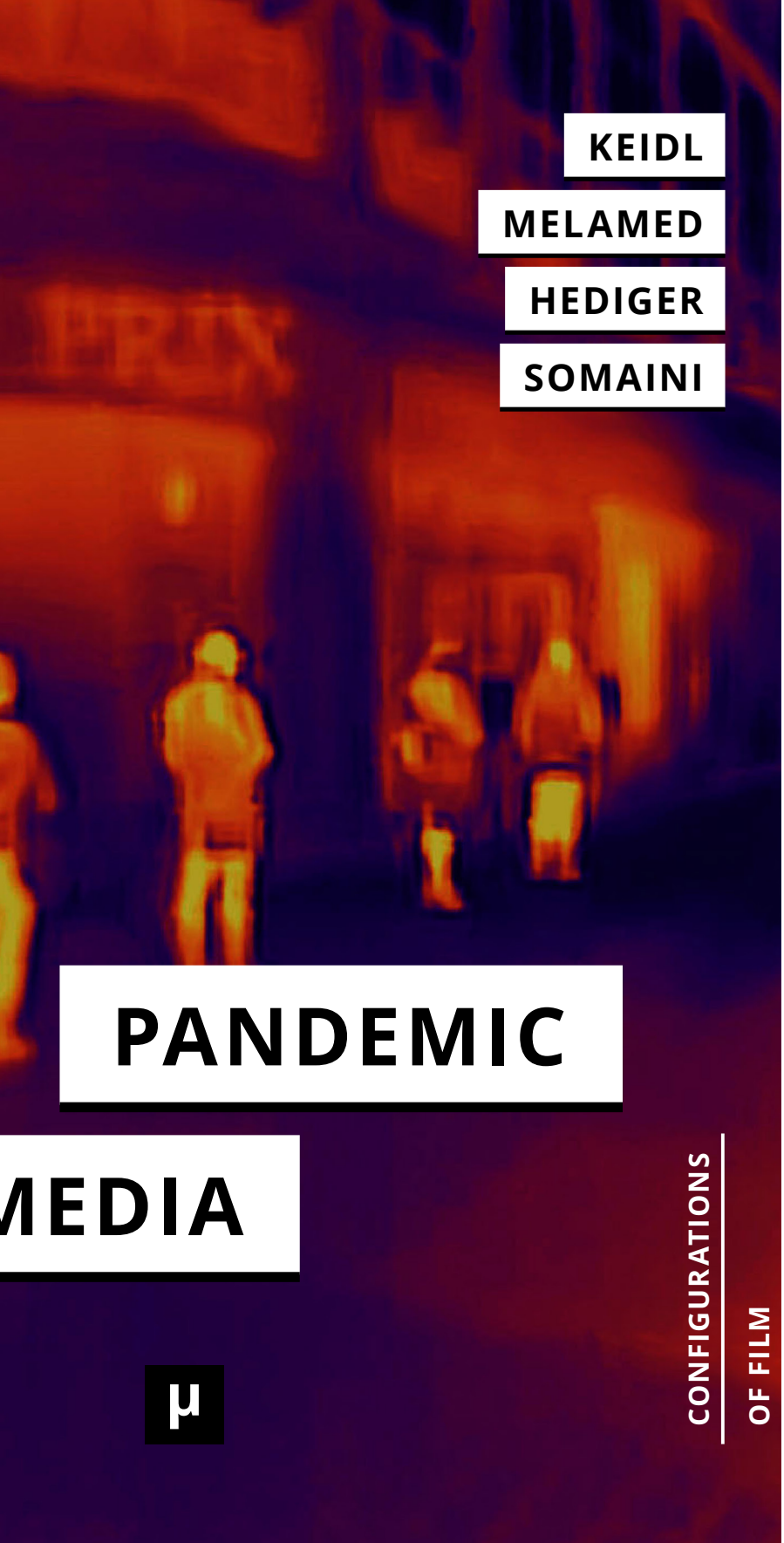

KEIDL

MELAMED

HEDIGER

SOMAINI

# PANDEMIC

# MEDIA

CONFIGURATIONS OF FILM

μ

**Pandemic Media**

**Configurations of Film Series**

# Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by
**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini**

meson press

KONFIGURATIONEN DES FILMS

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

GOETHE UNIVERSITÄT FRANKFURT AM MAIN

**Bibliographical Information of the German National Library**
The German National Library lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie (German National Bibliography); detailed bibliographic information is available online at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Published in 2020 by meson press, Lüneburg, Germany
with generous support from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
www.meson.press

Design concept: Torsten Köchlin, Silke Krieg
Cover design: Mathias Bär
Cover image: © Antoine d'Agata, reprinted with permission from the artist
Editorial assistance: Fabian Wessels

The print edition of this book is printed by Lightning Source,
Milton Keynes, United Kingdom

ISBN (Print): 978-3-95796-008-5
ISBN (PDF): 978-3-95796-009-2
DOI: 10.14619/0085

The PDF edition of this publication can be downloaded freely at www.meson.press.

**VIDEOCONFERENCING**

**SCREEN**

**MIRROR**

**INTERFACE**

**SELF-REFLEXIVITY**

**SELF-MONITORING**

[ 9 ]

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

**Yvonne Zimmermann**

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

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

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

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

## The Self, Me or You?

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

## The Screen as Mirror and Interface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Self-Reflexivity in Videoconferencing—Self-Monitoring 2.0

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

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

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

## References

Baudry, Jean-Louis. 1974–75 [1970]. "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus." *Film Quarterly* 28 (2): 39–47.

Elsaesser, Thomas, and Malte Hagener. 2015. *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses.* New York, London: Routledge.

Johnson, Laurie. 2009. "A Ghost of a Chance, After All." *Derrida Today* 2 (2): 166–76.

Metz, Christian. 1986 [1975]. *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema.* Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Stam, Robert. 1992 [1985]. *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Zimmermann, Yvonne. forthcoming 2021. "Advertising's Self-Reference: From Early Cinema to the Super Bowl." In Bo Florin, Patrick Vonderau, and Yvonne Zimmermann. *Advertising and the Transformation of Screen Cultures*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini (eds.)**
Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

**With its unprecedented scale and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces, and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration of media technologies and the cultures and polities with which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptability, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in response to the global crisis and provide elements toward an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.**

konfigurationen-des-films.de

KONFIGURATIONEN DES FILMS

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

GOETHE UNIVERSITÄT FRANKFURT AM MAIN

ISBN 978-3-95796-008-5

meson press

www.meson-press.com