "malleable surface upon which expressivity can be projected." Another group of filters add facial features (eyebrows, lips, etc.) in order to match a particular intention. Here, the face is treated as a "source of expressivity" in real-time. (Lepage-Richer) In either case, the face is treated technically, as a milieu on which signification can be projected; here, presented as two related versions visibility. As part of its "Studio Effects", Zoom also offers the possibility of adding facial features, but it offers a different type of facial filtering; a third account of visibility which does not so much deal with the facial milieu as a source of expressivity, as with the surface color of the face (with implicit ideological and racial underpinnings).

Probably the most used filter in Zoom is its 'Virtual Background' which singles out the face in order to replace or alter the background. The 'Virtual Background', and more specifically its 'green screen' option, is widely applied in *The Tenders*. For instance, in one scene, The Original Rhinestone Cowboy covers his face in gold paint (which might be seen as a reference to Bruce Nauman's famous *Art-Make-Up* from 1968, and Peter Campus' *Three Transitions* from 1973). He also wears a green jump suit which allows for a layering of images; meaning that the suit is not detected as part of his body, but as part of a background canvas on which another image can be displayed, resulting in his golden face floating inside Bowlin's ornamented house.



The Tenders by Judd, Morrisey, Mark Jeffrey and Abraham Avnisan, using Zoom's 'virtual background' (chroma key compositing), a technique to overlay images.

This technique is also known as 'Chroma key compositing', generally used to layer two images or video streams. A color range in one layer is filtered out and made transparent revealing another image behind. The technique has been used since the early days of cinema, where the filtering of the background of the human figure, was part of a post-production process and done by hand, relying on human perception. (Ramey 70) Human perception cannot be measured as such, but never the less be described in psychometric scales, such as color scales. The complex methods of defining and quantifying the attributions of 'colorfulness' (defined within a 'chroma range') allowed for automatizing the process, singling out that which does not have skin color, and also performing it in real time.

Usually, blue and green have been used, largely because red and yellow can be confused with Caucasian white skin tones. As a result, black and dark-skinned people often experience that their face disappears when using Zoom's virtual background function. Although virtual background filters are using AI-based neural networks allegedly making them less biased, the technique remains another example of how certain forms of privileges are built into and naturalized through technology: one cannot exclude the general history within the history of film and cameras, where both Kodak and Polaroid have used white models for calibrating skin tones; more specifically the so-called 'Shirley card', featuring a young Caucasian woman as an ideal standard to balance the colors of the image. (Roth 112)³ "Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face," as Deleuze and Guattari also phrase it. (178)

To put it in other terms, *The Tenders'* floating golden face points to how subjectivation takes place in the infrastructures of visibility, via a technical process of image rendering. Video conferencing users have their habits of making themselves visible to the software, for instance, making sure the lighting is appropriate for making the image rendering or the facial filters work; but technology itself is also inhabited by politics, and in this case racist ideology. This is further underlined by the performance's second scenography. Besides Bowlin's ornamented house, we see 3D scans of Fort Dearborn, an American garrison from the early 19th century, now an archeological site under the city of Chicago. This draws attention to how American idealism (of 'cowboy' individualism and realism), and hence also the ideal user of the graphical user interface (including Zoom's), is built on the destruction of

³ On the algorithmic perception of color, see also Pereira, Gabriel et al. "Algorithmic Sea: The Fluid Critical Making and Seeing of Color." *The Digital Review*, no. 1, 2021, doi:<https://doi.org/10.7273/z7pt-h352>.

American indigenous lives and culture. In this sense, *The Tenders* also “seeks to invert and queer colonial narratives lodged deep within the American imaginary.” (Avnisan et al.)

Conclusion

To conclude, the subtle changes in our facial gestures, in our facial performances, and in the filters that we apply are all ‘techniques of the face’, and as such also reflect a much larger politics of the face. Video conferencing is an interface design not only *for* use, but also *of* its users. In this sense, it installs certain techniques and habits of the face; it ‘inhabits’ us. The three performances seek to demonstrate, but also dismantle this (and the face). *Perfect Movement Engineering for Better Everyday Zooming* draws attention to how the video conferencing face is installed as a technical object and instrument whose mastery reflects both a shared belonging and a prestige in social setting; *Corporate Poetry, Room #3* to how the face and the body is ‘inhabited’ by corporate software and ideology, i.e., how the corporate video conferencing ideology is embraced by the user, and yet also imposed on the user’s bodily habitus; and, *The Tenders*, to how video conferencing, as a site of subjectivation, reflects a particular American ideology of realism and individualism with a colonial past: to render something visible, is always a space of power and control.

In this sense, in an aesthetic and cultural analysis of a video conferencing performance, one might be tempted to merely consider the visibility of the platform, and how the face operates in a space of signification – and forget the face as a technical object. However, what the performances draw attention to, is that visibility (as a social fact) is not opposed to vision (as a physical operation), just as the video conferencing face that we see and interpretate is not opposed to the face as a technical object. From the micromovements of the face to the filters that quantify human perception, the techniques of video conferencing reconfigure visibility and the faces we see (‘us’, the users). In this, the performances also present lines of flight; alternative visions of the body and the face of the user. To return to *The Tenders*, when (as lonesome as one can be in a pandemic) the colorfulness of the video conferencing face is a technique that also enables queer fantasies of alternatives, of ‘making outfits’ and promises of other strengths.

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