

KEEPING DISTANCE

NOTES ON VIDEO-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION DURING
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly changed communication practices, as physical proximity has been curtailed in order to deal with a global pandemic. For many, video-mediated communication has replaced face-to-face meetings, as work, education and leisure activities have been moved online. While video-mediated communication has a longer history, we are witnessing an unprecedented scale and scope of video-mediated interactions. These affect established ecologies of social interaction, and participants need to learn and negotiate novel stocks of knowledge for appropriate ways of being together. While in public discussions many lament the lack of face-to-face interactions with those dear to us, it is argued that video-mediated communication tends to socially sort our interactions towards those we already know, or towards those who are introduced to us via trusted intermediaries: it is much less amenable to the unexpected, and hence to the valuing of diversity in our social encounters.

KEYWORDS

Screens; Social Sorting; Proxemics; Social Interaction.

On 9 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced: “Chinese authorities have made a preliminary determination of a novel (or new) coronavirus, identified in a hospitalized person with pneumonia in Wuhan.” They went on to note that “people with symptoms of pneumonia and reported travel history to Wuhan have been identified at international airports. WHO does not recommend any specific measures for travellers.”¹

Nineteen months later, the WHO reports on their coronavirus dashboard 200,174,883 confirmed cases of Covid-19 infections, which include 4,255,892 reported deaths.² Over this period, only some Pacific island states, such as Tuvalu, Tonga, Palau and Nauru, alongside the politically isolated Turkmenistan and North Korea, have not reported any infections to the WHO. While the USA, India and Brazil have had to endure most cases, this is very much a global pandemic, which has affected, and continues to affect how we should live together.

Once the pandemic had begun taking hold and the severity of the disease became clear, both health officials and politicians spoke in strong terms of a need to maintain physical distance. A wide range of states, cities and other communities around the globe called for curfews and imposed lockdown, urging or requiring citizens to stay at home, while suspending the operation of restaurants, many shops and other venues considered to be non-essential. Physical contact between humans was considered a particular threat, especially amid growing awareness that asymptomatic individuals can carry the virus and infect others, without knowledge of having done so. Every individual became cause for suspicion, and the prescribed treatment for this condition was to mandate body surveillance: the extraction of information directly from the body, with less interest in a person’s own claims.³

The coupling of a call to keep one’s distance with the testing of specimens from the nose or mouth, with evidence of SARS-CoV-2 infection often prompting efforts to trace the individual’s social contacts, became a cornerstone of anti-Covid-19 strategies globally. While the digitalisation of work and the everyday had long been underway, the curfews and lockdowns changed social interactions dramatically. Companies and public-sector entities representing numerous domains of human life arranged for remote work, education systems became replete with tele-meetings, and physical social contact with others was reduced to a bare minimum. In the resulting

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World Health Organization, WHO Statement Regarding Cluster of Pneumonia Cases in Wuhan, China, <https://www.who.int/china/news/detail/09-01-2020-who-statement-regarding-cluster-of-pneumonia-cases-in-wuhan-china> (06.08.2021).

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World Health Organization, WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard, <https://covid19.who.int> (06.08.2021).

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David Lyon, *Under My Skin. From Identification Papers to Body Surveillance*, in: Jane Caplan and John Christopher Torpey (eds.), *Documenting Individual Identity. The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*, Princeton, NJ 2001, 291–310, here 291.

landscape, socioeconomic disparities in dealing with risk became evident, as those maintaining elements of fundamental infrastructure, such as health workers or people in the food-supply chain, could not choose social isolation. They had to continue meeting others' needs within their social proximity, thereby risking infection. Meanwhile, focusing on the rest of the population, news media chronicled the creative and witty ways in which individuals sought to overcome the isolation stemming from the need to keep their distance: joining in song from adjacent balconies at particular times, posting messages on windows, or meeting at such locations as a border crossing from a distance.

For visual studies, the change in prevailing modes of social interaction is of particular interest, as a variety of digitally networked screens allowed many people to heed the calls to keep a distance while still acting with each other, now using visual media to do so. Though remote meetings, video telephony and various graphical user interfaces aiding human-to-human interaction have a much longer history, the pandemic has witnessed unprecedented growth in their use. This is exemplified by a university colleague in Belgium who shared the statistics for his work-related use of the videoconference platform Zoom in spring 2021: he had spent 500 hours on that single platform, with the figure not including associated e-mail or time spent reading, writing or on the telephone. Meetings that otherwise would have been held mainly face to face were now conducted online.

The discussion below focuses on the role of maintaining distance in social interaction, arguing that, while the need for distance is publicly lamented, social proximity poses difficulties for people – and not only amid a pandemic. I suggest that it is useful to reflect on the use of media for negotiating access to others, and will do so by discussing the screen in video-mediated communication, as it is widely used for coping with the demands for keeping one's distance. More problematically, it is also a means of socially sorting those one encounters on a day-to-day basis, limiting the kinds of people one actually engages with in social interaction. If we truly value diversity as integral to our daily life, both within academia and beyond, we must consider means of facilitating it, not only, but also at a distance. For the field of visual studies, this approach implies a focus on the actual practices within which images and visual media become part of the everyday.⁴

I. Social Proximity as an Ideal Model

Theories of social interaction tend to accord greater value to face-to-face interactions than to technically mediated interactions. For authors from Émile Durkheim to Alfred Schutz and Erving Goff-

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For a description of such an approach, see Asko Lehmuskallio and Edgar Gómez Cruz, 'Why Material Visual Practices?', in: Asko Lehmuskallio and Edgar Gómez Cruz (eds.), *Digital Photography and Everyday Life*, London/New York 2016, 1–16.

man, face-to-face engagements are vital for understanding sociality.⁵ More recent theories aiming to systematise differences and similarities between face-to-face and mediated communication settings, developed particularly in organisation research, value specifically face-to-face interactions. For example, media richness theory places communicative media on a spectrum from “rich” to “lean” in line with the quantity of emotional, attitudinal and normative cues present. Its proponents take face-to-face interaction as the benchmark for rich communication because of the simultaneity of the cues present in interaction, and their sheer number. Other theories, such as media synchronicity theory, suggest that mediated communication may be at times more efficient, since participants can communicate simultaneously in chat discussions, more easily hearing or reading about the opinions of several more participants. Furthermore, social dynamic media theories suggest that the tendency for mediated interactions to feel less rich may be partially due to our lack of experience with them.⁶ While human and ecological evolution have prepared us for face-to-face interactions, equipping us with a vast range of cues that we are able to display and recognise in situations of social proximity, mediated interaction in near-real time is a more recent development. The social theorist Jonathan Turner speaks for many when writing:

Despite modern technologies that mediate communication among individuals, face-to-face interaction is still primal and primary [...]. Even when visual media, such as videoconferencing, provide us a picture of others, these images are often too crude for fine-grained reading of emotions; we can see the person, but our visual senses still cannot detect all the information that we naturally perceive when interacting in real face-to-face situations.⁷

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Durkheim discusses particularly the role of effervescence for sociality, Schutz the emergence of intersubjectivity, and Goffman the self as a nexus in face-to-face encounters. See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Oxford/New York 2001; Alfred Schutz, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt. Eine Einleitung in die Verstehende Soziologie*, Wien 1932; and Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Garden City, NY 1959.

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For examples of the above approaches in organisational and management research, see Richard Daft and Robert Lengel, Information Richness. A New Approach to Managerial Behavior and Organization Design, in: *Research in Organizational Behavior* 6, 1984, 191–233; Alan Dennis and Joseph Valacich, Rethinking Media Richness. Towards a Theory of Media Synchronicity, in: *Proceeds of the 32nd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 1999; Darleen DeRosa, Donald Hantula, Ned Kock and John D’Arcy, Trust and Leadership in Virtual Teamwork. A Media Naturalness Perspective, in: *Human Resource Management* 43, 2004, 219–232; Mitzi Montoya, Anne Massey, Yu-Ting Hung and Brad Crisp, Can You Hear Me Now? Communication in Virtual Product Development Teams, in: *The Journal of Product Innovation Management* 26, 2009, 139–155. For a pre-pandemic overview, stating that ICTs have not had the predicted effect on remote work and travel, see also Mohja Rhoads, Face-to-Face and Computer-Mediated Communication. What Does Theory Tell Us and What Have We Learned so Far?, in: *Journal of Planning Literature* 25, 2010, 111–122.

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Jonathan Turner, *Face to Face. Toward a Sociological Theory of Interpersonal Behavior*, Stanford, CA 2002, 1.

Here, social proximity, with co-located human beings having sensory awareness of each other, is a prerequisite for understanding human sociality.

In light of this focus on the importance of face-to-face interactions, it is perhaps surprising that negotiating social proximity is notoriously difficult, not just in times of a pandemic. Who deserves enough trust to be allowed close to our bodies, let alone to hold us tight, for an extended time? To feel and smell, to caress it? Whom should we allow to see us without our clothes on, in moments of strength but also when we are weak, fragile, sick or close to death?

As human beings, we have built ways of negotiating social distance by spatiotemporal means – for example, by grouping people at a social level into those who may enter particular buildings, corridors or rooms; those who may enter only at specific times; and those to be denied entrance, if they even know that the place exists at all. Entrance to these settings tends to be guarded – if not by humans, then by a wide array of doors: hinged or sliding ones, imposing gates or even just structures suspended from the ceiling, at times secured by locks, bars or other mechanisms.

Empirical research suggests that, although there is a wealth of cultural variation, we hold only a few people very close to us, and even they do not necessarily have access to all the places we do. Adults tend to have one to two significant others, such as a partner and a dear friend, with a somewhat larger cluster, of around five people, kept at a close distance. The latter may include one's children, parents, siblings, friends or other kinds of relations.

Robin Dunbar, who, proceeding from historical and present-day research, has theorised about the number of people we hold close to us, suggests that, in addition, we have around 15 good friends, 50 more general friends, 150 meaningful contacts, 500 acquaintances and around 1,500 people we are able to recognise. While other scholars have shown cultural and historical variations in such figures, his listing remains of general interest for its depiction of a slowly unfolding web of social relations, which we tend to handle differently. These everyday interactions depend on the sense of social proximity.⁸

Some of those near us receive means to enter the spaces that are important for us, sometimes out of necessity, often as a token of trust but usually because they are allowed to dwell in the same spaces we occupy, even when we are not around. Receiving a key to the home of a good friend, to be kept “just in case”, is a sign of mutual trust, allowing us to pass beyond various locks and doors to areas in which we might witness that which others should not see.

We keep our distance, regularly, from others, and social proximity is the exception, not the rule. Besides spatiotemporal means to negotiate social distance, we have developed culturally varied ways

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For an essayistic overview of this slowly unfolding web of social relations see Robin Dunbar, Dunbar's Number, in: Robin Dunbar, *How Many Friends Does One Person Need? Dunbar's Number and Other Evolutionary Quirks*, London 2010, 21–34.

of interacting in embodied ways so as to make clear whether we want to be approached or not. When sharing time and space with others, these ways involve situational body posture, our manner of dress, the direction of our attention toward the other, and forms of mutual address. At gatherings, we engage in focused or unfocused activities, and depending on what we do situationally, we invite with our actions others to join in or to keep distance.

The communication media we choose for our interaction with others depend greatly on the felt degree of social proximity. The telemarketer who rings us in the midst of our day-to-day activities is annoying not only because of what the caller wants to sell, but also because the communication medium is one that many of us reserve for matters of urgency and for interaction with those near and dear to us. The connection medium chosen may have just as much relevance as the actual information conveyed, if not more. Receiving a handwritten letter evidences attention and interest, in marked contrast to the quick short messages sent via semi-public and public social-media sites. A birthday greeting delivered in the form of a bouquet of flowers at one's door expresses a social relation different from what a message on Facebook or TikTok may articulate.

While sharing time and space together in a constrained setting, focusing attention towards each other mutually, is seen as the benchmark for rich human interaction, the examples of a handwritten letter or a flower delivery point to the importance of assessing the interacting partners' degree of mutual social proximity when one is evaluating communicational acts. A "lean" medium may become "rich" if the message sent is particularly meaningful within the social relations in which it is embedded. It is this richness of select mediated interactions that is at odds with the traditional focus on face-to-face interactions outlined above.

II. Proxemics and Screen Use

The Covid-19 pandemic has normalised the use of various screens for human-to-human interactions, by reshaping face-to-face meetings into face-to-camera and screen-to-face ones. Here the dual nature of screens, providing both protection and connection, is evident: face-to-face meetings are held via screens in order to protect the participants from a virus that is contagious only through close bodily proximity. At the same time, the many screens, connected to cameras, microphones, keyboards and communication networks, allow people in ever-increasing numbers to spend time together and discuss life, even if the participants live on opposite sides of the planet. Empirical research conducted pre-Covid-19 attests to

the felt importance of distant closeness as achieved via networked camera technologies.⁹

For a practice-theory understanding of screen use, authors in several fields have started pointing more often at the various ways in which screens become embedded in human practices. These encompass studying the ways in which people behave – ideally and in actuality – within such confined settings as the cinema, time spent in front of television sets, and visits to museums and galleries, but their studies venture outside just as often, examining public space. For example, Erkki Huhtamo has identified four kinds of human–screen relations, which he terms screen, peep, touch and mobile, focusing very much on the sorts of relations that individuals take with specific screen surfaces and on how these surfaces themselves are constructed and made available for human interaction. Tristan Thielmann, in turn, discusses how particular screens, such as the radar screen, have been created as a temporary result of specific kinds of work practices, within which the screen initially has had to fit and be useful. Looking at urban mobile screens, Nanna Verhoeff shows how the screen may be approached and allow for multiple ways of interacting and interfacing, which depend on the ways in which it is constructed and set up but just as much on how it gets used in the first place. Accordingly, Luisa Feiersinger, along with Kathrin Friedrich and Moritz Queisner, recommend analysing the technological basis of screens, which already affects the possibilities for action; the interface design, which orients users in specific kinds of screen-based spaces; and the perceptual level of human interaction with screens. What this and other related work shows is that screens vary significantly from each other, in size, portability, the interaction potential and the interconnections they allow for. Screens, such as those of mobile phones and tablet computers, are also already part and parcel of a host of activities and used not just by someone sitting or standing in front of them but also when walking, cycling, driving a car or flying a plane, to name a few examples.¹⁰

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For a range of examples, see Patricia Prieto-Blanco, (Digital) Photography, Experience and Space in Transnational Families. A Case Study of Spanish-Irish Families Living in Ireland, in: Lehmuskallio and Gómez Cruz, *Digital Photography and Everyday Life*, 122–140; Rebecca Venema and Katharina Lobinger, “And Somehow It Ends Up on the Internet.” Agency, Trust and Risks in Photo-Sharing among Friends and Romantic Partners, in: *First Monday* 22, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i7.7860>; Jenni Niemelä-Nyrhinen and Janne Seppänen, Visual Communion. The Photographic Image as Phatic Communication, in: *New Media & Society* 22, 2020, 1043–1057.

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Erkki Huhtamo, The Four Practices? Challenges for an Archaeology of the Screen, in: Dominique Chateau and José Moure (eds.), *Screens. From Materiality to Spectatorship – A Historical and Theoretical Reassessment*, Amsterdam 2016, 116–124; Luisa Feiersinger, Kathrin Friedrich and Moritz Queisner, Image – Action – Space. Situating the Screen in Visual Practice, in: Luisa Feiersinger, Kathrin Friedrich and Moritz Queisner (eds.), *Image – Action – Space*, Berlin/Boston 2018, 7–10; Tristan Thielmann, Early Digital Images. A Praxeology of the Display, in: Feiersinger, Friedrich and Queisner, *Image – Action – Space*, 41–54; Nanna Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens. The Visual Regime of Navigation*, Amsterdam 2012.

I want to suggest that screen use is tightly bound also to the felt social proximity of those with whom we interact. Screens are used not just for connecting to others but also as a tool of maintaining distance, of acting from afar. The study of culturally moulded distance, called proxemics, was introduced in the 1960s as a way to “increase self-knowledge and decrease alienation. In sum, to help introduce people to themselves.”¹¹ Although television was in wide use when Edward T. Hall coined the term, and radio, newspapers and letters all the more so, his work focuses mainly on co-located means of keeping distance. Thus, he offers a scale of social distances that ranges from the intimate, through the personal and social, to the public, each with its close and far “phases”. Hall was fascinated by ethological work such as that by Heini Hediger, who studied animal behaviour, and he transposed Hediger’s findings to the human realm. Hall measured these four distances among US middle-class white research subjects and, on that basis, assigned a very specific value to each, with the intimate being 0–1.5 feet, the personal 1.5–4, the social-consultive 4–10, and the public 10 to 30 or above. Within each distance band, as Hall following Gibson’s theory of perception suggests, we are able to feel and sense other human beings very differently, and these differences become visible also in how we relate to images, depending on the kind of social proximity that the images employed suggest.

The significance of proxemics for understanding video-mediated communication lies in its focus on human beings as organisms that live in and relate to particular environments and that have found ways of using space as a particular elaboration of culture. Maintaining distance is the prime means with which we organise our social relations, not least since letting someone or something get too close can be life-threatening, an explicit reason for the importance of distance amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Hall’s use of the words “screen” and “display” is indicative of this constant regulation of felt spatial needs, since he does not pay much attention to electronic displays or television screens. As he uses it, the word “screen” refers to blocking out. He explains that in Japanese homes we might find paper walls for visually screening out what lies beyond while what happens beyond remains audible, whereas in Central Europe thick walls are found that screen out sound too. Hence, screens affect our perception of space alongside our ability to connect to others within it, and do not only affect vision.

III. Screen-Based Interactions

During the pandemic, social proximity has been regularly precluded on account of risks involved in being physically too near each other. Instead of talking directly to other people in face-to-face situations,

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Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, Garden City, NY 1969, here x.

we have found a wide range of our social encounters mediated via screens. In the context of the pandemic, screens, used from a distance during lockdown, provided protection against direct encounters with other humans that could have turned fatal. Following its original meaning from the late thirteenth century as an object of protection, a panel protecting against extreme heat and sparks from a fireplace, the screen became an emblem of social relations during the pandemic. Those who still needed to work with other humans on-site started wearing face shields, and many clerks serving customers began doing so from behind a counter now protected with Plexiglas, allowing nearly unhindered visual interaction though significantly muting the voices of interaction participants.

In connection to others from a distance – for example, via a computer screen, camera and microphone from one’s home – the screen continued to serve a protective function, often while still allowing participants to see each other’s facial expressions better than in face-to-face situations involving face masks. But now the screen also took on the set of meanings it has carried since the nineteenth century as a surface on which images are displayed.¹² While computer screens can be used for showing a wide range of imagery, the near-real-time interactions are of particular interest for my purposes here.

Video-mediated communication has afforded connecting to others and has had a major function as a substitute for previous face-to-face interactions. Instead of gaining access to people largely through a camera being pointed at others, as is usual in settings of camera-based surveillance, the people communicating from a distance in these video-mediated settings can, if *all* participants are using cameras, microphones and screens, gain physical presence in the others’ household, not just as a representation of a person from afar but as an actual moving and interacting figure on a screen. These interactive figures shown on screens are, first and foremost, “here” as images that can be interacted with in a specific location. What Sarah Pink has posited for photography more generally is particularly pertinent for video-mediated communication: “Images [...] are inevitably and unavoidably in places: they are produced by moving through and not over or on environments, and they are not stopping points so much as outcomes of and in movement.”¹³ The images seen in video-mediated communication are thus always seen “here”, although the “here” might be thousands of kilometres from the embodied communication partner. Screens, as Francesco Casetti suggests, “have become transit hubs for the images that cir-

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For short historical overviews, see Dominique Chateau and José Moure, Introduction. Screen, a Concept in Progress, in: Dominique Chateau and José Moure (eds.), *Screens*, Amsterdam 2016, 13–22; and Francesco Casetti, What Is a Screen Nowadays?, in: Chris Berry, Janet Harbord and Rachel Moore (eds.), *Public Space, Media Space*, Basingstoke, Hampshire, NY, 16–25.

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Sarah Pink, Sensory Digital Photography. Re-thinking “Moving” and the Image, in: *Visual Studies* 26, 2011, 4–13, here 9.

culate in our social space. [...] [S]creens function as the junction of a complex circuit, characterized both by a continuous flow and by localized processes of configuration or reconfiguration of the circulation of the circulating images.”¹⁴ Screens and images coincide at times, but the images we see on these screens are not mainly representations of something outside of the here and now.

Hence, from a practice-theory perspective, what the increasing emergence of screens brings forth is a change in the ecologies of interaction. As curfews and lockdowns spread with the Covid-19 pandemic, in aims of curbing the spread of the virus, screen use became ubiquitous for a wide range of practices that previously relied on other communication media. Video-mediated communication, of specific relevance for the discussion here, was in many cases used in the place of face-to-face communications for circumventing possibly dangerous physical meetings. With the access that participants gained to each other’s locations via cameras, microphones and screens, a wider range of people could enter domestic settings as figures on a screen, settings they could not otherwise have accessed due to social rules for keeping distance.

Social interaction relies on the negotiation of shared situational expectations, in which the participants draw on their stock of knowledge for assessing appropriate frames for interaction. Especially in the early days of these uses of video-mediated communication, shared situational expectations were difficult to negotiate, so social interactions often violated some of the expectations of participants. As individuals learn about and disseminate the meanings of specific spaces, partitions within them, props and their use, and the types of clothing to be used within them, “the less energy they will expend in establishing mutual expectations, in sanctioning, in meeting transactional needs, in normatizing, in role making, role taking, and role verifying, and in assessing status”.¹⁵ In contrast, the less they share understandings of how to interact mutually within specific spatial settings, the more energy they need to invest in being able to interact in emotionally satisfying ways. The use of spatial props and interactive surfaces, such as the screens in video-mediated communication, form an aspect of this: they must be negotiated within the web of social relations in which participants are involved. The extent of the social proximity felt plays a key role, influencing how rich or lean the communicative devices need to be. And it is in the negotiation of how to use video mediation for communication that opportunities for intervention lie, and hence social and political change.

While face-to-face interactions bring participants together in a single co-located setting, video-mediated interactions, thanks to the use of screens, allow for “meanwhile structures” to emerge that

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Casetti, *What Is a Screen Nowadays?*, 17.

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Turner, *Face to Face*, 242.

entail “techniques of shuttling between two points in space at the same time that are too far apart for the unaided human senses”.¹⁶ Although the interaction in video-mediated communication always occurs “here”, on account of the processual nature of the encounter and the possibility of turn-taking in discussions, the communication partners may be, and often are, involved in these meanwhile structures. John Durham Peters borrows the notion of “meanwhile” from the classic work *Imagined Communities*, in which Benedict Anderson claims that the possibility for this shuttling between spaces in the same time emerged only with modernity – more specifically, with the novel, the newspaper, the census, the map and the museum.¹⁷ These media allowed for movement between scenes without the passage of time: depicting or explaining particular events from one location and then moving to another one to relate events happening meanwhile, that is, at the same time. For example, when reading about an event in the Philippines, and right after that about another one in Germany, both printed on the same newspaper page reporting about events unfolding at the same time. While Anderson’s posited historical rupture is not watertight, he and Peters point to the important interrelations between specific media technologies and ways of narrating.

In video-mediated communications, these meanwhile structures are apparent not as merely verbal narrative forms; but become visible specifically in image use. In contrast to co-located face-to-face settings, the interaction partners in video-mediated communication meet human bodies connected via a complex and extensive information infrastructure while far apart from each other. Just as is the case with most photography, also in video-mediated communication participants tend to be unable to frame the encounter without including everything else that is taking place where they happen to be in front of their camera and screen. Likewise, when talking to another person, they cannot help but notice if a family member or the family dog pops up in the camera’s view, and they see the interiors of households that in many cases they would never access if meeting face to face. Those taking part in video-mediated communication both are located “here”, interacting with images made visible on on-location screens, and see on these screens “here” what meanwhile is happening “there”.

Degrees of social proximity have needed to be negotiated anew in response to the novel manner of merging social relations and access to each other’s spatially bounded settings, even though most of the video-mediated interactions have been with prior acquaintances. Family members living separately, friends, work colleagues,

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John Durham Peters, A Cornucopia of Meanwhiles, in: John Durham Peters, Florian Sprenger and Christina Vagt, *Action at a Distance*, Lüneburg/Minneapolis, MN, 29–50, here 30.

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Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1991.

and others who form part of the social web identified by Dunbar have become a regular part of video-mediated communication. Where the gatherings are to include others, this inclusion often necessitated intermediaries known to both parties, entities regarded as good enough filters. Among these intermediaries are specialist e-mail lists, networks of friends, registration with one's pertinent details, and the like. In these conditions, the possibility of meeting, interacting with someone new, and entering deep engagement with a person whose modes of being differ significantly from one's own become more difficult. In a way, the measures for creating the distance needed to curb the pandemic weakened the variety of our web of social relations, as chance encounters at publicly accessible gatherings grew more difficult.

For those who take diversity as necessary for a good life, the increasing use of screens for social interactions appears all the more problematic, not just, or even mainly, because video-mediated communication differs in type from face-to-face interactions. In settings such as a pandemic, it introduces a kind of social sorting that complicates our time spent with strangers.

IV. Visual Orders

For the field of visual studies, related work on scopic regimes has been pivotal in addressing overarching socially negotiated ways of seeing, suggestive of disciplined and organised means of knowing the world that differ with historical and geographical context. For example, for European modernity, these have been analysed in terms of three distinct but overlapping regimes, denoted as Cartesian perspectivalism, the Dutch art of describing and Baroque reason.¹⁸ What all of these share is that they describe systems of thought with distinct visual counterparts to be found in optical technologies and pictorial representations – which not only represent the seen but also order and shape what we “should” in each case direct our attention toward. Today, these visual regimes are deeply entwined with and at times transformed by computational technologies. Images, screens, cameras and other visual communication technologies have become central elements in today's societal life, without which some of the major success stories of computing would never have been written.

What is needed in addition to earlier work on the normalisation of particular modes of seeing is both attention to digital technologies' impact on ways of seeing and knowing and a focus on the social relations within which image use is embedded. Related work on epistemologies and ontologies of relating to the world is of special significance here, especially with non-Western modes of knowing having gained serious attention. For instance, Diana Eck

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Martin Jay, *Scopic Regimes of Modernity Revisited*, in: Martin Jay, *Essays from the Edge. Parerga and Paralipomena*, Charlottesville, VA/London 2011, 51–63.

has shown how the Western notion of the active observer does not hold in the Hindu traditions she studied; Christopher Pinney has questioned the adequacy of European aesthetics for examining the history of Indian art; and Paolo Favero has developed a theory of the present image through his research into both virtual realities and Orthodox icons. This dialogue between visual studies scholars and social scientists has been advanced particularly strongly by Hans Belting's work on the anthropology of the image, Alfred Gell's recommendations for rethinking concepts of agency in light of empirical research done beyond the canon of scopic regimes, Birgit Mersmann's work on image cultures, and recent publications on technical images and image operations.¹⁹ From this perspective, the increasing use of screens and video-mediated communication in connection with global efforts to arrest the spread of SARS-CoV-2 allows us to reconsider how we interact socially but also how to take it into account as we strive to understand how "the seen" ties in with "the known".

V. Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown how vulnerable and tightly interwoven our infrastructures are, in that a rare disease may spread quickly and widely due to the importance we have given to movement. Movement, particularly that of human bodies, has become again increasingly regulated and treated as a menace to society. The curfews and lockdowns imposed on citizens in numerous settings throw a spotlight on how each and every one of us is treated with suspicion and how one of our richest interaction settings, face-to-face interaction, is cast as dangerous.

The calls for using video-mediated communication to screen off the dangers of possible disease have been both lamented and welcomed, and our societies' current discussions of ways of moving forward in dealing with the pandemic are replete with suggestions that many of our gatherings in physical proximity could be held online for the foreseeable future. There are viable economic reasons for this: travel takes time and energy, and is a financial cost factor to be accounted for. In addition, environmental arguments favour paring back human and other movement, especially where the movement creates higher carbon dioxide emissions than does connecting online from one's home.

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Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images. Picture, Medium, Body*, Princeton, NJ 2011; Horst Bredekamp, Vera Dünkel and Birgit Schneider, *The Technical Image. A History of Styles in Scientific Imagery*, Chicago, IL 2015; Diana Eck, *Darsan. Seeing the Divine Image in India*, New York 1998; Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk, *Image Operations. Still and Moving Pictures in Political Conflicts*, Manchester 2016; Paolo Favero, *The Present Image. Visible Stories in a Digital Habitat*, Cham 2018; Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford 1998; Birgit Mersmann, *D/rifts between Visual Culture and Image Culture. Relocations of the Transnational Study of the Visual*, in: Doris Bachmann-Medick, Ansgar Nünning and Martin Zierold (eds.), *The Trans/national Study of Culture. A Translational Approach*, Berlin 2014, 237–260; Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods. The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*, London 2004.

I have tried to show that our increasing use of video-mediated communication instead of face-to-face gathering brings with it a tendency toward socially sorting our encounters in favour of people we already know or those to whom we are introduced via trusted intermediaries. As these encounters intervene in our established ecologies of interaction by introducing novel ways of structuring the use of space, we need to learn novel stocks of knowledge in order to know how to negotiate shared situational expectations appropriately. In this context, video-mediated communication introduces particular meanwhile structures to our situational encounters, which confound and reorder our means of suggesting, verifying and validating degrees of social proximity. While it thereby provides for various novel means of being together that can open unexpected routes of conversation, insight and human interaction, it has a flip side: it is much less amenable to the unexpected, and hence to the valuing of diversity in our social encounters. Although appreciating and accepting diversity is a difficult task in other settings too, as elucidated by Caesar Alimsinya Atuire on the removal of racist statues,²⁰ it is among the core tasks for visual studies too.

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²⁰

Caesar Alimsinya Atuire, Black Lives Matter and the Removal of Racist Statues, in: *21: Inquiries into Art, History and the Visual* 2, 2020, 449–467, <https://doi.org/10.11588/xxi.2020.2.76234> (19.08.2021).