ARTCHIAE:

For a Media Ar(t)chaeology of Telepresence

edited by
B. Grespi, M. De Rosa, M.T. Soldani, L. Lazzari

Milano University Press

ARTCHAE

For a Media Ar(t)chaeology of Telepresence

Edited by Barbara Grespi, Miriam De Rosa,
Maria Teresa Soldani, Lorenzo Lazzari

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Closed-Circuit Faces: Archaeologies of the Face in Telepresence*

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Abstract

This article is the translation of an essay published in 2022 in the Italian journal *VCS – Visual Culture Studies*, and it contains the guiding hypothesis of the *ARTCHAE* research project. The authors examine the mediation of faces in videoconferencing apps, investigating the specificity of close-ups on Zoom, Meet, or Teams, to be understood both in relation to the mirror image—long central to processes of self-recognition—and within the genealogy of video, especially early experiments in the live mediation of faces and bodies in the video art of the 1970s. Secondly, this contribution explores the form of gaze conveyed by faces in telepresence, analyzing the non-reciprocity of glances and the constant self-checking distraction to which every participant is subject. In the background lies a broader archaeological question concerning contemporary applications of closed-circuit television (CCTV), across pictorial prefigurations, video art, and everyday media.

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Keywords: Video Conference; Closed-Circuit Television; Mirror; Gaze; Screens; Early Video Art

Abstract

Questo articolo è la traduzione di un saggio pubblicato nel 2022 sulla rivista italiana *VCS – Visual Culture Studies*, e contiene l'ipotesi guida della ricerca *ARTCHAE*. Le autrici studiano la mediazione dei volti sulle app di videoconferenza, ricercando la specificità dei primi piani Zoom, Meet o Teams, da comprendersi sia nel confronto con l'immagine speculare, da sempre cardine dei processi di riconoscimento del Sé, sia all'interno della genealogia del video, in particolare le prime sperimentazioni sulla mediazione live dei nostri volti e corpi nella video arte degli anni Settanta. In secondo luogo, indaga la forma di sguardo di cui i volti in telepresenza sono portatori, studiando la non reciprocità delle occhiate e la continua deviazione autoriflessiva di cui ogni conferenziere è preda. Sullo sfondo una più generale domanda archeologica relativa alle applicazioni contemporanee della televisione a circuito chiuso (CCTV), fra preconizzazioni pittoriche, videoarte e media della quotidianità.

Parole chiave: Videoconferenza; Circuito chiuso; Specchio; Sguardo; Schermi; Early video art

0. Televisageity

The pandemic era was characterized by the disappearance of the face, resulting from social distancing and the widespread use of masks, and, in parallel, by a full access to it through forms of telepresence, particularly via video conferencing platforms, where a domestic, miniaturized version of the cinematic close-up emerged. Over the past few years, much of our social and professional lives have relied on this figure of the human. The close-up was invented by cinema more than a century ago, yet it was immediately understood both as the triumph of the individuated face and as its crisis: a physiognomy of the human and an abstract figure of subjectivity—that white wall/black hole binomial which, according to Deleuze and Guattari, encapsulates the idea of the subject as a depth emerging upon a surface of inscription ([1980] 1987). Webcams that film and livestream our faces via Zoom, Meet, or Teams have instead developed a language of faciality grounded entirely in individuation, in which the recognizability of each subject is the product of a specific mediating gesture rooted in self-surveillance. Interaction on videoconferencing platforms presupposes that each participant curates their own face, generating close-ups that oscillate between the mugshot and the selfie, the faceprint and the self-portrait. Likewise, our access to images of others passes through their self-mediation (Villa 2019), achieved by seeking a reconciliation of face and gaze. In what follows we will examine two aspects of this platform-based visageity: (1) Users' relation to their own teletransmitted face—ceaselessly performed and monitored—within what

may be regarded as a new stage of specular recognition; (2) the collapse of the reciprocity of the gaze, fluctuating between the glance cast toward one's own image and the pursuit of an impossible eye contact with the interlocutor.

1. The Mirror and the Front Camera

In René Magritte's famous painting *La reproduction interdite* ("Not to be Reproduced," 1937), an elegant young man stands before a large mirror mounted on a marble shelf. The framed surface, however, works outside any catoptric logic: it reflects correctly—i.e., reversing right and left—the title on the worn cover of a novel lying on the shelf (*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* by Edgar Allan Poe), while it does not do the same with the human figure. In the mirror, we continue to see the man from behind, paradoxically reflected —actually, slightly reduced in scale. The painting may be read as depicting a man's entry into the mirror (the book remains on this side, the man passes "over there"), with the reduction in scale of the body within the frame indicating that he has already passed through and that is moving away, but the overall impression is one of duplication and receding: the man portrayed—the English poet Edward James, a patron of Surrealism—has apparently taken a step back (Fig. 1).[1]

This very movement of denied mirroring and apparent receding, in coincidence with the approach toward one's own reflection, is at the center of one of the most celebrated works of video art: Bruce Nauman's *Live-Taped Video Corridor* (1970). Nauman builds a corridor ten meters long and sixty centimeters wide, at the end of which he installs two monitors, one above the other: the first displays a recording of the empty corridor; the second transmits live what is captured by a camera placed at the corridor's entrance, at a height of about three meters (Fig. 2). When the viewers enters the corridor and walk toward the monitors, crossing the camera's field of view, they realize that the closer they move to the screens, the farther they move away from the camera's lens—thus experiencing a double frustration: they find themselves filmed from behind, whereas they expected to see themselves frontally; and they notice that their transmitted image shrinks and recedes, whereas they expected it to approach, enlarge, and become more defined.

1 Furthermore, observing the direction of the lights reinforces this paradoxical movement: the shadow of the body that has crossed the threshold—as well as that of the book—is correctly reflected, that is, corresponding to an inverted light source, while, on the contrary, the reflection on the man's hair continues to descend from a light source located behind the figure.

Figure 1. *La reproduction interdite* (René Magritte, 1937) © René Magritte, by SIAE.

Figure 2. *Live-Taped Video Corridor* (Bruce Nauman, 1970) © Bruce Nauman, by SIAE.

Like much early video art, *Live-Taped Video Corridor* evokes the mirror experience, prompting its viewers to seek on the screen an image analogous to their reflected self. But it immediately frustrates this expectation, exposing the different genesis of the two body images: while a mirror produces an image that depends on the subject's position relative to the reflective surface, video generates an image that is entirely independent of the viewer's position in front of the monitor, varying instead according to the distance between the body and the camera's lens. This crucial difference—experienced in Nauman's work—was perfectly described by Dan Graham, another major figure of that artistic season and a keen theorist of the architectonic nature of video image. For Graham, video "functions semiotically as window and mirror simultaneously, but subverts the effects and functions of both […] as the observer approaches, the mirror opens up a wider and deeper view of the room environment and magnifies the image of the perceiver. By contrast, a video image on a monitor does not shift in perspective with a viewer's shift in position" (1990, 178–79).

Thus, the history of interaction with video images begins in the form of a forbidden reproduction, even if it subsequently unfolds in quite a different direction: the medium's initial resistance to the specular image is progressively overcome by the immersive thrust that characterizes the contemporary image as a whole.[2]

Rosalind Krauss recognized early on that video was becoming the site of a crucial engagement with the experience of confronting the self-image. In her

2 We referred to the framework outlined by the research project *AN-ICON. An Iconology: History, Theory, and practices of Environmental Images* (2019–2025), of which this article was a scientific output.

essay "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" (1976) she writes: "Video's real medium is a psychological situation, the very terms of which are to withdraw attention from an external object—an Other—and invest it in the Self" (57). Krauss may seem to evoke a full experiential conformity between video and mirror, but she is in fact drawn precisely to the works that most visibly "suffer" the specific difference between the two devices and attempt to disguise it.

Consider, for example, Vito Acconci's early experiments, which combine the two images by having him sit in front of a mirror with a camera behind his back—thus showing himself *à la* Magritte while granting us a correct frontal reflection (*Air Time*, 1973). Or his earlier *Centers* (1971), which resolves discontinuities through a gesture of the arm: for twenty minutes, he films himself pointing with the index finger at the center of his video image (he looks into the filming camera lens, but controls the result in a lateral monitor, covering his sideways gaze with his arm). With this configuration, he obtains what Krauss calls a "tautological" image, because it begins at the subject's point of vision and ends in the eyes of his projected double. The outstretched arm covers much of the face but, in exchange, traces an eye-to-eye trajectory that takes the camera lens into account. Acconci thus stages the "self-consideration of the self:" the confrontation with one's own image understood as the direct prolongation of a body that stands out in the real world, and that the fingertip welds to its imaginary double inside the monitor. With this gesture, the Italian American artist becomes a pioneer of immersive art,[3] among the first to push the subject's relation to video toward a fusion that in reality does not belong to the device's technological design (on video and mirror see also Valentini 1998.)

The model proposed by Vito Acconci predominates in the social applications of video, whereas Bruce Nauman's protocol—centered on the differences between mirror reflection and the teletransmission of the self—has been more extensively explored by artists. A tireless experimenter of video's non-specularity was peter campus, trained as a psychologist and author of a series of works that thwart self-recognition on screen. In *Interface* (1972), campus creates a surface of confrontation between users' video image and their natural reflection. The setting is a dark room divided in two by a transparent sheet of glass: on one side stands a camera, on the other a projector. When spectators enter the frame, the reflection and the projection of their bodies appear side by side on the glass, chase one another, and at times overlap (Fig. 3).

3 And he becomes a pioneer of a genealogy of immersivity centered on the myth of Narcissus, that reconstructed by Andrea Pinotti (2025).

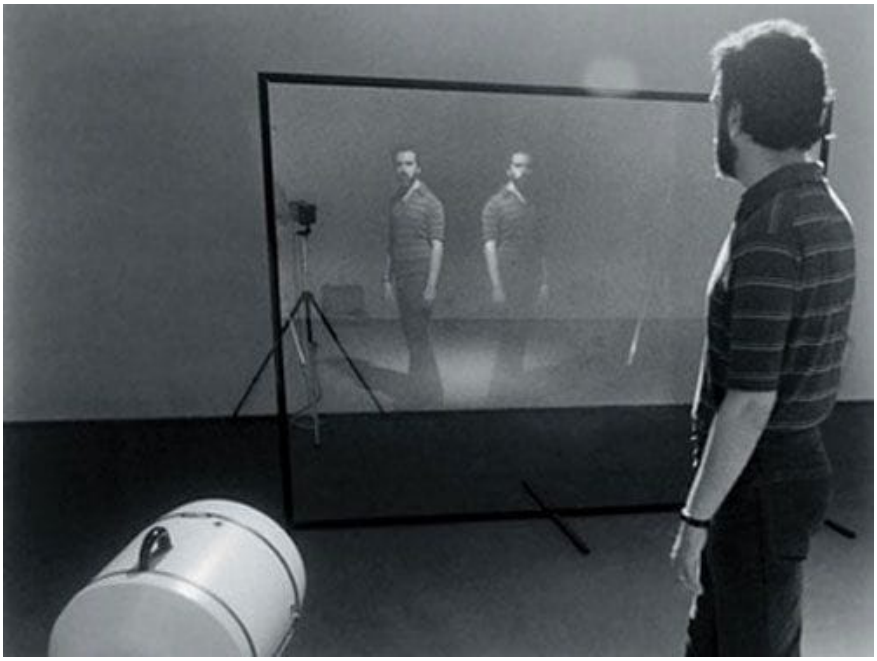

Figure 3. *Interface* (peter campus, 1972). Courtesy of the Artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

It becomes evident that the two images are laterally reversed: the reflection presents a reversed double (someone who repeats with the right what we do with the left), whereas the video image presents a "perfect" double, simply displaced in front of us, on the other side of the famous 180° line that governs cinematographic shooting. In which of the two images do we recognize ourselves, then? As a result of counter-lateralization, the mirror reflection is not, on the symbolic plane, exactly our copy; nonetheless, it is the image most familiar to us. The subjective Self corresponds to the face in the mirror—the one we are accustomed to taking as our own and with which, after early childhood, we establish a relation of continuity and adhesion, given that we literally coincide with it. By contrast, the face transmitted via video corresponds to the image of us as it is formed in the other's gaze—here simplified as an interlocutor facing us.

The mirror is not an eye that looks at us; it is a "natural" image based on a physical phenomenon.[4] The videocamera (as with photography and cinema) is, in every respect, the eye of another who takes us as an object. Relative to the mirror image at the base of the Lacanian stage, video (or rather, this form

4 For Umberto Eco (1985, 9-37), mirror reflection is *an absolute icon* that lies at the boundaries of semiosis.

of video art) would therefore represent a further step in self-recognition:[5] the access to our image not only objectified by a self-as-other, but also caught by a gaze that originates elsewhere, from any point in space so long as it is not ours. This self-image is as accurate in theory as it is unsettling in practice, because to grasp it we must use imagination rather than bodily sense—for example, by imagining that we have turned around in order to return our own gaze.

For this reason, familiarity with our face in the mirror underlies various psychological experiments on identity and self-representation, in which recognition is constructed precisely through the manipulation of the monitor to produce forms of specularity. The underlying assumption is that the mental representation each person forms of their own face is the product of mirror experience and continually seeks confirmation there, plastically modeling and updating itself with each exposure to it.

Mirroring is not a merely optical but also a multisensory experience—for instance, strongly anchored in the perception of movement as synchronous spatially contiguous, even if, symbolically, it is counter-lateralized. Recent experiments aimed at isolating the factors most relevant to self-face recognition demonstrate this so clearly that they posit the possibility of *enfacement*, i.e. recognizing oneself in a face that is not one's own. In these tests, the subject is placed before a monitor on which a close-up appears, proportionate in size and position to their own face; it may belong to someone whose features are very different, even of different ethnicity or gender. The subject then receives a tactile stimulus (for example, the stroke of a brush on the cheek) while, in perfect synchrony, the filmed face is "touched" in the same way, with the same tool and on the same side (thus, in fact, on the opposite cheek). Repetition of the stimulus creates the subjective illusion of looking at oneself in a mirror, so that the test subject ends up taking the face on video as their own, even though it does not resemble them at all (Tajadura-Jiménez et al. 2012).

The fact that the reproductive capacity of the video, perfect as it may be, is less decisive for recognition processes than the "mirror device"—with its simultaneity and lateral contiguity—has shaped the recent development of major digital technologies, not only immersive apparatuses but also the most direct everyday applications of closed-circuit television. CCTV (closed-circuit television) works by producing audiovisual information that is simultaneously transported to and transmitted on a monitor, in close coincidence of input and output (Kacunko 2004). For Gene Youngblood, one of the earliest advocates of the medium's artistic potential, closed-circuit installations are "teledynamic environments" (1970)—i.e., spaces continually reconfigured by the shifting

5 It goes even further than cinema, which Christian Metz ([1977] 1982, 45-49) sees as a mirror capable of reflecting everything except the all-perceptive viewer. For the difference between video and film see the pioneering writings by Sandra Lischi (among the most recent 2001, 2019).

faces and moving bodies that inhabit them through the screen. We are accustomed to this type of environment: we experience it daily on our phones and, for some time now, with equally regular frequency, through videoconferencing platforms. The smartphone's front camera and the webcam on our computer create closed circuits within which we routinely inscribe ourselves.

The closed circuit of meeting apps such as Zoom, Meet, or Teams has its own specificities. It is typically a peer-to-peer system built on a cloud infrastructure—i.e., on sending each signal to a server that routes it to every node. Remote interaction is therefore grounded in the socialization of individual self-transmissions, whose dialogic exchange can be seen as the most successful attempt at interactive television.

In this medium, the close-ups we produce and constantly monitor for communicative purposes are subjected to a visual logic that is, all in all, perverse: the webcam transmits our face to others as an ordinary camera does, preserving lateral orientation, but at the same time transmits it to us in mirrored form (Zinneman 2020). No matter how much effort we invest in self-representation by using the webcam as a mirror, the face we ultimately "release" will never match the one our interlocutors see. By contrast, in a historical video installation such as Les Levine's *Iris* (1968), the effort involved in self-producing the face did succeed. A device comprising six television monitors and three video cameras filmed the surrounding space through different lenses, incorporating the spectator's image into the resulting image. As Youngblood (1979) explains, viewers were surprised by their appearance and hurried to correct it—adjusting hair, jacket, or glasses—learning to control and model their public image live, that is, the way they would look if they were on television. On meeting apps, by contrast, we can verify how we look to others only through accidental screen shares of someone else's view.

We must settle for recognizing ourselves in a pseudo-specular digital reflection that is less alienating than that of video and yet very far from the total fusion created by the mirror. Lateralization, after all, is not the only factor differentiating video and mirror, as we have learned from the practice of the selfie.

The selfie represents our everyday operation within a closed circuit. Its strongly gestural character—forming an extension of our outstretched arm (Frosh 2015)—links it to the self-image Acconci produced with the pointing finger and the arm that connected screen, face, and gaze. Indeed, everything that precedes our post-photographic self-shots is homologous to *Centers*: a precondition for selfies is the live transmission of one's face on the smartphone, within the closed circuit formed by the display and the front camera, which has long been fixed in mirror mode and not open to user modification. Until a few years ago, at the moment of capture, the image was "straightened up" to produce a "true" photograph, one conforming to our public self and ready for social circulation. With the introduction of the mirroring option, however,

it has become possible to freeze the video-reflection as such, allowing us to circulate an image closer to our point of view shot in the act of looking into a mirror. Yet this image does not truly coincide with specular reflection as neither this selfie variant nor the mere front camera feed are identical to this. The front camera allows us to control our image—it is the application to the self of the massive socio-technical system of space surveillance based on video feedback and derived from CCTV (whose media logic is explained in Doyle et al. 2012)—but it never allows us to look ourselves in the eyes and lose ourselves in our image, like Narcissus before his double. The front camera remains an eye that watches us watching ourselves: it cannot assume our own gaze upon ourselves because it is not located at the center of the screen, where our eyes fall, but on the border, on the frame. Thus, when we look at ourselves, the camera's capture trajectory cannot coincide with our gaze (and vice versa: if we look into the lens, we cannot simultaneously mirror ourselves).

For this reason, it is possible to shoot an entire film through the smartphone's front camera, as in *Selfie* (Agostino Ferrente, 2019), where the director uses only images produced by the adolescent protagonists acting in selfie mode, framing themselves with their lifeworld in the background—the neighborhood, bars, homes. Yet because the trajectory of their gaze is undecipherable, these videos oscillate between inverted subjectivity (a look from their point of view onto the world behind them) and false mirroring: precisely when they are looking at themselves, their gaze escapes us—indeed, it escapes itself. *Selfie* thus reveals the medium's specific gaze: a device belonging to digital natives, with the capacity to see them looking at themselves as faces integrated into an environment that defines and conditions them (see Montani 2020, 36-37).

On videoconferencing platforms something even more complex occurs. Remote interactions rely on the exchange of self-representations and on the accumulation of autonomous "directorial" gestures through which one's face is both self-monitored in mirror mode and transmitted in video mode. The eye-screen device that today is our laptop constitutes a complex machine of *televisageity* in which, as we shall see in the following section, the gaze fully separates from the face.

2. Are You Talking to Me?

Let us continue the archaeological exploration of these closed-circuit faces by focusing on the peculiar topology of gazes that characterises contemporary telepresence. In videoconferencing platforms the experience of a separation between face and gaze generally occurs unconsciously. At first glance, my face, as seen in the video preview of meeting apps is akin to the reflection I meet in the mirror. During video calls, we constantly intercept our own image, much like when we monitor our appearance in the reflection of a shop window—another

optical apparatus of mediation. An entire category of memes that emerged during pandemic-era smart working epitomises the enchanted expression with which we unwittingly find ourselves staring at the video preview tile.[6] There is something hypnotic about this image which, on closer inspection, is not simply a matter of vanity: in the video preview we expect to find our own face, and yet we do not recognize ourselves.

The video proves to be a pseudo-reflection: at the very moment we try to catch a glimpse of ourselves on screen, the encounter with that face is thwarted, and we are already looking elsewhere. Art history has already foregrounded similar *mises en abyme* of reflection. For instance, Titian's (1555), Rubens's (1613–1614), and Velázquez's (1644) Venuses at the mirror famously depict the goddess in the act of admiring herself. The iconographic motif of the *toilette*, with its ambiguous connotation of *vanitas* and allegory of feminine beauty, can be traced back to antiquity, as evidenced by the mosaic of Aphrodite's *toilette* (third century AD) preserved at the As-Suwayda Museum in Syria. Nor is it limited to mythological subjects: in the famous cycle of Flemish tapestries *The Lady and the Unicorn*, devoted to the emblems of the five senses, the panel symbolising sight depicts the unicorn contemplating itself in a mirror held by the lady (Fig. 4).

At least, this is how these works are usually described. In fact, even without a knowledge of geometric optics and the physical laws of reflection, our everyday familiarity with mirrors should tell us that Venus or the unicorn, occupying a vantage point different from ours, could not simultaneously be visible to themselves on the reflective surface. In fact, they could not observe their own face from the same angle from which it appears on the canvas. In the painting, Venus is not directing her gaze toward herself, but toward the position of the painter in the act of painting—and therefore toward the painting's viewer.

Why, then, even while we know how reflective surfaces behave, do we misinterpret the image? This is a perceptual illusion that, taking precisely this pictorial subject as its cue, is called the "Venus effect" (Bertamini et al. 2003; Bertamini and Latto 2017): when an image shows an individual and a mirror, we tend to believe that the individual positioned in front of the reflective surface is seeing their own reflection in the mirror, even when—on further examination—their spatial placement makes such reflection impossible. The illusion is not limited to our perception of paintings: photographic and cinematographic staging of reflective surfaces has long exploited this confusion in order to hide the apparatus of recording.

Something similar happens in closed-circuit installations that hinge on the discontinuity between video and mirror. In peter campus's *Dor* (1975) (Fig. 5), the artist places a camera facing the threshold of a doorway that provides access

6 Whose caption reads, for instance: "Me looking at myself during a Zoom call, not hearing a word everyone is saying."

to a room; the output image is projected on the wall immediately beside the door. When the camera frames the face of the person entering the installation, their video image is therefore not visible from the same viewpoint, that remains one step before the door threshold. The subject thus ends up chasing their transmitted image in vain, perceiving it only in passing and always, inexorably, from behind. If, however, we observe other visitors' experiencing the installation, we too become subject to a perceptual illusion: seeing the projected face and the individual's back facing the camera, we tend to assume that they too have access to the output, whereas their perspective is misaligned and the closed circuit in fact produces an impossible mirroring.

Figure 4. "Sight," from the tapestry cycle *The Lady and the Unicorn*, 1484–1500.

Figure 5. *Dor* (peter campus, 1975). Courtesy of the Artists and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

The Venus effect, moreover, does not only influence our understanding of images; it also influences how we interpret people's reflections in mirrors in everyday perception. In some cases the effect persists even after the illusion has been revealed. It is not simply a naïve reading: even museum captions betray their susceptibility to this misreading. According to the psychologists who described the illusion, we are influenced by seeing, in the mirror, the reflection of the subject before it; we then assume—erroneously—that the subject also sees the very image we see from our viewpoint. This tendency arises from an egocentric preconception: we think that everyone has access to the same information we receive from our own point of view, whereas to share the same visual field we would have to occupy a similar viewpoint. In other words, we imagine that we can occupy multiple points of view at once—the magic of painting.

In a similar way, on Zoom, Teams, or Meet we are "at the mirror," yet the act of mirroring does not occur properly, because we cannot simultaneously face the apparatus of capture and look at our "reflected" image. Thus, just as while looking at the paintings of Venus we assume she is admiring herself in the mirror, in our self-perception within meeting app interfaces we believe we

are mirroring ourselves in the "selfie" of our preview tile, while we are in fact witnessing a *mise en abyme* of mirroring, without ever being able to meet our own gaze. In these closed-circuit faces we are condemned to watch a vision that our filmed face directs elsewhere, and thus to witness the performance of a face-eye that does not produce gaze.

If in Magritte's painting, mentioned above, the mirror displays the production of a gaze function even in the absence of a face, while in the Venus effect of the preview tile we find instead a face "at the mirror" that cannot meet its own gaze because that gaze is constantly diverted. We expect video to behave like a mirror, returning a reflection adherent to reality, whereas our existences among screens, as Giovanna Borradori suggests, "are governed by a sort of Venus effect" (2016, 247).

That same misalignment shapes our encounter with the other faces that appear on screen. In the topology of gazes produced by the interface we do not meet the gaze of those with whom we are connected; we are limited to staring at their video image, and we cannot decipher where their gaze is directed—generally engaged in a scan among layered windows and applications. Sometimes, in a clumsy attempt to appear more expressive, we try to intercept the gaze of those other faces: diverting our eyes away from the images and staring the webcam's objective in an attempt to produce a television-style look. But soon, deprived of the sight of others' faces, we are drawn back to the grid; our eyes scan the split-screen image, following the lines of force imposed by the interface, in order to recover the spectacle of a faciality now deprived of its decisive function of fixation: an act of seeing that does not produce a gaze.

If we reverse the terms, we might imagine a different articulation of the split between eye and gaze described by Jacques Lacan, and before him by Roger Caillois, as though the scission were inverted: this is not a gaze produced even in the absence of an eye as a biological organ, but a form of looking detached from its capacity for fixation—a face that has lost the catalytic, hypnotic function of the gaze.

In meeting apps the image of our face thus becomes a mask for our gaze. In extending our visual capacity and our visibility, telepresence simultaneously generates the need for masking: the need to obstruct the lens, just as the pointing finger of Acconci in *Centers* seems about to do. The environment generated by video's regime of visibility demands that we develop the ability to dissimulate the surface of our body—to learn *how not to be seen*, to borrow Hito Steyerl's expression.[7] This dialectic between showing and hiding pertains to the intrinsically ambiguous structure of the screen, which here recovers its etymological function as shield and protection investigated in genealogies of the screen (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010; Buckley et al. 2019; Bodini et al. 2020; Strauven 2021) and re-emerging

7 H. Steyerl, *How not to be seen. A fucking didactic educational .MOV file* (2013).

forcefully in pandemic and post-pandemic contexts (Carbone and Lingua 2023; Casetti 2023). Of this ambiguous nature we may be more or less aware: we can be Narcissi who are aware or unaware of the opaque presence of mediation, as Andrea Pinotti notes by alluding to the myth's double articulation (2025, 17–42).

Before becoming the surface of a transparent exhibition of the image, the screen is camouflage, an interstitial barrier, a membrane, a filter. This prophylactic function tied to screen-mediated communication was prefigured by David Foster Wallace in a section of *Infinite Jest* (1996), which offers a striking phenomenology *ante litteram* of videoconferencing platforms. In the novel's futuristic universe, the advent of videocalling, after an initial moment of euphoria, ends in failure. For the narrator, the causes lie in the emotional stress produced by visual telephone interfaces. By reducing the speaker's body to immobility and forcing an appearance of total dedication to the interlocutor, "videophony" subverts the regime of distraction characteristic of interpersonal communication, which permitted a "bilateral illusion of unilateral attention." A second psychosocial phenomenon, however, undermines the new technology more radically: symptomatic consequences tied to users' negative self-perception of their own image—what the narrator calls a form of "video-physiognomic dysphoria." Seeing their own image in the output signal, video callers recoil in horror, unable to recognize themselves. In response, the market begins to produce high-definition masks designed to improve users' appearance: at first electronically generated—an archaeology of augmented-reality filters or virtual avatars—and then, more cheaply, as wearable sheaths; these are soon replaced by transmissible photographs, sort of proto-profile pictures, that can reflect the desired self most effectively. Such images can be placed in front of the camera to block the field of view completely and are eventually replaced by standard lens covers. The decline of videophony finally allows users to regain their lost invisibility—exactly as we have learned to do in our own practice of remote video communication, by exercising the option of turning off the built-in webcam.

As we settle in front of our laptops we arrange ourselves like Venus in her *toilette* (Fig. 6): our faces pose like models before the mirror, yet without being able to see themselves—hidden by the veil that is the screen, as an extension of the *toile*, that is the "cloth," from which the dressing table takes its name, namely the embroidered or ruffled trimming arranged around the piece of furniture, where ointments, perfumes, makeup, brushes, and other boudoir objects were traditionally displayed (see Koda and Bolton 2006). On closer inspection, it is precisely in this piece of furniture that we can discern an archaeology of the personal computer setting as a tool for remote communication.

Indeed, if clothing and female makeup, with the consolidation of the bourgeois value system, are relegated to the reserved space of the bedroom, the dressing table, as it takes shape in the aristocratic lifestyle of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, constitutes a peculiar intersection between intimacy

and the social dimension. As evidences by the ceremony of the royal *levée*, the lady's morning *toilette* merges private ritual with public performance—an occasion not only to receive friends and courtiers and keep abreast of the latest news and gossip, but also to conclude business and economic decisions. In the *toilette*, the display of the female body thus becomes the site of a spectacularization of domestic space akin to that generated by contemporary telepresence.

Figure 6. *Venus at a Mirror* (Peter Paul Rubens, 1614).

Figure 7. *La casa telematica*, toeletta, Fiera di Milano (Ugo La Pietra, 1983). Courtesy Archivio Ugo La Pietra.

The convergence between the dressing-table setting and the topology of telepresence did not escape the attention of the artists who pioneered experimental work in video. The para-specular structure of the closed-circuit installation and the motif of Venus at the mirror overlap, for example, in one of the environments of Ugo La Pietra's project *La casa telematica* (1972), which explores the interpenetration of electronic technology and domestic space, prefiguring contemporary smart homes. In the installation presented in 1983 at the Milan Fair, the dressing-table area reinterprets the dressing table—a status symbol of post-war bourgeois interior design—by extending it by means of a closed-circuit camera system. The archival photograph of the environment (itself exploiting the Venus effect to conceal the photographic apparatus from the shooting) shows the reflected image of a performer as she combs her hair. Three monitors counterpoint this reflection by capturing perspectives of her face not accessible through the frontal vision of the mirror. The juxtaposed montage of screens thus spatializes the body image, recomposing its three-dimensionality. The real-time circuit produces a deferral not of duration but of the surface of space occupied by the body: in the telematic *toilette* I observe my face in the mirror and

at the same time I access it from perspectives (output of cameras placed at the sides and behind me) that I could not obtain simultaneously.

The convergence between video's proxemics and the function of the mirror seems to confirm Krauss's intuition. However, the video does not merely re-enact the mirror's narcissistic function. Indeed, the narcissism that for Krauss is endemic to video is not to be understood only in a psychoanalytic sense, but also in light of the "second and more profound sense of narcissism" (Merleau-Ponty [1964] 1968, 139) that, for Merleau-Ponty, marks our relation to the visible in general. If the mirror is the first technique through which the body experiences its exposure to gazes—discovering itself not only as seeing but as reciprocally visible—video, by exposing profiles that I cannot see from my own viewpoint, shows that my body is not only visible but three-dimensionally and environmentally inserted into the visible—indeed, it is *of it* (Merleau-Ponty [1964] 1968). As Lacan puts it: "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides" ([1973] 1998, 72). Thus, bringing video's gaze into circuit makes it evident that the reciprocity or reversibility of vision is always imminent and never realized in fact: I cannot simultaneously witness myself as perceiving *and* as perceived. Video installations engage with this truism by technically extending the reflexivity already inherent in our embodied condition, our way of being a body, therefore staging the slippage of gazes that re-emerges in the closed-circuit faces of digital platforms.

The face that appears on video is not myself but a me-as-other, my *Doppelgänger*, an uncanny alter ego. *Doppelgänger* (1979) is also the title of a video performance by Elaine Shemilt, part of a series of experimentations begun in 1974 and later eventually lost as they served as supports for ephemeral installations[8]. In the framework of feminist avant-gardes of the 1970s, Shemilt uses video as a performative element to manipulate her own bodily image and generate real-time perceptual deformations. In *Doppelgänger*, after an extreme frontal close-up, we see the artist sit before a mirror. On screen we can observe in a medium shot both her reflected image in the mirror and her profile from a three-quarter angle, standing in front of it. Looking at herself in the mirror, Shemilt proceeds to apply a thick, pale foundation to her face. Once finished, she takes a makeup pencil and begins applying makeup not on her face but directly on the mirror's surface, tracing the outline of her face, reduced to the white *tabula rasa* of a theatrical mask. The drawing of the face on the mirror surface overlays her reflected face, tracing eyebrows, eyes, mouth, nose, and so on: the phantasmatic alter ego to which the performance's title refers.[9] When the drawing is complete, the artist leaves the scene, moving away from

8 A restored version of the videotape is accessible at: https://vimeo.com/115278830.

9 The voice-over evokes the theme of a double personality by relaying medical notes on schizophrenia. The entire video is punctuated, at several points, by cutaways to photographs featuring multiple exposures of the artist's face, suggesting the idea of a multiple identity and a lack of correspondence between her public image and her inner self. Cf. Leuzzi (2016, 2019), Leuzzi et al. (2019).

the mirror: only the "double" produced during the performance remains, as if the copy had replaced the original.

If in the history of painting artists have always used mirrors to represent themselves, Shemilt similarly uses video to realise a self-portrait in the mirror (Fig. 8-9)—while the mirror itself takes the place of the pictorial canvas. Yet the viewer of the video performance quickly discovers themselves a victim of the Venus effect. In order to trace the facial lines on the reflective surface while following the outline of her own face, the artist does not look "into" the mirror: visibly her eyes do not point toward her reflection. Where is her gaze directed? Toward the closed-circuit video preview, which remains off-screen for the beholder watching the recording, and is only visible from the performer's position[10]. In other words, in the video performance we observe an anamorphosis: the face traced on the surface of the mirror appears as such only from the camera's (and the spectator's) point of view, while the artist, from where she sits, cannot perceive the same correspondence (except as she looks at the closed-circuit video feed visible only to her).

Figure 8–9. *Doppelgänger* (Elaine Shemilt, 1979). Courtesy of the Artist & REWIND Artists' Video (DJCAD, University of Dundee).

As long as the two images—pictorial and specular—overlap, the mirror surface functions, in its opacity, as a barrier preventing the artist from acting on that other version of herself that appears on video "beyond the mirror": we, spectators, can see it, but for her it is accessible only obliquely, that is, only by diverting her gaze away from the mirror and to the video.[11] The performer's gaze

10 In 2016, Shemilt produced a re-enactment of the video performance, curated by Laura Leuzzi and and Adam Lockhart at the Nunnery Gallery, Bow Arts, London. *Performance documentation accessible here: Doppelgänger Redux*: https://vimeo.com/190696369.

11 This diplopia reverberates in the dissonance between the dressing-table setting—defined by the act of applying makeup as a social marker of femininity—and the artist's outfit: a white T-shirt and overalls, fashionable in the 1970s and 1980s, which evokes the world of manual and industrial labour, in contrast with the stereotype of feminine display.

is directed toward the mirror and yet oriented toward an invisible elsewhere, elusive and inaccessible. Indeed, this topology seem to replicate precisely the misalignment of gazes that constitutes our experience of videoconferencing and the conditions of production of selfies. The difference lies in the fact that, in meeting apps or in the preview tile of our smartphones, the distance between camera and screen has collapsed, reducing the divergence of trajectories to a minimum, narrowing of the gap between screen and mirror as if they were foregrounded by the same logic.

3. Virtual Closed-Circuit Faces

The closed-circuit video installations of the 1970s belong to a broader genealogy of contemporary media, and especially of today's video conferencing platforms. As early artistic experiments centered on the teletransmitted face, these works already brought to light the issues bound up with our transformation into a living image—an image that both corresponds to us and stands in for us. Some historical installations force video to become mirror (through a combination of reflective surfaces and camera positioning); others exalt its specificity as a filming eye capable of inserting the subject into the pure field of the visible (by denying specularity or intensifying the diversion of gaze). The application of closed circuit to everyday technologies—first the smartphone, then telepresence apps—has pushed in the direction of mirroring the self in the transmitted signal (through mirroring options or the inversion of the webcam), and produced faces that possess the inverted lateralization of the specular reflection but not the capacity for eye-to-eye gaze. This last divergence between video and mirror may be addressed by the imminent introduction of avatars that will replace our filmed faces. The avatar (the image that remains on the mirror, our *Doppelgänger*) will ideally be able to simulate ocular contact with interlocutors, although with modalities still to be defined. In some experimental apps avatars will be in augmented reality with a significant video component and in Horizon Workrooms, a mixed-reality environment launched by Facebook precisely as an evolution of webcam videoconferencing, VR headsets are used to enter "rooms" and interact remotely. The transmission of our movements—making the real self coincide with the virtual one—will be the only survival of the mirror device: head and arm gestures will be tracked (still on the basis of a sensor that films us, as in video-based devices), but at the same time our virtual faces will be endowed with gaze. Avatarization is in fact the only way to place a virtual webcam "behind" our eyes, restoring an immersive form otherwise thwarted by the fusion of monitor and camera. In this way, the least "fusional" of contemporary media, still conceived as a mosaic of framed flat images, concomitant and co-present—will also move in the direction of immersivity.

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