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Alighting: A Phenomenology and Ethics of Sight and Touch in the Videocall

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Abstract

This thesis investigates from a phenomenological perspective how it is that I am able to share a space with my brother, Kyle, by way of the videocalling application FaceTime. While the thesis uses the personal as a starting point, it then draws on Merleau-Ponty, the tradition of critical phenomenology, and Media Studies to argue that the one and the other can share a ‘space’ through the screen, despite that they ostensibly only have mutual access to their auditory and visual environments. Drawing heavily on Merleau-Ponty and other contemporary phenomenologists, the thesis takes space and communication to be two different sides of the same phenomenon of intercorporeality, of being in a world with others, and proposes that communication and space are not superpositional (subsequent and/or antecedent to one another; causally related), but coeval and coterminous. I argue that contrary to some recent and canonical media studies paradigms, the screen is phenomenologically neither a flattening of presence or being through the institution of a transcendental ocularcentrism, nor the portal to another (virtual) world, and thus not emblematic of an exposure to or display of pure presence. Rather, I suggest that the screen of the videocall is the ongoing surfacing of what Lisa Guenther calls intercorporeal depth, the manifest “vision of another vision, complimentary to mine and yet irreducibly different”; indeed, I see myself as “one among other” seers, and “not as a solitary subject of experience,” even if the videocall nonetheless heightens one’s experience of geographical distance (Guenther: 2013). Ultimately, the thesis regards the computer screen as a surface that might provoke us to hesitate in the reenactment of sedimented (ocularcentric and egocentric) ways of seeing and proposes instead that a sense of sharing space can be thought through in terms of the pre-thetic, operative intentionality of Merleau-Ponty’s “sensory life”. Drawing on the media theory of Laura Marks and the critical phenomenology of Alia Al-Saji, I conclude that the videocall is an instance of haptic visuality and, as such, represents an ‘affective’ or ‘rhythmic’ instance of lived ontological non-coincidence that is nonetheless a communion.

Summary for Lay Audience

Videocalling technology has become increasingly accessible across demographics. Media studies has long concerned itself with the implications of being able to communicate across distances in apparently ‘real time’—without (noticeable) delay. Still, there remain some trends in media studies whose foundational presumptions end up reducing the videocall experience to a ‘substitute’ for ‘in-person’ communication, and which presumptions in fact deny the possibility of any communication occurring in the first place. I suggest that these theories end up either painting interlocutors as isolated individuals or else reducing space to something that can never be shared. At the same time, there are also strains in media studies that take up diverse theoretical and philosophical starting points in order to describe the creative, communicational potential of digital, screen-based communications technologies. However, there remain few theorizations of contemporary videocalling communication, especially in terms of one’s experience of space, time, and embodiment. Accordingly, through a description and analysis of videocalling with my own brother, I ask how the videocall engages the senses such that interlocutors feel a sense of shared space. Specifically, I am concerned with how the videocall allows for a sense of shared space through the ostensibly limited sensory pallet of hearing and vision. I thus aim not at defining ‘communication,’ writ large; instead, through the philosophy of phenomenology, I consider how the self and the world structure one another such that the space shared over the videocall can appear as more than one which is typically regarded as virtual, sensorily deprived (or somehow ‘crippling’), or imagined. The phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers a way of considering my sense of myself as always impacted and conditioned by the other’s presence before I grasp myself as *my* self; similarly, it allows for a way of conceiving space as more than something subjects and objects ‘occupy.’ According to both Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and his recent critical interpreters, the recognition of both presence and the senses of self and other that this entails are always co-relational. The material infrastructure of the videocall helps provoke a recognition of this foundational co-relation.

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My family, spread across continents.

Sacha, Toby, and Sarah: my oldest friends.

Andrea, of course, whose very love and company has been a community, especially these past two years.

This work *is* a dedication: it would take an entire separate work to pronounce the name of the one to whom it is committed.

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Alighting: A Phenomenology and Ethics of Sight and Touch in the Videocall

Introduction: *Discourses of Screening Experience*

Kyle, my twelve-year-old brother, calls me through FaceTime, the videocalling application built in to my computer. Despite his living overseas we are face-to-face. I am bound to experience a sociality with Kyle that is limited to his visible, live-streamed image that appears within the area that the margins of my computer screen stake out. Also evident is my access to his auidial environment: his device's microphone transmits to my speakers. Of course, I have to presume from past experience that my image and voice are with him in a similar way, either on his computer or the family tablet. In any case, it is on-screen that Kyle's face and background appear before me. I cannot travel to meet him. And yet I am in front of Kyle, and we are face-to-face. Neither of us has moved to be so close to the other that we could hug; and yet, we see each other as though from a distance where touching one another with our hands would be possible. And so in the face of this distance our eyes wander in each other's milieux; I can confirm by my own eyes that Kyle is wearing a sweater, or that it is cloudy where he is and the drier, cool season. There, and above my left ear, the first few pixels of bronze Fall unfurl on the tree outside my window. For whom is this not real?

I, at least, feel that Kyle and I are able to come together and communicate, to share a common space over FaceTime. Hence there is in the moment, for me, no question of the reality of the call, of to whom I am speaking. Still, if I understand that the call is a reality, then it does not immediately follow that the space I imagine we share is as real. The videocall nonetheless

appears to offer a solution to the ‘problem’ of topographic dislocation—of two or more being held apart by whatever circumstances that cause the distance between communicants to arise as *this impassable, yet recognizable, distance*. How does the videocall engage the senses such that communication can obtain despite this dislocation? To be more specific, I am concerned with how the videocall allows for a sense of shared space through the ostensibly limited sensory pallet of hearing and vision. This specification therefore aims not at defining ‘communication,’ writ large, but at reviewing the conditions of possibility for sharing a space that is typically regarded as virtual, sensorily deprived (or somehow ‘crippling’), imagined, or ‘simply felt.’ And what does it mean to suggest that this audio-visual space shares in less reality than the ‘full’ range of the five senses?

This explanation will take up what existential phenomenological thought characterizes as lived space to ask how two or more can share it. In chapters two and three I perform an applied phenomenological reading of the videocall, what in Husserlian and (to an extent) Merleau-Pontian terms would be a “phenomenological reduction” of the “conditions of the possibility of the appearances” that the videocall renders (Davis 5). This asks more than simply how or on account of what something appears to me; it asks after structures of conscious embodiment that in the first place allow Kyle’s presence to appear as *his* presence—which is to say, as his presence that is meaningful to me. In chapter one, on the contrary, I employ the terms and framework of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s own critical “bracketing” (or phenomenological *epochē*) of tropes in empiricism and idealism that I argue theories of the screen reenact, albeit with their terms altered. Put otherwise, at the more general level of logical structure, I engage with how these theories implicitly reject the possibility of what they mean to prove.

From the point of view of lived space, the relationship between dislocation and communication does not persist in the way that a cause relates to its effect such that the effect could be reduced to its cause, or such that the effect would have always been immanent in the cause. Referring to the quotidian and goal-oriented experience of space, Lisa Guenther notes that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology does acknowledge the relevance of that measurable homogeneous space (or "geometric," or "thetic" space) which regards agents and world alike in terms of their thingly objectivity, in terms of cause and effect: "I find myself 'in' space and implicated in a nexus of causal relations: bound by the laws of nature [...and] constrained by my own physiology" (*Solitary Confinement* 167).¹ This everyday notion of space helps me to predict, plan, and adapt my actions to the world around me. Over the videocall, I am certainly constrained such that I cannot touch Kyle in a hug, if we take touch in its typical denotation. Instead, Kyle persists in his presence to me as visible spectacle, one whom I fix with my vision just as the chemical bath fixes a photograph and materializes a memory. In this quotidian way of experiencing and of reflecting on experience, objects are useful for me according to my capacity, and I am assured of my self, my sense of being and individuality, through the objects.

As I show below, though, this sense of space is not especially useful for an understanding of being able to share a space over which neither participant has complete control. Indeed, geometric space ends up displacing the perceiver (or communicant) from the field in which and by which she would perceive or communicate. This superordinate positionality with respect to the field in which the viewer sits is what Husserl calls the "natural attitude" and which Merleau-Ponty qualifies as the "realism" of empiricism and intellectualism alike. As Gunther summarizes

¹ Hereafter cited as 'SC'.

with respect to Husserl, “the natural attitude is a naïve, unreflective relation to the world as if it existed separately from the consciousness to which it appears” (“Epistemic Injustice” 196). The similarly “naïve” realism of which Merleau-Ponty accuses empiricism and intellectualism (a rendering of idealism) belongs to “all [those] philosophies that leave consciousness behind and take as given one of its results” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 48).² Put otherwise, these realisms have a tendency to take as given in their argument what it means to prove.

In contrast to the realism of the natural attitude, lived space, or the space of the “phenomenal field,” proposes that I “inhabit space” in a way that goes beyond a figuration of space as the undergirding by which I posit the utility or relevance of others and objects—and others *as* objects (PhP 140).³ In lived space, I am tied up and imbedded in the same world in which I perceive: I have experience “as a corporeal Being-in-the-world who is both constituted by that world *and* constitutive of its sense” (SC 168, my emphasis). The recognition of presence is always co-relational and therefore always one that recognizes the reality that Kyle and I are face-to-face before I consciously deduce the impassable kilometres between us. This does not say that whatever I happen to feel at a given moment is capable of constituting the objective world; by extension, it does not suggest that I simply know Kyle’s experience through analogy with my own. On the contrary, this co-relational recognition of presence suggests that it is not sufficient to define dislocation or distance in terms of propinquity, or *vice versa*. In the same way, it is not sufficient to describe the experience of videotelephonic space—or spatiality in

² Hereafter cited as PhP

³ ‘Inhabit’ might appear to be just some catachrestic alternative to ‘being in’; but its relation to ‘habit’ (through the Latin *habere*, to have) as an unthought and fundamental acquisition resounds with Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that I indeed *have* the world “through my body” and, in this way, am invested in and with it—that is, the world *has* me as well (PhP 367).

general—in terms of its constituents (or *vice versa*) since these constituents would have to be spaceless beforehand—and would accordingly have to either construct space by themselves, from nothing, or chance the benevolence of god (a transcendental alterity on whose intention and effects I can only speculate). And finally, the real cannot be considered as self-stable or self-evident if it is always accessed through the realm of irreality. And yet these are precisely the sorts of arguments that risk inflecting one’s understanding of the space we share over the videocall. The sense of dislocation over the videocall is rather possible only on the grounds of a prior and tacit (or unthought) understanding of co-presence, of something shared, of ‘something’ from which one might in the first place be dislocated.

Finally, if this formulation begins to resemble the familiar, if elegant, negative-ontological maxim that connection as such is predicated on disconnection, it remains for the following chapter to clarify that this original co-presence is not predicated initially as *some thing*, either stable in itself, or else posited by a stable and “constituting consciousness” (god or the perceiver) (PhP 42). Subjects and objects come late to experience. To retreat to a level of thought that does not take the essence or nature of its object for given, that does not posit it as a *some thing*, is not to aim at paradoxically knowing “the experience of an unknown reality to which there is no methodical passage. Rather, it is the making explicit or the bringing to light of the pre-scientific life of consciousness that alone gives the operations of science their full sense and to which these operations always refer” (PhP 59). If this notion of pre-scientific co-presence displaces that of definitionalist necessity or negative ontology, and if this provokes something of an intellectual dissatisfaction or unease, then it is with this unease that I must linger a little longer before returning to lived space.

In chapter two, then, I return to this lived space of the videocall through the lens of what Guenther calls intercorporeal depth and what Merleau-Ponty calls levels or lighting. By drawing on the bases that Guenther and Merleau-Ponty provide, as well as Helen Fielding's application of lighting to the experience of cinema, I argue that what we mean by touch should not be limited through its association with the merely tactile, but expanded to include other sensory modalities, the likes of perception and sensibility generally; further, I contend that by seeing we belong to the same world—though not the world that we would have if we were to meet eye-to-eye in the same location. The goal of this chapter is twofold: for one, I want to expand the canonical descriptions of the screen as a mirror or portal into a surface that has phenomenal depth; second, I want to show that this depth is tied to how I orient myself (or am oriented) with respect to my bodily capacities, the bodily capacities that the apparatus of the computer-screen-image entrains and what role the other has in the orientation of these capacities.

In chapter three, I begin to flesh out the ethical ramifications of how the screenic experience of the videocall orients my relationship to another. I mobilize the foregoing phenomenological engagement with the videocall to articulate how the space that the screen opens up allows for what Alia Al-Saji calls a critical-ethical vision of sensory life. I consider the visual-tactile experience of what Laura Marks calls haptic vision to describe the videocall as a literalization of seeing otherwise than vision. Haptic visibility causes us to hesitate in the operation of our objectifying gaze by drawing attention to the extent that any projection of the natural attitude always relies on a tacit presumption of co-presence. The arc of chapters two and three therefore tracks how what I treat as my space is always to some extent already a shared space. To this extent, I conclude, the meaning of sharing space is more than sharing a

geographical location and that the meeting which occurs as a failure to meet in the same location at the same time is nevertheless a meeting of vision, a meeting in lived space, if not one that always 'makes sense' or satisfies in terms that homogeneous space makes available.

Chapter 1: Screening Methodologies: Immediacy, Virtuality, and Phenomenology

1.1: Metaphor, Reflection, and Refraction

There is a certain unease or disquiet that persists for me through most of the meetings that Kyle and I share. In part, this disquiet both stems from and further manifests as a contraction of mobile powers. We are unable to occupy the same space such that we could both, for example, circle around the same object, pick it up, and pass it back and forth. In this way the cohesion of the call partly depends on the extent to which we remain fixed within the camera's field of view. If, for some reason, I have to leave the field of view that my camera portrays to Kyle's screen, then Kyle is at a loss to follow me. Even my aural presence to him diminishes to the point of interruption when I leave the room my computer is in. It appears that my power for taking up Kyle's world is rendered down to the field of view that Kyle's camera offers up to my screen. Where I cannot move myself such that Kyle appears before me, there I must rely on his remaining in place.

Subsequently, this contraction in the potential of free movement manifests at the level of reflection in linguistic description, specifically through the diction of itinerancy. There is an

ambivalence, an oscillation, between movement and immobility—and this ambivalence further reflects the degree to which I feel and recognize that I am both present with Kyle and not ‘really’ there with him. Over the videocall, eyes meander and cross paths when legs and bodies cannot cross borders; and when (and where) bodies cannot touch, the panes of the different windows in which our images sit can overlap. Yes, we ‘cross’ a continent and our eyes cross paths while remaining stationary; and truly there is still some life, even ironic humour, in the moribund metaphor of staying in ‘touch’ over the videocall. The eyes rhetorically acquire a tangible-touching flair even as the windows’ images and the windows themselves substitute for the rest of our bodies: a given sensory capacity, such as vision, becomes synecdochic for sensation while images recede into symbolism: I see what *would be* Kyle’s tangible body (and room, and objects) were we in the same location *as if* I were there with him in the same location.

But both this synecdoche and this symbolism operate according to a reference of absence. It is on this account that one might approach the screened scene with reservations, with a feeling of skepticism towards the truth and the significance of what the screen portrays. ‘Really,’ I do not touch you; our images are not ‘truly’ who we are. Movement, touch, and the ‘body’ (as though the corporeal reigned from someplace inside the hands or chest) appear as the sign of the videocall’s constitutive lack of bodily integrity and wholesale bodily inclusion. In this rendering, Kyle’s presence to me and impact on me is expressed negatively as the horizon of mobility and touch that the audio-visual limits of the videocall impose. Just as, in the words of Vivian Sobchack, the electronic screen “atomizes and abstractly schematizes the analogic quality” of earlier film-based media, so is the body broken down, atomized or ‘pixelated,’ into mere sensory components (eyes, ears, skin) (153). To the same extent that it appears my body is reduced to

both its lack of free movement and a mosaic of sensory capacities, so am I compelled to treat Kyle as some *anxious object*—that transferred epithet of immobility—who must remain fixed in his frame in order for me to feel connected to him. In other words, the limits that the videocall’s screen enforces on my senses in the first place discretize these senses and make of the scene only a source of sensation. To the extent that I am atomized so is Kyle objectified.

There is in fact, then, a two-ply ambivalence in the electronic screen, which is represented in both the ostensible operations of digital-electronic screens themselves as well as in the theories that map them. In this double ambivalence, the Janus-faced undecidability of the sensorially diverse scenes that electronic screens portray slips into the more decidedly two-faced. That is, the ambivalence consists in the *initial* ambivalence between distance and proximity, mobility and immobility, *and* the oscillation between this potential truth-at-distance and the un-certifiable, or ‘subjective,’ representation: an oscillation between ambivalence and the (in)certitude of the image’s or scene’s authenticity. On the one hand, I am in almost immediate relation to the scene as a sensory mass of vision and hearing. I understand that the sounds that Kyle’s microphone picks up are processed and transferred, as though point-by-point, to my speakers; and his camera and my monitor correspond likewise. On the other hand, I am distanced from the scene and the other to the extent that our mutual im/mobility forces an objectification. As Elena del R o writes regarding a fictionalized account of the videocall, and in the adopted voice of classical cinema studies, the screen serves as the “mediating device generating the distance between subject and world” that is first necessary for objectification to occur (96). After all, I cannot strike with vision what is already pressed against my pupil—it is too close.

And yet, in some prevalent theories of screened telecommunication, this undecidability regarding the role that the body plays in its mobility, in its touching-tangibility with respect to the other, appears to resolve in a rebranding of Cartesian skepticism. The dualism of this skepticism hinges on the (un)certainty of the senses in the first place and the (un)knowability of the image's provenance, representational accuracy, or material reality in the second. The personal and discursive unease I have described explains and perhaps articulates one reason why some theorists and critics of the digital-electronic screen are concerned for the state of the body in scenarios of contemporary mediated communication. Kris Paulsen, in her recent work *Here/There*, encapsulates this concern and the drive that develops from it: to think of human-technology interaction from an "embodied" perspective "helps us both to rethink the status of materiality and matter in digital contexts and to reconsider our ethical relationships to mediated and virtual subjects and things" (122). In short, Paulsen's work represents a wider concern for an understanding of our own bodies in relation to those of others (and other objects), which latter, thanks to digital-electronic technologies, one might touch, see, and impact without risking any reciprocity.⁴ If we we want to take the body seriously in cases of communications technology, Paulsen warns, we cannot give up the duty to recognize that actions carried out from the perspective of a disembodied eye—on a drone or in the computer's webcam—have reciprocal effects for the perceiver and the perceived.

While I do not pursue Paulsen's semiotic reading of digital screens here, many other screen studies theories which draw on deconstruction and phenomenology nevertheless risk

⁴ Paulsen cites the live television broadcast as a more benign example of this asymmetry; later, she adds surveillance cameras and military drones to her discussion as more pernicious instances (cf., especially, 145-82).

misrepresenting both the screen and the body in their efforts to read the latter back into the former. Indeed, in this chapter I argue that these theories end up negating the very possibility of what they hope to prove, namely the possibility of sharing space, of communicating across space, through electronic media. They instead either remove the body from the equation through their characterizations of space, or else erase the possibility of any space which two bodies might share. I contend that there is in the videocall not so much a single screen set to work framing and portraying the bodies and spaces of one interlocutor to the other. The mode of screenic logic at work over the videocall is likewise not confined to the material apparatus of the computer, its LCD display, its camera, microphone, and speaker. Rather I hold that the screen of the videocall is a laminate of *screening functions* that includes both interlocutors' videocalling devices in all their materiality *as well as* the aesthetic tactics—*namely metaphor*—that code our reflection upon the experience itself.⁵

If at the level of personal reflection the videocall provokes a rhetoric of itinerancy, then at the level of theory the screen of the videocall manifests in the metaphorical figures of the portal and the mirror. In the same way that the screen is a laminate of screening functions, so are these figures not confined to their material counterparts: the mirror and the portal are emblematic of discernible, yet inextricable, onto-epistemological operations. (For example, a given mirror-based technology is only metonymic of theories that operate according to a specular logic.) The screen of the videocall is the portal to another world that screens for sight, screens from touch, and filters out the effects of geographical distance. This portal is one in whose pane collects my autumnal and Kyle's tropical and which allows a sort of double crossing to take place, a mutual

⁵ In the subsequent chapter I examine how these screening functions can indeed begin to establish a type of 'third' space, or place, that is not entirely one subject's or the other's.

crossing of borders for us on either side. Or else the screen is primarily a mirror in all its matte neutrality that reflects and certifies our view of the world to ourselves and in this way screens the subject from the object even as it screens the object for the subject. In this last instance, my real body and my mirror image correspond point-by-point in an array of causal efficiency (traced out in the angles of incidence and reflection of ray diagrams, for example) such that I both literally see myself in the mirror-image and, in a sense, depend on this virtual image to reaffirm my own body.

In addition to its inevitable implication in metaphor, the screen of the videocall is a paradigmatic example of the generalized screen's dual-modal operation. I maintain that to the same extent that the screen may both reveal and conceal from sight, touch, or access in space and time, so do the ways that we speak and reflect on the screen conceal the intricacies of these material practices and embodied experiences from consideration. If the screen is therefore both materially and discursively refractive, then reflection on the experience of screening must disavow the desire to undo this refractive and reflective (or duplicative, dual-modal) logic and instead confirm that the reduction of the screen to only one of its 'sides,' or only one of its modes, commits only to either the assertion of the screen's existence or only to our understanding of it, but not to a recognition of screenic experience. In such a mono-modal reflection the lived space of the screen remains *in camera*.

What I call the mirror model of the screen works according to a mediating logic, whereby I arrive at a common with the other through a process of mutual objectification and a reduction of space to measurable distance. The mirror grounds this measurable space and situates the real body, the stable subject within it, through the production of a virtual image, or a "constitutive

outside” by which its own reality claims, its own boundaries, are secured. The portal rejects this mediacy in favour of a model of communication which stresses immediacy and presence. In this way, it posits the common of communication in the form of a simultaneity. It is in this notion of simultaneous presence that the ones for whom, or ‘between’ whom, a common might arise are ultimately erased. Even though the mirror and the portal have been left behind in lieu of other models of the screen, the way the images of electronic and mobile screens are characterized maintain a tautological self-referentiality characteristic of these older, supposedly surpassed models.

These metaphors do not so much reveal the essence of the screen so much as screen experience from thought. It is primarily in this sense that the electronic screen that supports our social and communications media proliferates images—images that are themselves judgements concerning a meaningful reality rather than a token of unreality, moral vacuity, or wishful thinking. That is, the critiques and theories of the images and scenes that the screen produces are themselves such screenic images. And so it is ironic that the metaphoricity which these critiques rely on in fact offer an excellent re-inscription—rather than description—of the screen. In the end, if this work moves beyond the spatializing, sensory, and peripatetic metaphors of staying in touch over the videocall then it is not to reject these metaphors or metaphoricity. It is instead to show the pre-reflective or pre-discursive bases of these metaphors and the structures by which their linguistic significance can ring so true.

1.2: *The Mirror's Objectivity and the Virtual's Constitutive Outside*

Historically, the screen has been just as much a site for the reception of projected images as it has been a site for the production of metaphor in theorizations that would relate it to notions of the real, the illusory, and the human imaginative capacity. Whole “screenologies,” “media archaeolog[ies] of the screen” have arisen that would peel back the historicized layers of factual deposit to get to the causal truth of the screen’s impact on thought, perception, and culture in general (Huhtamo 2016). Erkki Huhtamo, who coined the term screenology in his eponymous essay, situates the contemporary digital-electronic screen of communications technology within the more general category of screen-devices or screen-objects, such as the photograph, the cinema, and status display-monitors on appliances and vehicles. Similarly, Francesco Casetti, in his essay “What is a Screen Nowadays?” traces the historical and etymological shifts that the word, idea, and apparatus of screen undergo. He moreover updates the canonical metaphoric descriptions of the magic lantern’s phantasmagoric screen and the cinema’s silver screen, which relied on such figures as the frame, the window, and the mirror (18-20). What these screenologies make clear is that the screening function of a given image-production process includes the means of production as well as both the product itself and its reception.

In lieu of these older, more analog metaphors, Casetti offers the figures of the monitor, the bulletin board, and the scrapbook, which blend to form the super-category of “display” in the mobile and internet-connected device (23-8). Casetti grounds each of these metaphorical models for thinking through the screen in relation to the situations or goals with respect to which the screen is placed. Yet for all that these new metaphors might have greater descriptive and

emotional resonance for people today, they do not ultimately muster the descriptive weight to apply to the videocall. The monitor refers primarily to the sorts of power imbalances that the panoptic apparatus of surveillance cameras and security terminals produce; the bulletin board best describes video games and augmented reality, a world “not only completely abstract, reduced as it is to numeric values, but also essentially destined for decomposition”; and finally the scrapbook accords most closely with the sorts of socio-cultural dynamics expressed in social media (23-6). As Casetti himself will conclude, not “all the screens that surround us will enter fully into the rubric of the display screen” (29). And I should hope not, for this new display is a “surface [that] no longer implies a reality, an envision [sic], a recognition” in contrast to the apparently sound metaphors used to describe earlier screens (28).

The difficulty with this scenario of metaphoric shift is that it implies that the prior figures of screenic experience *were* sound. But what is the nature, for example, of this implied reality that the likes of the mirror manifested in its description of screenic experience? Casetti’s description of the screen (especially cinema’s) as a mirror is that which most readily corresponds to an understanding of the videocall in its two-ply, material-discursive, ambivalence. Thus, while I agree with Casetti that our ways of describing the screen must accord to the screen’s varied and ever-changing role in our lives, the role of the videocall’s screen remains under-explored in terms of metaphors that go beyond the mirror. As a result, before I can begin to *revaluate* the structures of screenic experience in light of the videocall, I must first *reevaluate* how it continues to be metaphorized in terms of the mirror.

On the model of the mirror, “the screen is a device that restores to us a reflection of the world, including a reflection of ourselves” (19). The self is in other words simultaneously that site by which we first recognize ourselves as one among others—one who is capable of being seen as much as and to the extent that one can see. For it is only by going beyond that site by which we see that any sense of that site in the first place becomes apparent. In this way, Casetti remarks, the specular screen establishes a dialectic of “appropriation and dispossession” that reflects the operative ambivalence between mobility and immobility described in the videocall above (28). The mirror is therefore what posits my subjectivity while also, at the same time, acknowledging my existence as a potential object for others. Last, in this sense, the mirror also acts as a device for “self-regulation and self-recognition,” and so bears at least an ostensible similarity to the homogenous space of the natural attitude (20). Through the mirror, I am confirmed as a subject and able to pick out and make use of objects. This relation of self to world in the manner of an oscillating appropriation-dispossession is what makes the mirror a convincing model for the explanation of the scenes that the electronic screen portrays.

Before going any further, it is important to articulate a distinction that has up till remained in the wings: this is the distinction to be made between the virtual scene that the screen may produce and the tele-present⁶ space it may represent. For just as the mirror in classical conceptions of analog media plays on an epistemological oscillation between propinquity and distance, self and other, and visible and tangible, so does the mirror of electronic media extend this epistemological play into the ontological.

⁶ Different theorists spell this word both with and without the hyphen. For ease of reading, I prefer ‘tele-present’ over the crowded ‘telepresent’; the former also has the advantage of typographically expressing (through its hyphen) what it wants to convey.

Paulsen highlights an ongoing discussion in contemporary digital media discourse that centres around the distinction between virtual reality and tele-reality. Citing art historian and media theorist Oliver Grau, Paulsen notes that these discussions often try to distinguish between the two modes of reality by assigning a “simulacral” value to virtual reality (VR) and a “distal” value to tele-reality (9). Tautological descriptors aside, virtual reality becomes useful when it represents scenes that might not exist in one’s own physical space; and likewise tele-reality rises to relevance when it conveys that which may not exist in one’s own physical space but *does* indeed exist in some such space. The hard-line classical distinction contends that tele-reality makes present while virtual reality makes imaginable. While the apparatus of virtual reality (head- and handsets) “simulate[s] [a] world through a variety of controls that communicate [...] sensations of [a given] fictional world,” tele-reality “shows things that are real but that may not be ‘there’ with the viewer or user” (9). Yet these characterizations of course leave several of their key terms either under- or unexplained. What, for example, is physical space compared to virtual space but the very difference that the comparison in the first place stakes out? If physical space is defined by virtue of the senses, and the senses are defined in terms of physical space, then all that virtual reality allows one to imagine is the figure of some grand circle.

The FaceTime application gives me a small mirror-image of myself in the corner of my screen so that I can compose myself throughout the call, so I can see, in effect, the view that Kyle has of me. It appears that I can forget about simply imagining what he sees. The distinction between my mirror image and the face-to-face encounter coalesces to fit within the frame of the videocall application’s window: I see myself as I would were I to look in the mirror; as well, I see how I look to Kyle *as* I look at him, as I look at his image that his own camera collects and

which his computer projects to my monitor. Surely part of the reason that we look slightly strange to ourselves in photographs or video is that we are most used to seeing ourselves as a mirror-image, that is, as laterally inverted. The camera-screen apparatus of the videocall, by contrast, produces my image as others would see me. And this is what Kyle sees on his screen even as I see, thanks to the same apparatus, my familiar mirror-image. Hence the camera in its socket above my own computer screen plays a diplomatic role—albeit with the help of FaceTime’s software. While it is thanks to *my* camera that Kyle sees me as he would were we face-to-face (in the mode of the optically true), it is also by my own camera, Kyle’s eye in my possession, that I see myself as I am accustomed (in the mode of the laterally inverted such that, when I raise *my* right arm, my reflection appears to raise *his* left).⁷

This bifurcation of optical point of view in image presentation speaks to the tension in contemporary discourses surrounding the (ir)reality of the digitally generated image—which, secondarily, itself signals the complex relation between the physical and the ostensibly immaterial, or the virtual, or the “tele-present,” in contemporary media studies discourses.⁸ Over the videocall, one experiences the other (or the objects of the world) according to a

⁷ The optical effect of the plane mirror in fact goes beyond a lateral inversion: the mirror image is inverted along a projected z-axis of depth, almost as though, like a glove, it were turned inside out. For the purposes of everyday use (such as checking one’s appearance or brightening a room) this additional complexity makes little difference.

⁸ As I discuss below, the term “telepresence” has begun to run alongside the notion of virtuality in the visual social sciences and new media studies as the “perceptual illusion of nonmediation” (Westerman and Skalski 63).

contronymous⁹ screenic logic, the punning expression of which Paul Frosh attributes to Stanley Cavell:

“Screens, whether painterly, cinematic or televisual, have long been understood in terms of a paradox. The screen depicts a world to the viewer but also separates the viewer from that world (this is implied in the screen-as-window metaphor) [...] ‘The screen *screens off*’ (Cavell 1979), marking a distinction between representation to the audience and connectivity with the audience” (155, original emphasis).

We can go further to parse the subsidiary vehicles of this window metaphor: as agent of representation, the screen acts as a barrier to some true essence; as medium of connectivity, it acts as a portal, a means of apparently immediate conveyance. As a laminate, the screen conveys access to truth at a distance, apprehension without contamination. What Frosh attributes to Cavell’s screen in general I would suggest is but one screening function, namely that of the mirror. This mirroring bifurcation is in other words a screen both in the sense that it splits or separates points of view, or vantages, as well as in the sense that it establishes a division at the onto-epistemological level—that which posits the nature of perceiving subject and perceived object, the knower and the known, and between the real and the illusory. In point of fact, there is already a bias of the face-to-face evident in the compulsion to name the optically true or real that image which reproduces a vision for me as though I were before the subject of that image.

The metaphor of the mirror heightens this more general function of screenic mediation that Frosh cites in Cavell’s work through the production of virtual images—and it is necessary to

⁹ A contronym, or auto-antonym, is a word whose one meaning is opposed to its second meaning, a word that inversely reflects—mirrors—itsself. (I have invented the adjective here through analogy with similar words—eg, synonym becomes synonymous.) By way of further topical example: ‘cleave’ means to both split apart and hold together.

speak on how this notion of the electronically produced virtual draws and differs from what is typically viewed as its technological precedent, film. For the description of the digital image as having an ambivalent impact on viewership, of offering a virtual face-to-face both real and out of reach, can be traced from the classical contrast to analog, or film, images, such as those produced in photography and cinema. These analogs are the same one's that Sobchack sees atomized through the processing of computer-screen portrayal. The film-based image's mode of production granted it what Peircean semiotics calls an indexical authority (Paulsen 19).¹⁰ The film photograph's authenticity lay in its being a sign "that stands in for its object through physical or causal connection" (Frosh 1609). Still obvious in its Ancient Greek etymology, photography (and so the images it produces) amounts to a process of "surface marking" with light (Lehmuskallio and Gómez Cruz 3). In this sense, the photograph does not just "stand in" for the thing; it is portrayed as a literal photic emanation of the original scene preserved in the mordanting action of the darkroom's chemical bath.¹¹

While Paulsen notes a *discursive* blurring and blending of borders between the virtual and the distal, the apparatus of computer monitor and camera likewise help incite a transgressive wandering across screen borders and lines of sight in the mode of a mirroring. One aspect of the videocall's screening function is indeed this mirroring that the monitor and camera bring on. That

¹⁰ Much of Paulsen's work in *Here/There* develops from her re-reading of Peircean semiotics in general and his notion of indexicality in particular. The index, she writes, "is not (and never has been [for Peirce]) a sign based simply in materiality" (19). Although I do not take up Paulsen's semiotic project here, her work remains critical to recognize, especially her characterization of indexicality: the index is "a *clue* that points to something not yet known" and as an "indeterminate sign that relies on context and narration" for its probative capacity (29, 23). Paulsen's characterization testifies to the degree to which the ostensible reality that we might extract from bluntly material sources is always inflected by value judgements and sedimented habits of perception.

¹¹ In Peirce's own words, indices are signs that "represent their objects [...] by virtue of real connections with these objects" (Peirce, in Paulsen 25).

is, the videocall can certainly induce the sort of subject-object bifurcation described above. Still, as when I approach a mirror too closely, and begin to see my faintly reflected image in the glass unmoor itself from the reflection of the silvering behind, so on closer inspection does the obvious mirror-function of the videocall's screen begin to falter and double. The notion of mirroring focuses on a separation between an indisputable original and a copy, or projection—less real in some sense than the original. It is in this way that the mirror stands as the physical or material homolog to the discourse of the virtual.

What optics names the plane mirror's virtual image is so-called because the image that the mirror reflects cannot be projected on a screen (other than that of the (mind's) eye) as it can be with the camera obscura or the film projector. Stéphane Vial, in his psychological and phenomenological analysis of how digital technology alters perception, *L'Être et L'Écran (Being and Screen)*, proposes that virtuality, as used with respect to digital technology [la technologie numérique], came to mean 'not physically existing' through its use in 17th century optical science. In this context a virtual image is an optical illusion to the extent that one cannot "project [it] onto a screen, since it only exists in the [use of the] device [mirror or lens] which renders it" (Vial 156, my translation). The virtual image is what cannot be shared, cannot be put before the test of a public viewing, cannot be reproduced.

On this account the "virtual" or "telepresent" image of the electronic screen only touches others, is itself not made through touching, is untouchable; at the same time, it is also that which only one person sees, which cannot be shared beyond the frame in which it appears since it is in principle untouchable. If the virtual cannot be touched, can only impact others, then others can only experience the virtual image collectively through the proxy of representation. In this sense,

along with further shuttling the virtual image into connotations of the unreal, the digital-electronic screen supports a view of the perceiving subject as an *individual*, an indivisible unit of being who travels, windowless, through the world. Our own spaces appear defined against the limit that the videocalling apparatus places upon our abilities to handle and move around the objects that are within the other's reach. I cannot pick up and eat the carrots Kyle is eating; he cannot help wash the dishes in my sink. Thus our own spaces, my room on this side of my screen, his on that side of his own, at first blush acquire significance by blending the proprietary with the real; and reciprocally, the illusory is that which I cannot grasp, move about in, and move about myself. In the same stroke that the virtual would seem to confirm my own individuality or stability as a being in the world, so does it prevent my association with others. In the same way that my vision fixes Kyle in the mordant of the objective gaze (and so photographs him, in a sense) so does my relation to him become one of utter solipsism: like a photograph, I do not have the event of being with him but only ever a reconstitution, a memory, of it.

In addition to this epistemological strike against the virtual as an explanation of the real experience of sharing space, of communicating, and of navigating the distance that separates me from others, there is a more fundamental ontological problem that arises at the level of discourse. And it is in this following sense that the materiality of the mirror's virtual image meets up with the imaginary of the rhetoric surrounding it.

To the extent that the distal operation of the mirror produces virtual images, there is a trend in popular and scholarly thought that demotes the images and communities that digital technologies create to fictions or, more pejoratively, illusions. This demotion has led to ways of thinking that have characterized such digitally generated images and worlds as virtual, where the

virtual is seen as “an alternative world to the physical, and in competition with it” (Waterworth and Waterworth 183). The implication here is that what is physical and what is virtual are mutually incompatible, if not altogether exclusive of each other. As Jaron Lanier, a pioneer of the technology, succinctly summarizes in terms of its impact on a human user: “VR [virtual reality] allows the user ‘to see, hear, and feel things that aren’t really there’” (Heilbrun, in Paulsen 9). While there has been scholarship that aims to recuperate the importance of so-called virtual worlds, especially in the fields of communication and social-psychology, these discourses do not disavow the illusionary connotations of virtuality (do not rethink what the virtual is) but disavow instead its denigration (and so rethink what the virtual as the unreal, or the make-believe is worth).

This is all to say that the material-empiricist view of indexicality as applied to the virtual through digital technologies proposes that the virtual is the unreal (the unauthorized, the fake) to the extent that its operations cannot be said to testify to its referent’s existence. At the same time, the virtual, as an image, *still exists*. However, to say that the real has an ontological opposite, which is not the non-existent but the unreal, the fake, the deceptive, betrays that a reasoning other than ontological is at work. Such reasoning ontologizes the virtual. To say that something is not the real is still to say that it *is*. Indeed, the failure to appreciate this covert ontological operation testifies to a presupposed epistemology and morality at the heart of the materialism under which operate what are ultimately realist conceptions of screened scenes. These formulations use the term virtual in such a way as to make certain normative claims—value judgements—in the guise of ontological ones, which themselves rest on the dubious grounds of a pseudo-positivist materialism. I qualify the positivism of this materialism because these theories

in effect begin by assuming what they mean to prove whereas positivism, at least in theory, aims to offer valid proof based on scientific or mathematical practice. It is therefore not that the mirror makes claims about what the virtual image is, so much as it stakes a claim on what *counts* as real.

Other, seemingly more ontological analyses of the virtual are more in line with the other denotation of virtual, ‘almost the same’. One example, Michael Heim’s relatively early 1993 study of digital technology and virtual reality, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, proposes that virtual reality “is an event or entity that is real in effect but not in fact” (109). Here, then, the conclusion of optical virtuality is inverted, while the structure remains in tact. The virtual that is real only in effect can presumably not itself be affected (just as the virtual image in optics cannot be projected on a screen). Nonetheless, it affects things other than itself; yet in affecting, it is said to be real, but not as fact, not as a state of affairs. For Heim, in other words, the virtual is real but non-existent. Nevertheless, for all that Heim’s definition may disrupt earlier notions of virtuality—going so far as to say that it ‘real-ly’ does not exist—he falls victim to the logic of a materialist semiotics by proposing that the virtual only produces meaning by virtue of being compared to what it is not. Heim writes that “we need some sense of metaphysical anchoring [...] to enhance virtual worlds [...] A virtual world can be virtual only as long as we can contrast it with the real (anchored) world” (133). Here, then, the virtual is defined by its opposite, but not as its opposite’s equal. At the same time, however, Heim asserts that for virtual reality to come into its own as a technology, an art form and even “an experience of the sublime,” it should “evoke the imagination, not repeat the world”; and more, he holds that “[v]irtual reality could be a place for reflection, but the reflection should make philosophy, not redundancy” (137). What Heim holds

to be the standard for engaging and meaningful VR experience, a non-redundant “reflection” of the world, should rather hold as a standard for his own methodology. For by claiming that virtual reality is only meaningful by virtue of the physical reality that it is not, he defines it by the real world’s reflection. By way of this reflective thinking, the being of the reflection is entirely dependent on, explained, and caused by the reflected materiality. Here the virtual remains, if not descriptively or literally, then structurally, as much an index of the world as was film photography.

The logic of the mirror takes this negative ontology one step further to complete the arc of its circular logic. While Heim’s (albeit early) rendering of the virtual certainly approaches this circularity from the side of virtuality, the logic of the mirror makes the virtual materialize, as immaterial, so that the material can reject it as—and thus claim itself to be—the real. As one sees in the reflection of screenic mirroring, the definition of the virtual proposes that it is a positive content of the world that simultaneously cannot be expressed in the terms that the world gives me. Similar to the way that the guilty person gives themselves away by referencing a detail of the crime that no one has publicized, so in the act of extolling its self-sufficiency would the real admit that it is not enough. The real, of course, depends upon the virtual. And so the theorization of the videocall in terms that paint its offering as a *virtual space* do not give us insight into what makes this space possible to share. It rather denies the possibility of sharing space insofar as it turns both real space and virtual space into stable structures while at the same time denying that one can only make this assertion based on the prior acceptance of its antithesis—that is, their co-constitutive relationality, their ontological interdependence.

As we saw at the outset, however, the implicit logic of FaceTime taken as a whole—its mirrorings, its overlapping panes—begins to suggest that by my vision, my seeing power, I have more than mere images of the world. I am not simply positioned before an object that my gaze both solidifies, or pins down, and takes up. Instead, there emerges something of a *process* of seeing in the design logic of the videocall. What I have are objects whose visibility is not already fully cultivated, but scenes subject to (and subjects of) potential mirrorings, unmoorings, and refractions. This process of seeing is different than what might appear to be the homologous *processing* that biophysics instructs takes place in the eye and brain. For this reason, that view of the digital-electronic screen is limited which locates its essential difference from earlier modes of screenic media in the way that images are produced. The digital-electronic is more than a mere amalgam of processing functions, themselves reliant on the analysis, or discretization, of individual data upon which the human eye, mind, and hand have no grasp. Such mechanistic, pseudo-scientific (scientistic) understandings belie a scientific point of view in favour of a magical realism. If the screening that the ocular apparatus carries out is always invisible for the one with whom it furnishes sight, then the screening of the videocall might still in its operation announce the possibility of a vision that sees itself, of a virtuality that is entirely real. And finally, it may be this same screen that ceases to impose a categorical distinction between the virtual and the real and rather reaffirms the difference, the lived and recognizable difference, between the virtual and the actual. *This* virtuality and *that* actuality are both frequencies of *this* life.

1.3: *The Portal, Presence, and Simultaneity*

The foregoing has argued that theories of communication are not justified in positing the real in terms of the virtual through the figure of the mirror; but the attempt at rejecting such a dialectic can lead to similar problems. The mirror has proposed that the screen is a medium through which we might recognize the self and deduce the other accordingly, or likewise recognize the possible and accordingly deduce the real. In contrast, the portal is the synthetic resolution to the unacknowledged co-constitution of the virtual and the real. Whereas the mirror separates subject and object in the act of mediation, thereby making of the other a vestigial self, so does the portal make of both the self and the other the function of an absolute spatiality—the likes of this spatiality being such that any sense of sharing it is written out. As my use of ‘synthesis’ above already suggests, then, the portal is not structurally an outright rejection of the mirror’s dialectic as much as its ratification.

As I have noted with Paulsen, the simulacral and the distal modes of digital-electronic screens converge in the case of telecommunications. This convergence is amplified in the specific case of the videocall and epitomized in the structure of the call’s nested ambivalence: an oscillation between an ambivalently accessible and remote scene on the one hand (the curve of the hand I can all but hold in my own, the room remaining just out of sight beyond the camera’s field of view) and the concomitant incertitude of the image’s representational powers on the other (is this really what is happening and how can I be sure?). The metaphor of portal, as an emblem of synthesis, emphasizes immediacy, presence, and simultaneity in its bid to overcome

the ambivalence of the screen's specular mediation and so posit the foundation of co-presence and communication.

After all, are we not face-to-face? Do I not read in Kyle's posture that he is tired despite that his voice tries to say otherwise; do I not smell the air after rain in the passing dark clouds that lag in the window over his shoulder; and do I not finally feel that, just tomorrow, we could go on one last Halloween outing as I watch the heavy leaves blowing next to his head in the window that portrays my reflected image? What could be more self-evident than that screen which at its highly theorized and documented core renders all that it presents in stark self-evidence? For some contemporary critics this is the electronic screen of the computer, the smartphone, the tablet—the screen that has surpassed television in its fragmentary, bombastic, and distracting array to become, through the very pixelated, manipulable, and fleeting nature of its images, less a pre-existing site for images to collect upon than a nebulous environment concocted from them (Casetti 30). Certainly, unlike the photograph in the album or even the film on its reel or digital file, the image I have of Kyle over the videocall is fleeting. Its verisimilitude, its fluency, depends on the consistency of our internet connections and the power of our computers; and if I were to end the call, then the same image would not reappear should we pick up the call later. Similar characterizations describe the bevy of images and texts that appear on social media platforms.¹²

If the screen is a medium and amplifier of self-evidence, in what does its evidentiary or probative capacity consist? The previous section has already attested that this truth-bearing

¹² Cf. Casetti on the “scrapbook” model of screens: “the materials that form [the screen as scrapbook] are only partly self-produced; often they are recuperated from elsewhere, and once they are posted on the internet they are further recyclable in order to narrate other lives. The resulting portrait is true to life, but in its dismantling and reassembling, it could also apply to anyone” (26).

capacity is established by a mirror image of the real that this same real projects outside of itself in the mode of a negation. Therefore this qualification of ‘self-evident’ is always ready to respond: the existence of the screened image smuggles with itself an essential evidentiary force. If the screened scene is to be evident *for us* as viewers it must already have arranged *itself* to be apparent. In its attempt to theorize beyond the dialectic of constitutive negation, the portal creates the problem of a third term required for the in-itself-apparent to become the evident-for-us. But this covert maintenance of binarism through the extrinsic third is only one facet of its drawbacks.

Unlike film photography, whose classical theorization figures the photograph as a chemico-physical trace of some existent, the digital-electronic screen of computers and smartphones apparently have no indexical authority on which to draw. Nevertheless, this lack of authority poses little problem for the portal model of digital images, which locates the force and significance of the digital image not in its physico-chemical origins, but in its destination as a subject of transmission. The mediation of the mirror allowed us to see “things as they are [... but] only an image of them,” and in this way share a space through the proxy of representation (Casetti 19). For the mirror, the videocall is like a multi-sensory form of letter writing. Conversely, theories of the screen that employ the logic of the portal emphasize immediacy, presence, and simultaneity. While the mirror claims that two communicants have simultaneous access to the same *objects in space*, the portal asserts that two communicants have access to the same *space* at the same time.

Theories of the portal attempt to solve the problem of dislocation and communication which the videocall provokes by positing a simultaneity of presence that appears in some

articulations under the sign of the “perceptual illusion of non-mediation” (Westerman and Skalski 63). In the field of telepresence studies, a growing discipline that takes an inclusive social-sciences approach to media use, the notion of presence is defined subjectively. Per the International Society for Presence Research (the central body through which research and conferences on the subject are conducted):

Telepresence requires the use of technology and results in a psychological state in which media users voluntarily suspend the experience of mediation in order to feel a sense of connection with the mediated content they are using [...] A sense of telepresence is felt by media users when the technology becomes transparent in the interaction (Bracken, et al., in Bracken and Botta 42).

On this reading, the effects of telepresence that are essential to maintain that sense of the face-to-face I have pursued this whole time appear to rest on a medial invisibility. This is in contrast, then, to the operative mediality of the mirror. In their essay “Mediated Presence in the Future,” Eva Waterworth and John Waterworth argue that “[w]hen we experience strong mediated presence,” as of an individual through the telephone or over the videocall, “our experience is that the technology has become part of the self, and the mediated reality to which we are attending has become an integrated part of the other” (193). Nonetheless, this sort of technological invisibility through bodily integration in fact belies the very erasure of the other that they would make appear—both through the conservation of binarism to which I have already alluded, as well as through a rendering of presence as somehow absolute.

While this sense of technological invisibility and full-body inclusion appear to be lacking in the videocall, other scholars who claim no association with telepresence studies employ the

subjective social-science measure of immediacy to convey the communicative power of electronic screens. In “Fit to Frame: Image and Edge in Contemporary Interfaces,” for example, Stephen Monteiro shows how the mobile digital screen is slowly surpassing its synecdochic relationship to the apparatus whose ever decreasing bulk it increasingly covers and masks. For all that the apparatus and the materiality of the screen are progressively overlapping, Monteiro argues that the deference of the image to the screen’s edge, such as in cases of aspect ratio deformations, only serves to foreground the screen as a support of the image.¹³ At the level of both marketing-consumer aesthetics and logics of representation, Monteiro labels this process the “fetishization of the frame” (360).

Unlike the frame (or parergon) of Derridian deconstruction to which Monteiro contrasts it, the frame of the contemporary screenic device resists the cleavage of mirroring and acts as an “edge” (362). On Monteiro’s reading, the frame of the painting sutures the world of the painting to the world outside of it through a negation. Drawing on Carla Gottlieb’s analysis of modernist hard-edge painting, Monteiro explains that the “frame serves to mediate image-environment relationships” in a dialectic of inside-outside, such that the two, image and environment, are differentially and paradoxically co-constituted.¹⁴ Hence the frame constructs a relationship of constitutive alterity between the inside and outside in the sense that for the inside to maintain its status it must also acknowledge that which it is not, much as the real must suture itself to its

¹³ Monteiro cites the ways in which the image is bound within the materialized field of view that the screen’s edge stakes out while simultaneously being highly fluid, dynamic, and nearly tangible. For example, when one turns one’s smartphone ninety degrees on a plane perpendicular to the normal of the screen, the image appears to perform an “initial *separation* [...] from the frame before performing its *reattachment*” in a “‘popping’ or ‘snapping’ or ‘rubber-banding’ into place” (361, 378).

¹⁴ Here, ‘differentially’ adverbially evokes the sense of *deferral* which Derrida includes in his notion of *différance*.

constitutive outside of the unreal in the virtual image that the mirror produces. In contrast to the frame, “the edge marks the abrupt break between the two” (the inside and outside); in Gottlieb’s diction, the edge is a “termination” (Monteiro 377). The scene of the digital-electronic screen appears in stark and utter dissociation from the otherwise physical world in which it sits. As with Casetti’s characterization of electronic images and scenes as contextless data, so does the screened scene in the confines of Monteiro’s communications devices risk becoming that unthinkable or unrecognizable dimension which we are forced to “comprehend [...] primarily as an object” (378). This terminal, this edge, can never be a lived or affective edge. It can only be a speculated or reconstituted edge. Any recognition always implies some sort of contact, for how else could we recognize a totality, an absolute absence, but by rendering it down into the finite span of *this* totality?

Likewise, as Monteiro writes of the contemporary digital mobile screen of the laptop and the smartphone, so does Vivian Sobchack take up the television and the desktop computer in her work *Carnal Thoughts*. Sobchack begins her analysis of how different screenic media, from photography and cinema to the computer, all condition or inflect perception at the level of the possible, at the level of embodied subjectivity, and thus beyond that of the “objective” expressive of the natural attitude (154). Sobchack marks a tension between these levels of objectivity and subjectivity by maintaining that those technologies which we would typically figure as being “*expressive*” become “*perceptive*” in that they enable us to manifest and convey judgements concerning the world; but more, perceptive technologies reveal what counts as the world for us at all and in the first place (135, original emphasis). Hence, for Sobchack, contemporary screenic, image-producing media (from the photograph, to the film, to the computer and its multi-

functionality) are just as much onto-epistemological claims on and about the world as they are aesthetic.

On her reading, the postmodern electronic instant breaks from the modernist cinematic “temporal structures of retention and protension,” and thus “constitutes a form of absolute presence” (158).¹⁵ This absolute presence is an abstraction “from the objective and subjective discontinuity that gives meaning to the temporal system past/present/future” for Sobchack, and has grave consequences at the dimension of embodied subjectivity, or lived space (158). “[E]lectronic presence,” such as one exhibits and receives before “television screens and computer terminals [...] randomly disperses its being *across* a network, its kinetic gestures describing and lighting [sic] on the surface of the screen rather than inscribing it with bodily dimension” (158). The electronic screen lacks depth, or dimension, according to Sobchack; it plays no role in orienting the space in which one encounters it. It is on this account that the electronically presented body can “ignore[...] its own history,” the sedimented background circumstances that in the first place allow one to take stock of objects and phenomena by polarizing or orienting one’s field (162). As a depthless void, Sobchack’s electronic screen takes up the same onto-epistemological stance that Monteiro’s edge does.

It might appear strange that Monteiro and Sobchack argue for the prominence of the screen at the same time that they characterize its disappearance as imperative for its ability to convey immediate presence. While Sobchack links this immediacy to the potential for moral vacuity, Monteiro remains more equivocal and descriptive. Nevertheless, this tension between

¹⁵ Retention and protension are concepts that play key roles in Husserl’s understanding of lived temporality; while I take up their parallels in Merleau-Ponty in chapter 3, they remain outside the purview of the current discussion. I include them here as both a sign post and to emphasize the temporality of simultaneity that I discuss below in this chapter.

prominence and disappearance will ultimately be attributed to the paradoxical nature of contemporary screens in general.¹⁶ That said, it is also explicable in terms that go unemphasized in Monteiro's essay—those of homogeneous space and the understanding of immediacy, or simultaneity, that it supports.¹⁷ Monteiro and Sobchack both recognize that for there to be any immediate relation between the scene the screen depicts and the world from which it is removed, there must indeed be two scenes, two arenas of action which can in the first place remain separate. We can read Monteiro's account of the screen's edge accordingly: it is only by drawing attention to itself as an object that the screen can serve as a portal to another world.

While both Sobchack and Monteiro discuss this immediacy of viewer and perceived world in terms of a simultaneity of situation between two otherwise discrete entities, in terms of passive viewing, and largely in terms of entertainment media, their renderings of screenic experience have stark effects when applied to telecommunications. If there is no relationship between what is 'inside' the frame and what is 'outside,' but instead the cold haecceity to which Sobchack refers as the images being "just there"—if, indeed, there is an utter difference between these two points then the result is a bare presence, a pure that-ness to which no other meaning may attach (158). This is the reason why Sobchack suggests that the screen must work harder to

¹⁶ I would add that in Sobchack's case, this prominence is also a matter of the socio-cultural fascination with television and computer technology as much as it is a matter of the personal or private hold these technologies can exact.

¹⁷ Though Sobchack does speak about how the electronic homogenizes the richer scene of cinematic images, she does not linger on the possibility or impossibility of *sharing* or *communicating* across such spaces (cf. 156). The way that Sobchack arrives at a consideration of technologies' onto-epistemological function is through both the methodology and concrete posits of phenomenology. Namely, she takes up the phenomenological tenet that our perception is always embodied and inhabits the world that it perceives, the world that, in everyday life, it takes as an object of perception. In this way a second tension develops in Sobchack's work, one which is representative of a dissonance in discourses of communications media more generally. If perception is always embodied, then how is it that it can come, through itself, to be disembodied? This tension is elaborated in Chapter 3.

produce saturated and stunning images.¹⁸ While Sobchack confirms with Merleau-Ponty that our sense of presence in the world (what Merleau-Ponty would call consciousness) is relational, to suggest that we experience an absolute and “flat” presence in the face of the electronic screen is not simply paradoxical, but, like the meaninglessness that the electronic screen apparently evokes, somewhat nonsensical (159).

Ultimately, both Monteiro and Sobchack reduce the experience of the electronic screen to a series of sensory impressions. As Merleau-Ponty’s notion of lived space has already shown:

The perceptual “something” is always in the middle of some other thing, it always belongs to a “field.” A truly homogeneous area, offering nothing to perceive, cannot be given to any perception. The structure of actual perception alone can teach us what it is to perceive. Pure impression is thus not merely undiscoverable, but imperceptible, and therefore is inconceivable as a moment of perception (PhP 4).

At the same time that the electronic screen appears to maintain a binary of subject and object, Sobchack and Monteiro argue that, as absolute presence, electronically screened scenes erase themselves from perception. On this reading, there is an indifference, a meaninglessness, that contradicts the casual, albeit anxious, experience of the videocall. The videocall does not include any of the cinematographic, visual hyperbole to which Sobchack refers, and yet I am indeed

¹⁸ Sobchack’s account is highly contingent on the screens of the time in which she was writing and, as she notes, those that took up the most airtime were the screens of television and computer (152). At the time of her study (early 2000’s, though some of the chapters appeared as essays from the 1990’s), mass-market computer technology (software, hardware, and ancillary internet infrastructure) lacked the capacity to make videocalling a viable option. Accordingly, the examples she uses to draw her conclusions no longer stand as strong as they might once have done, although her conclusions display logics and assumptions that parallel Monteiro’s. In this regard, along with how she situates the electronic with respect to the photographic and the cinematic, Sobchack’s work is an invaluable resource for thinking through current instances of screenic experience.

engaged. Framing the question of pure presence or immediacy in terms of simultaneous access to a shared space will illustrate the latter pair's conclusions in terms of telecommunication in general and videocalling in particular. As it stands, this question of simultaneity has accompanied telecommunications since the first electrical experiments and has always involved the attempt at theorizing communication without mediation. The question of how a medium might bridge two points such that they share a connection appears in some of the first electrical experiments.

Florian Spregner offers the following description and analysis of Stephen Gray's 1792 transmission of electrical current through a copper wire:

As soon as the 'line of communication' [the wire] gets extended to the point that Gray can no longer hold it in his hands, the constellation [of transmitter and receiver] changes. The channel [between the two points] creates a medial, material connection between two bodies, and constitutes a necessary technical condition of telecommunication. (17).

There is a tension between the conception of an effect that is attributable to the medium (it is thanks to the wire, or the screen, that the transmission is transmitted) and the recognition of a perceived instantaneity, which would have to disavow the intercession of any medium—since indeed the notion of medium denotes temporal delay. As Spregner further notes, “[a]lthough the effect” at the end of the wire opposite that of transmission “apparently proceeds through a medium, instantaneity seems to negate this medium” (17). Gray's rendering, which Spregner paraphrases here, as do Sobchack's and Monteiro's, imply causality without temporality. In other words, the paradoxical distancing of the tele-communication has been with the notion of telecommunication, presence at a distance, from the beginning.

It is unclear what this simultaneity means with respect to and in experience, in lived space, and it remains under-explored in contemporary accounts of the electronic screen. It is nonetheless understandable that simultaneity and immediacy are a concern if by sharing a space with Kyle I mean that we have access to the same world at the same time. For example, is there any salient difference between simultaneity and immediacy that goes beyond the seemingly arbitrary dimension of symbolic language? Does sharing pass in an instant, only to be recovered and reconstituted intellectually after the fact? Two things cannot be immediate without being simultaneous with respect to one another: I cannot be immediate with something while ignoring the temporal dimension of simultaneity. If I were not simultaneous in my immediacy, then this delay would appear as a mediation.¹⁹

The Latin root of simultaneous is *simul*, meaning *as soon as*, or *at the same time*, and these latter senses are indeed part of the way in which we mean simultaneous in everyday speech. But ‘simultaneous’ and ‘at the same time’ are not strictly synonymous insofar as they are members of different parts of speech, and thus reflect different onto-epistemological forces; that is, each carries different assumptions about what constitutes an object of knowledge and a subject who knows. At a broader level, as I have shown, it is precisely this onto-epistemological divide between subject and object that restrains a cogent description of absolute presence (as immediacy or simultaneity) in the first place. If simultaneous is an adjective (or likewise if it is employed adverbially), such that occurrences *x* and *y* are simultaneous, then simultaneity acts as

¹⁹ Here, then, immediacy connotes a nearly spatialized rendering of presence while simultaneity connotes its temporal dimension. The paradox of perceiving, let alone cognizing, pure presence is more readily seen when both these dimensions are taken together.

a property attributed to some otherwise self-stable, impregnable identity. It is in this sense of the self-stable ego, or subject, that mirroring inflects the simultaneous.

But if this were the case, then there would be two simultaneities between the two occurrences, and these two simultaneities would not truly share anything other than the regard of the observer who would collapse the two into one through the projection of similarity. Here one might reply that simultaneity is simply an adjective that is only ever applied to two or more things in such a way that they form a unit: and yet the simultaneous presumes a multiplicity, not a unity. For how could something be simultaneous if it were not so *with something else*? The unity that vernacular simultaneity posits in this way presumes and colludes with the projection of homogeneous grid space discussed in the previous chapter. Hence simultaneity as a property on the one hand appears to be an oxymoron, and in fact requires that one distinct from the events impute their simultaneity; proprietary simultaneity is always in principle falsified.

On the other hand, if this transcendental constituting consciousness were disregarded, then defining simultaneity becomes an exercise in infinite regress. There would have to be a third simultaneity to mediate between the other two, and so on, such that simultaneity as a multiplicity would always disappear into a logical loop of immanence. Simultaneity should in this case be ever deferred, should never exist let alone be experienced. The observer who projects similarity to support simultaneity in fact leads us to the other, equally problematic, use of simultaneity to which I have already alluded. For even if a proprietary notion of simultaneity is false, it is still true that I have a perception of simultaneity: and yet where have I gone in the face of events that *are* simultaneous while still *having* simultaneity? The conjunctive function of ‘as soon as’ or ‘at the same time as’ fixes little. This function inflects the simultaneous with a certain distance from

the two parties it would fuse and also removes the I for whom the event would be simultaneous. For how should I judge that two things are simultaneous lest I, like proprietary simultaneity, be two places simultaneously; forgetting that this already begs the question, by what measure would I decide to view a ‘there’ from a given ‘here’ if I *were* both places at once? It would only be by some projected, unreal third point of view that such a simultaneity could appear as *lived simultaneity*—and thus not be lived at all to the extent that it is “seen from nowhere” (PhP 70). Here, the emphasis is not on the simultaneity of the objects or the events, which may or may not ‘have’ it; instead, there is no longer any I for whom simultaneity is meaningful.

In all three instances of immediacy, presence, and simultaneity, the only way that any sense of lived relation can occur is through the projection of the same homogeneous, geometric space that Merleau-Ponty reminds us reduces experience to thought. Monteiro and Sobchack agree in terms of their acknowledgement of the screen’s dissolution of the dialectic of inside-outside. But this refusal only disembodies the subject further on Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of phenomenal experience: this refusal proposes an elsewhere as a no-place, for there is no longer any here from which experience may be said to take place. That is, what these explanations do—ironically, through emblematic metaphors—is define the structure of experience analogically with respect to its alleged contents. Hence, just as Merleau-Ponty asks rhetorically of his own conception of lived, “anthropological space,” so could we ask of these descriptions of screenic space whose avowed goal it is to theorize communication: “do they teach us something concerning the very structure of consciousness, or do they merely give us the contents of human experience” (PhP 300)? By reducing the space of the screen to a homogeneous grid space, the portal ends up removing the communicant (or perceiver, in

Merleau-Ponty's diction) from the field through which she would communicate. In denying relationality through absolute presence (figured as both immediacy and simultaneity), the portal denies us the ability to elaborate the conscious experience of the screen. Here, consciousness reduces to a quality of objects rather than being elevated to the principle mode of being in the world that in the first place grounds the possibility of any quality, any meaning, at all.

The sense of the real which ostensibly anchors itself in the graspable, the manipulable, or shareable covertly posits itself through the objects upon which it would confer reality. The way that the significance of the real depends upon stable and identifiable objects for its self-positing authority eclipses both the real itself and the degree to which this significance of the real is always presumed and mobilized in its measurement, in one's recognition of it. Typical approaches to sharing space over the screen, in particular the electronic screen of the computer, end up refuting the possibility of actually experiencing such a communication. The spatio-material metaphors of the mirror and the portal are particularly emblematic of these canonical approaches and their two modes of effacing one's experience of screened communication in favour of representing its essence.²⁰ The mirror circularly define the possible common space—the space of possibility—of two communicants by defining real space primarily in terms of the

²⁰ In light of prizing essence over experience, it does make sense to question for whom the videocalling image is real, as I have done rhetorically in the Introduction. But this questioning cannot have anything to do with the reality or the significance of images. For essences do not *belong* to anyone or anything insofar as the essence is posited as that without which no belonging could take place. Hence to ask after the essence of the digitally generated image is already to diverge from an understanding of experience that begins from the one who experiences it, regardless of this image's reality. Therefore here it is sound to say that existence ought to be thought of as preceding essence. This is all to reiterate the degree to which these metaphors or models of sharing screenic space displace the interlocutors from the space that they would hope to share.

virtual, possible, or unreal that this same real space is supposed to (dis)prove and ratify: this is the principal action of mirroring metaphors.

Second, the model of the portal describes communication in terms of a simultaneity and an immediacy that are qualities of the objects or the subjects which would communicate, rather than as the ground of possibility for there to be objects (that is, others) for the subject at all. Such a proprietary simultaneity is yet inextricable from the position of the mirror insofar as it relies on the posit of a subject-object split to enact any sort of attribution—even as it strives to nullify this distance. To be clear, this sense of the objective other does not propose that the subject-self constructs the other, but merely that the extent to which we grasp others as one with whom we are communicating is the only lived sense in which we can meaningfully encounter others. What this means is that the other, before being meaningful to me as an objective other, already plays a role in my life as the horizon of possibility against which meaning might develop. Together, these two metaphorical misarticulations of sharing space through the screen reject the reality of the perceiver-communicant on the one hand and the world on the other. That is, they work backwards from the real to construct the possible at the same time that they take the possible as a causal explanation of the real.

Yet FaceTime's entire premise is to allow the user to “[c]onnect with family and friends around the world” (Apple). It is true that the videocall affects such a connection, and so I am not claiming that we must readjust our understanding of these feelings to align with the models. At the same time, beyond suggesting that we must realign our models to more firmly affix to the facts, I am arguing for a different approach to this modelling, this presumption of facts and the metaphors that bear them. For if the videocall truly affects a passage through mirroring, and if

there is accordingly produced some virtual image, then this virtuality must be something closer to the “electronic consensus-hallucination” of science-fiction’s early descriptions of computer-generated virtual reality—a commons that precedes the individuals who are after the fact claimed to have generated a community (Gibson 181).

That is, this other virtuality is something closer to a shared world out of which objects and subjects crystallize, distill themselves from each other in a co-constitutive process. Such a mirroring as I have claimed videocalling achieves must either render no true virtuality at all or else alter the situation of the virtual; and this is the same as saying that if there is such a thing as screenic virtuality then it is this co-constitutive virtuality. For this latter case of mirroring would be one that also affects a transportation across the barriers of the subject-object binary, viewer and image, rather than reify the boundary between the two in the process of composing itself. It remains for the following chapters to trace the arc of this other mirroring and its attendant virtuality through the domain of lived space and the real reciprocity *through which* we live it.

Chapter 2: The Spatiality and the Locality of the Screen: Sensing Depth and Shared Space over the Videocall

2.1: *What Is Sharing and Does It Take Place?*

There is an epistolary romance in the wings of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. This romance, at the level of genre, lends the work an affinity to thinking through the experience of sharing space with another person over the videocall—to say nothing of the *Phenomenology*'s inherent theoretical and topical affinities with this task. All throughout the text, though especially in his analyses of spatiality, the experience of others, and temporality, Merleau-Ponty describes scenes of departure, arrival, longing, and tele-communication, this last in the form of the telephone and letters. If there is an addressee in this romance it is perhaps the recurrent, nearly apostrophic, Paul. No more than this given name is specified in the text itself, but Merleau-Ponty's Paul often stands in for the other whom one addresses (in letters and calls), to whom one lends their attention (while he is mourning), or whom one intends to visit (in Brazil).²¹ Thus the industry of the train-ride, the plastic of the phone, or the anxious wait of the letter are all recast into the everyday technologies of love and friendship. These scenes work in service of Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the predominant classical assumptions concerning space, others, and time. Namely, and in brief, these assumptions are that space serves as the container or field *in which* events and people take (their) place; that we know others through an analogy with the self, which is known immanently and taken as self-same and self-evident; and that time is a linear flow of successive moments. In this chapter, I consider the role that the other plays in my

²¹ Cf. pages , 372, 427, 447 for the most poignant scenes.

sense of space and in the exercise of my senses, particularly vision, touch, and kinaesthetics, as well as the way that the videocall underscores this role. Here, I bracket out the temporality of communication in itself in order to focus on the spatial and interpersonal (and, as we will see the intercorporeal) aspects of videotelephonic communication. However, this bracketing is not an obfuscation or avoidance of temporality; rather, the temporal appears in this consideration of sharing a space with another under the sign of a reciprocity not confined to the simultaneity of the previous chapter.

I consider the phenomenological approach to space and others as epistolary because there is a certain elegiac tone inherent in the letter, that mode that requires the other to be absent in order to write. But this modifier, epistolary, should also not overdetermine the figure of the letter or that of the videocall; nor do I propose that the letter sit as the archetype of all communication beyond the so-called face-to-face. That said, I figure this necessary epistolary absence as a certain distance, a lack of proximity, between myself and the other with whom I wish to communicate. It is a joke to call or text someone when you are sitting in the same room as them; but this proximity also makes it so that the act of calling or texting is itself a positive content rather than something like a means. Hence it is not self-evident that physical distance is required to communicate; though in some modes of communication, distance (and proximity) appears to play a more operative or obvious function. But even if this distance *is* required in the case of the letter in order to write, it is not obvious that the writing creates this same distance that it requires. In any case, how could the writing, or putative cause, create the distance, the effect, that the writing requires (as a necessary precondition for its creative causation to manifest) and be said to have ever required the distance, since the effect would in that case precede the cause—

and since, moreover, that which would be needful, the writing, would also be yet to be? Or, equally, in the efficiency of writing perhaps one and one's letter are clairvoyant of their end in the hands of another: here the final cause of writing is figured as a lack of something, that is, as a positive lack of being together, and again the effect of communication (being together) appears presaged as *a* not-something in the communicating.

And yet, before communication, this distance appears only vaguely, like a number or a fact, and has a sort of abstract grain of reality: consider the baffling population of some urban centre or the inhuman interval of lightyears. This is to say that even if my writing or my calling someone does not literally repel us kilometres apart, the distance remains insensate as a merely measurable quantity until it is put to the test of a closure or cleavage. You are far, there are circumstances, and we cannot travel to meet: kilometres and currencies are sensible now in terms of one's wait for the other's word. Accordingly, even if the communication does not 'cause' the distance to develop between Kyle and me, it is thanks to the communication that the distance is recognized as *the distance between us two*. And so, finally, in this last formulation, it becomes apparent that the abstract figure of a distance is 'always already' set in relation to a ground that it takes for granted. Kilometres of what? Of distance between us.

Finally, one requires a certain faith that the letter—in one's writing, sealing, and sending it—will overcome or abide the vicissitudes of postal transport. This is not to mention that I must wait on the other to respond. Over the videocall, I must trust that the internet connections of both parties, myself and Kyle, remain stable; I have to believe that the hardware and software of both my computer and Kyle's will function as reliably as they have up till now; and I must have faith in Kyle's willingness to stay within the frame of his camera's field of view, which in turn

determines what of him and his space appears on my screen. This faith in the other's response and ability to respond binds the epistolary, the telecommunicative, to the romantic, first to its common use and second to its more technical, generic use.

For first, what else could be loving or caring if not this faith in both the other's reply and their ability to do so, both now in strangers' hands? (Loving could be nothing else if not inclusive of this faith, but desperation could certainly be as bound to it.) Of course, this epistolary faith is typically rewarded—the postal system works, my computer is a month's rent well spent; but it was only necessary on account of the initial distance that the genre itself required. Hence there is a romance in the epistolary communication in the sense of a *tragicomic, self-sealing* fate. The spatio-temporal distance or gap that both necessitates and maintains the attempt at communication with an absent other is the same distance that helps literalize and pun this attempt as a *longing*. In suggesting that the *Phenomenology* bears the marks of an epistolary romance I only mean that parts of it lend themselves to an analysis of communicating with an other at a distance—a distance that is recognized at the same time that it is apparently closed.

How else can I recognize the distance of something or someone without bringing them near and negating the distance I was in the first place attempting to recognize? This is the same as asking how and if action at a distance is possible. In this sense, the epistolary is only the novelistically codified genre that metonymically refers to modes of communication outside the class of codified novelistic genres. Even though there is 'no such thing' as a (video)telephonic novel, the basic logic of sending and receiving, calling and answering, of longing at a distance, all serve to enlarge the genre of the epistolary (of which the letter is thus only one specific example) to that of the telecommunicative. In the end, of course, this epistolary conceit is more

specifically to ask how sharing a space is possible. On the model of homogeneous space, sharing space can be thought as the sharing of a boundary, where what is one's own is marked out by an expanse of what is not one's own. Hence the one is defined in terms of the other, and both are marked by a reciprocal and inverse lack, and this is what the model of the mirror asserts.

For Merleau-Ponty, as for phenomenology more generally, it is true that every view is a view from somewhere, and that every view is a view *of* something (which is the truth of Husserlian intentionality, or act intentionality). Therefore it is true that I cannot be two places at once. But to this act intentionality Merleau-Ponty will add operative intentionality, that 'means' or condition by which the world is always already accessible or sensible, or meaningful and oriented to/for me (McWeeny 256). And this operative intentionality, the *level* it institutes, is what prevents the knot of negative ontology and simultaneity traced both above and in the preceding chapter from dissolving into solipsism. It is not that the fragments of so many simultaneous objects were swept up and unified, through the measure of an absolute and underlying spatial plane, into a mosaic of intelligibility. Indeed, the simultaneous events are not simultaneous *in* space or time as objects might be in a container. For the purpose of relating this notion of operative intentionality, that attention and care towards the world that precedes my objectifying it (and which therefore precedes the projection of a proprietary simultaneity that renders sharing confusedly), to the notion of sharing space over the videocall, we can turn to Merleau-Ponty's concept of the level. I aim to show on this account that sharing a space is not a matter of occupying a pre-established arena for action, but begins in the co-operative formation of such an arena. Just as the last chapter began and ended with the question of my ambivalent

mobility in the face of the videocall, so does this one entail the meaning that develops out of what mobility I have.

2.2: The Diegetic Level of the Screen

Typically, when Kyle and I hold a video call together, the calls are prearranged, mostly out of convenience. Therefore, unlike a consideration of texting or (video-) telephony, which would have to account for these modes' interruptive and disorienting aspects ("I wasn't expecting your call"; "Now's not a good time"), this reflection on the videocall will neither form nor resolve questions concerning the specifically aural-audial nature of telecommunication. Yet for all that it eschews involving the question of sound and voice, this reflection still revolves around issues of the convocal. The live connection of the videocall consists in mutual audio-visual access to the content that the other's microphone and camera transmit to one's own screen and speakers, such that two can speak and see each other as though each were on one side of a perforated sheet of glass—out(side) of touch, but within earshot and field of view. This convocation, the gathering at the response to a call, thus owes itself in part to the apparatus of screen and camera. The screen is a necessary, but insufficient, motivation of the experience I am describing. I will take up below the impacts of these components on one's sense of lived space. The following reflection therefore does begin from the point of reorientation after the call has been sent, received, and answered. Therefore in one important sense, that of reflection, the call begins from the point where Kyle and I are ostensibly already communicating—that is, insofar as

we have visual access to each other's milieux. And yet, at the level of phenomenological description, which takes into account the (phenomenological) objectivity of reflection, the call begins before this meeting or interlacing of visual fields.

Thus, though I choose to focus on the visual and tactile aspects of the video call, there remain open avenues in other contexts for discussing the aural aspects of videotelephony, especially in terms of sonic notifications for incoming calls. My focus on the visual and tactile in particular in this section also reflects Merleau-Ponty's own focus with respect to the body's accessibility "to both touch and vision," how these are crucial in one's experience of subjectivity and, for Lisa Guenther, intercorporeal subjectivity (Guenther 167).

I understand from experience that unlike the answer that follows a question, the answer to a call (audio-video or otherwise) does not foreclose the possibility of further communication. The call's answer is a response to the solicitation of a new orientation: it opens different possibilities for responsibility. I understand this intuitively in the case of sounding out the mute passage that an open telephone line or dark, lagging screen offers. I answer the phone and say, "Hello?," or lean in to the screen and say, "Can you hear me—can you see me?" When my partner says, "Yes," or, "No," I do not hang up or end the session, satisfied that I have got my answer. Rather, the call inspires dialogue. The call is not a question that seeks closure by way of answer, but a plea that seeks an open and elaborated future by way of some other's response.

Accordingly, my concern here is to see how Kyle and I are able to maintain a sense of togetherness, or community, by way of the live two-way video connection that our computer screens display. But this community, this communication, that I feel must occur *despite* the geographical distance that separates us as well as the concomitant inability to move about in each

other's locational space, let alone touch one another. More, this community must circumvent the pressures that screened, visually oriented space puts on each of us to foreclose the other's spatial being and withdraw into what Merleau-Ponty calls a "private world," and what Guenther, invoking Merleau-Ponty, describes as "the turbulence of night" (300; 176)²². This nocturnal turbulence, I contend, is similar to that dislocation or flattening that the mirror and the portal threaten.

To resolve the concerns of my screened communication with Kyle, I must therefore consider how the screen brings two individuals—facing each other, though not 'face-to-face'—into what Lisa Guenther calls intercorporeal space, and how it allows for the maintenance and expression of two individual subjectivities. While Guenther engages with Merleau-Ponty's late concept of the *flesh* to help examine the effects of space's exhaustion, one also finds a precursory discussion of similar 'fleshly' themes in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the experience of others in the *Phenomenology*, particularly in his mentions of the inter-world and communication (373). As these latter concepts appear in the context of a phenomenological consideration of how multiple human actors can be meaningful to one another, in contrast to the more ontologically oriented element of *flesh*, I will restrict my engagement with Guenther, including her use of *flesh*, to passages offered in the *Phenomenology*. I will conclude my description of the experience of screened, videotelephonic space by suggesting that the space the screen holds open, in an act of ostensible separation, is the very same condition for the possibility of

²² On Merleau-Ponty's reading, this private world belongs exemplarily to the person living with schizophrenia; I make no claim that my experience is at all similar to those of the spectrum of schizophrenic experiences, nor do I actively endorse Merleau-Ponty's understanding of it. For Merleau-Ponty, the spatiality of night is aligned with a generative possibility for new ways of perceiving (PhP 296). On Guenther's reading, the privacy of night is aligned more with a sense of reductive individuality and foreclosed possibilities of community and stable subjectivity.

community: in a chiasmic mirroring, it is at the moment when sight reaches its limits for lack of touch that touch reasserts itself in the mode of physical and location space, and as the ever possible, if never simultaneous, reciprocal interdiction of sight. The space that is lived through vision is not incommensurate with or insensible to that which is lived through the movements of the limbs or the textures of the room's atmosphere.

If this agenda portrays the screen in a paradoxical light, as that which holds close while holding apart, then this sensation is not far off from the very sense of 'screen' that I hope to elaborate through the lens of the preceding chapter. Indeed, while this reflection can only gesture towards the complexity of the screen's sense, consider alone the visual-tactile connotations of the word *screen* in English, and its contronymous resonances: the screen at the film screening is that which presents a spectacle to vision; but at the same film, one may screen one's eyes, or have them (coercively) screened. Alternatively, consider applying the same connotations to Lisa Guenther's description in *Solitary Confinement* of supermax prisoners' cell doors, which are "constructed of perforated stainless steel resembling a dense wire mesh" (163). In this last case, the door, as a screen, is that which permits sight (selectively, in a *screening process*) at the exclusion touch. In Guenther's rendering, then, the incarcerated subject and the guard are held together through the violent imbalance of power that the screen in part helps to maintain. As a final prefatory note, it is inappropriate for my reflections here to consider the vital space that screens and video calls could possibly provide to the prisoners in supermax confinement upon whose conditions Guenther reflects. This consideration involves too much abstraction from various aspects of prisoners' lives, and thus too much speculation on my part to be of any value—which is to say, use—to them or others. Rather, I draw on Guenther's thoughts on how the

lived space that Merleau-Ponty describes in his *Phenomenology of Perception* can begin to break down. Perhaps in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty's own project, it is by examining how it is possible that one's sense of her own space can be negated that I hope to outline the means by which videotelephony both risks and resists such a negation.

The breakdown that the videocall risks is that which I have outlined in chapter 1 and rejected under the headings of mirror and portal. Broadly, these categories align with Merleau-Ponty's rejection of theories that posit spatiality in terms of either a constituting connecting consciousness (one that imposes a homogeneous field by which objects can be related) or in terms of a qualitative empiricism (where spatiality is a property of objects). In contrast to these formulations of spatiality, Merleau-Ponty proposes a version of spatiality that relies on the structure of the *gestalt*, the figure against a ground: this, in turn, polarizes or "orients" my field of space such that it becomes navigable for me in a "gearing of [the] subject into his world" (PhP 262). Merleau-Ponty describes this *gestalt* structure through various metonymic figures, most notably—at least in this analysis—that of lighting. It is through the stability of a level, the constancy of lighting, that objects first become apparent to me in their objectivity. At the same time, this appearance is only ever from the perspective of the "first coordinates" of my own body (103). Hence what might be one person's lighting (in the sense of sedimented background) might be another's light (or object which appears in the plane of the circumscribing shadow). These first coordinates are not a reduction of the spatiality of one's body to grid space, but in fact the

opposite: to recognize myself as locally coordinated is the first step in recognizing the limitations of any pretensions to a panoptic gaze.

For example, Helen Fielding notes that upon entering a cinema, the screen at first presents only light—light *by which*, she stresses, one does not see, but instead sees. Such light as one *sees* is the same sort of light that disrupts the constancy of the field that allows one to identify the same book as blue over the course of the day’s shifting lighting; similarly, in the absence of a shared or equally distributed level of lighting, objects will appear as confused grey tones, rather than as black or white, from beyond a keyway’s aperture. Fielding describes the way that one’s eyes and sense of movement are offset in relation to the dim milieu of the theatre, since one has just come from the bright lobby. One’s sense of space, what is available for the seeing and locomotive body, has shifted, and the screen offers “inadequate light to search out a seat” (84). Given a moment or two, however, “my body further adjusts [to this new lighting level], the screen recedes as light and becomes instead the world I inhabit, the relations among things, and my body reasserts itself according to this new level of the film” (83). Here, Fielding is describing two anchorages, two levels into which the body gears. On the one hand, the light from the screen becomes the lighting by which I navigate the theatre, by which the theatre *is* navigable for me. Following this, the theatre in its sensorimotor navigability (how I move in it, whom I can hear, see, etc.) recedes, and the lighting of the screen’s light acquires its diegetic dimension as the scenes of the trailers and film play out. The film becomes the world I inhabit.

Before speaking on the ways in which our sensory-motor body engages with such screenic scenes, or diegetic lighting, in the case of the videocall, I also want to acknowledge the social aspect of the shift in level (of lighting, of locomotive, navigable space) that occurs upon

entering the theatre. I believe that this social aspect may be more pronounced over the videocall than in the cinema and that what I have called diegetic lighting is complicated through this social dimension of the videocall. Indeed, the videocall's diegesis, the world that the sensible image establishes with me, is far more explicitly bound up with the social, with communication and community, than it is in the typical cinema experience.²³ By staying for a moment with the cinema that Fielding describes, and the hesitation in searching for a seat, one can extrapolate to the ways in which others appear before me and I to them in and through the establishment of a level.

For who has not felt like a little intruder at the threshold of the theatre's steps or ramp, entire body exposed to the light of the screen—the light that is not yet lighting. Already, the screen's light is for the other theatre-goers a level of lighting. Here, before them, the light illuminates the different sides of your face and body by turns as you shift your posture from the bright screen to the steps or ramp in search of a seat; the other patrons' lower bodies are obscured by seats, their postures obdurately, ably, oriented towards the front of the theatre. In these cases, I remind myself that I have as much right to come into the theatre as the other patrons (and so I do not intrude on any privacy constructed by economic or cultural means, such as that which a private conversation might maintain). Yet I still have a sense of playing the monoglot in mute

²³ I say 'more explicitly' rather than simply 'more' bound up in the social since, from its inception, the cinema experience has of course been a social one. This sociality does not end with the beginning of the film, once everyone has found their seats; finding one's seat or place in the theatre is in fact the successful founding of a level. It is only by virtue of settling into the world of the theatre that I can be open to the diegetic world of the film. And here, moreover, the diegetic already begins to lose its apodeictic status as a discernible category. In virtue of the fact that my ability to gear into the film is founded on the already established level of the theatre, my responses to and engagement with the film are entrenched in the presence of others around me. My reaction to a sudden twist or tragic denouement is only crystallized through the reactions of other audience members, even—and perhaps especially—if they do not share my reaction. If nothing else, the explicit sociality of the videocall lies in the avowed goal of seeing and speaking with another person.

apology at the edge of the conversation, a nonparticipant who cannot even interrupt because I cannot grasp what I would in the first place be interrupting. Or rather, I do not sense the interruption from the other's point of view: it is primarily in my own sense of space and my capacity for navigating that this (non)interruption is apparent to me. The lighting of the theatre and the light from the screen interrupt the sensori-motor fluency I bring with me from the street and the concessions; I hesitate before beginning to find my seat. For me, each entry into the theatre, similarly to each successful connection of the videocall, begins with this scene of stage-fright.

Over the videocall, co-extensive with the (typically) sonorous introduction of the call into the space of the called is the interruption of the order of that one's space. Here, order does not refer to propriety but to priority. When the call's tone (submariner's sped-up sonar) breaches the boundaries of my concentration, I look up from the dishes and towards the computer. The call's interruption is the introduction of a new task that I will attend to. It is a different sort of task from the dishes with which I had just been occupied. Washing up is not interruptive, but something that always comes after eating and, depending on the one with whom I have eaten, something I can do at my own pace, and even leave and return to. The interruption of the previous order of space does not abolish order and ordering in general—but introduces a different order.

The interruptive sound of the call is an introduction in the way that a plant is introduced to new soil, or the way that the needle is introduced (in)to the arm's tissues and interrupts its structure: the skin blushes as blood rushes to the interruption. Priorities of attention have shifted and the way that the blood moves through the body's space therefore tends to be different. But just as an incoming call re-orientates the space of the called, so is the space of the caller reoriented.

When I, as a caller, sit down and place a videocall, I have bent myself and my attention to the task of selecting Kyle (our mother's number) from my list of contacts and selecting the videocall option. I am also, to an extent, already elsewhere than in front of my computer in my room. I am thinking about whether Kyle will answer my call as we had arranged and whether his unreliable internet connection will be stable. When the call-tone begins, I quickly settle into its rhythm, maybe keep count of the cycles; I also soak up the comfortable sight of my own mirrored image that FaceTime puts on-screen in lieu of my unconnected interlocutor's camera feed. In short, I settle into the sonorous space of the outgoing call, half-pulse-half-echo, and into the visual space of my own mirror image. The sounds of the creaking fridge and the peripheral sight of the dirty dishes recede a little for the sake of my focusing on the call. However, as with telephone calls or an abrupt, if anticipated, knock at the door, I am suddenly cut off from the space of my own listening and reflective seeing and thrown into that of being listened to and watched. When the call connects, Kyle's face appears and his audio floods my ears. I have been anticipating his answer the whole time; yet the introduction of his visuo-sonorous space is still an interruption into the open, echoing space of the outgoing call.

2.3: Intercorporeality

Recalling from the last chapter the private and proprietary structure that screened communication can impose on both self-conscious reflection and theory, it is not so surprising that I am anxious as the videocall connection establishes itself between Kyle and me. This live-streamed two-way visual access to each other's environments introduces what Guenther calls

“*social depth* or, more precisely, *intercorporeal depth*” into the surface of the screen (178). For Kyle and me, the screen becomes a site at which and by which we are able to share our experience: the screen opens each of us up as individuals to each other’s worlds. To understand how this is so at a phenomenological level, one that begins from the first-person point of view and reflexively reflects to arrive at the subjective basis of objective truth, it is necessary to specify the role of depth in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of space.

On Merleau-Ponty’s reading, depth is not only the result or manifestation of a phenomenology of space; it is also emblematic and metonymic of phenomenology’s repeal of predominant classical notions of space that render it in terms of a homogeneous field. If length and width (or breadth) are properties of objects in the world that, as objects, are already defined as stable, individual entities, then depth is that which helps to ground the very appearance of objects. Depth is emblematic of that pre-reflective field that grounds the quotidian view of the world by which properties inhere in objects, objects relate to each other, and which establishes the ‘I’ as a subject over and against an object—supposedly in the first place. In a gestalt configuration, “depth immediately reveals the link from subject to space” (PhP 279). Shifting from the logic of the mirror and the portal, this immediacy is therefore not one that obtains between subject and object, but which holds (us) “prior to any object being taken as a standard of reference” (278). The depth of the world comes just as much to signal my “virtual body” as “a system of possible actions” as it does the “the power upon my body” that the world has (260, 261). In binary terms that Merleau-Ponty spends the entire *Phenomenology* working through, depth is an originary measure by which there are objects for-us: that is, this for-us remains the objective, or reflective, expression of a “coexistence of my body and the world” (261).

It is thanks to the common world of vision that the screen clears that interlocutors can appear as distinct individuals—individuals with depth. This common individuation is one way of expressing Guenther’s formulation of intercorporeal depth. Indeed, it is from this perspective of commonly individuated depth that the “overlapping of my own perspective with the perspective of others” can occur, and can sustain the open-ended, inexhaustible polysemy and possibility of a shared world (SC 178). This is to say that while objects in my room and in Kyle’s can have meanings for me, these meanings can only arise so long as our interpretations “are subject to constant mediation and negotiation” while nonetheless remaining relatively fixed and stable—in the way that a level is a relatively stable measure by which we experience the world (173). In our case, this intercorporeal depth is traced across things that are immediately behind me and Kyle, and available to both of our visual faculties. I do not suggest that Kyle and I share the same perspective of the world in our shared visual access to the same things. Rather, Kyle and I have visual access to the same objects simultaneously in time while neither of us in fact has the same vision of these objects. Yet, as we have seen, to speak of simultaneity in this way can be misleading: for something to be simultaneous there is the presupposition of a consistent, stable subjective viewpoint. Therefore to say that Kyle and I have visual access to the same objects simultaneously is already to say that Kyle and I *do* have access to the same points of view. To portray simultaneity in terms of moments in time is to imply a third point of view that belongs to neither of us two. In the first place, then, my anxiety at the call’s inception was a response to two operations: first this anxiety signals my withdrawal out of privacy and into the common visual world of being suddenly face-to-face with Kyle; the advent of the face-to-face is thus the adventure of our common world where I am just as suddenly exposed to Kyle’s virtual points of

view, which are necessarily alternative to my own.²⁴ This adventure is the anticipation before a world opened up. In the second instance, but in a moment coeval with the private anxiety of adventure, the face-to-face signals a fracture in the typically uninterrogated structure of simultaneity. This is the anxiety that comes from a perceived simultaneity that necessarily renders us as mere objects for one another; and second, we are at once together and not together at one and the same here-and-now. What Guenther means by simultaneity, a sense of shared world, I will therefore call the adventure of community.²⁵ The sense of simultaneity, of being *synchronized* with the interlocutor, over the videocall highlights the spatial and bodily aspects of what Guenther means when she uses phrases such as “at the same time”. This embodied sense of simultaneity furthermore clarifies that what I reflect on as a temporal disjuncture in instances of lag is primarily experienced as a stifled movement and contraction of motor projects.

For Guenther, this community, or sense of a shared world, grows with geographical proximity even as this spatial proximity encroaches on the sense of lived time, of time passing by: “the closer we are to one another, the more fully our perspectives overlap—*simultaneously*, spread out in space—without ever coinciding absolutely” (178, original emphasis). It is worth

²⁴ Here, however, I understand privacy in its privative connotation—where privacy is the state of being deprived: I am no longer deprived of Kyle—I finally have him, he has arrived. The adventure is not just or primarily my arrival at a certain elsewhere, but the arrival of another into my here, *even as* I advent to them: our adventures are coprimordial, a convention. This is also a convention in the rhetorical sense of the word: a new level is established.

²⁵ It is tempting to mention the experience of lag, or asynchronous communication. An altogether familiar occurrence, lag is the gap between one’s perception of events unfolding in time and the other’s perception of the same events. One always feels that the other is either ‘ahead’ or ‘behind’ oneself according to the expectations of perceived immediacy between transmission and reception that are carried over from face-to-face communication. This intuitive, or at least vernacular, portrayal of time as linear, homogenous, and (metaphorically) spatial may be useful in describing the annoyance, and even alienation, that lag induces in interlocutors; but this portrayal is not useful in a continued phenomenological analysis in the way that it portrays time as a succession of passing moments to the inexorable crest of which one must catch up.

noting that in this rendering the semantic value of simultaneity potentially shifts. While in the prior formulation simultaneity is positioned as a function of an impossible third-person relation to one's own and another's subjectivity, here it suggests a relationship of co-implication, similar to the way that we can validly deduce *A or B from B or A* in the proposition, $\{A \Leftrightarrow B\}$; alternatively phrased, in this formulation, the notion of simultaneity takes on a greater spatial resonance than in the first formulation, which focused on a notion of time in a kind of disembodied vacuum that resulted from its attribution to bodies as a quality. In more concrete terms, it becomes accurate to say that if I touch another's hand, then the other's hand touches mine. Here, my power to touch implicates another's equal (*if only still from my perspective*) power to touch.

Without explicitly mentioning geographical or cartographical proximity, Merleau-Ponty writes similarly of others' power to open up the potential senses of the world to me: the objects another takes up are "no longer merely what I could do with them, they are also what this [other person as a] behavior could do with them"(369). As with Guenther's assertion, Merleau-Ponty's own describes the experience of recognizing (if not accessing) the world's inexhaustible meaning in relation to co-locational space. That is, the *shared local coordination of bodies* seems to play a role in the experience of intercorporeal depth. While these two examples of spatial experience are both described in locational terms, the body and its capacity to sense the world are more than their insertion in objective homogeneous space of the sort that a map may measure. Indeed, to say that one's "body is not primarily in space, but is rather of space" holds that geographical (co-)location is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the experience of space (PHP149). Nevertheless, certainly it is necessary that Kyle and I be at the same place in order to

touch one another; and so shared locational space is still a viable, if insufficient, aspect of intercorporeal depth.²⁶

The way I come off to Kyle through the screen suggests that while my image belongs to his screen, and his to mine, in a “zone of reversible relationality,” my point of view nevertheless does *not* overlap with his in a way that demonstrates the *unconditional* open-ended possibility of the world (Guenther 179). The zone of co-implication, or community, where hands are in touch with one another, begins to lose its definition and stability. In videotelephony, whatever overlap that persists in this communal zone of reversible relationality outlines the world’s fragility, its limitations, by outlining my incapacity to challenge or negotiate at all this apparently shared world. My presence to Kyle through the screen does not seem to ‘stick’ or ‘take’ (in the way that a transplant fails to take when the host body rejects it, or even when a plant fails to take to its new soil and its new neighbour). Kyle’s gaze meanders and seems to look past me, above me, or to my side, and his retinas refocus even as his facial expression and posture connote the recognition of things beyond my immediate field of view. Later, he will tell me that he smiled at our mother as she came into the room. Here, it is true, there is a question of framing. But this framing is the result of the camera’s field of view, not the computer screen’s edge, as the case may be with a window. Be that as it may, when he sees our mother I have my second experience of anxiety, where it is “not even clear that [we two] belong to ‘one sole world’ whose ‘landscapes interweave’” (Guenther 170). Intercorporeal depth breaks down against the confines that the screen, with the involvement of the camera’s framing function, imposes on visual fields: to the

²⁶ Similarly, it is necessary that we both be visible for one another for the other to see us.

same extent that landscapes are traversable, the screenscape is not. Kyle's suddenly shifted field of view, not to say his point of view or vantage, is that which is now not available to my own, *nor could be* through any bodily coordination on my part. I feel displaced from our common world, disadvantaged in taking up our common adventure.

My sense of displacement is characterized as a distance, negatively recognized as my ability "to return the other's gaze" that nonetheless imposes itself upon me (Guenther 170). Here, Kyle's camera acts as a screen by presenting me with a limited instance of Kyle's field of vision even as it screens out my ability to gaze back insofar as I cannot follow his gaze by moving the camera on *his* computer. I am confronted with nothing of Kyle's world but its frame: here I am certainly visible thanks to my camera, which structures his field of view on my room, but I am robbed of the reciprocity, the reciprocity of vision that (face-to-face) visibility typically entails. I see only the means by which I am seen: I see *him* only as the means by which I am seen even as my camera is his eye in my possession. Likewise from Kyle's perspective, the camera screens (presents) me to Kyle's vision at the expense of his own visibility: I cannot see him in a reciprocity for how he looks away while I remain unable to shift my gaze accordingly. While I can always return Kyle's gaze if he looks back at the screen, when he looks at our mother (now whose mother?) I am left with the sense that there is no *way* by which I can *follow* his gaze. I cannot reorient myself bodily to do so, even though I always have *potential* access to return the gaze of the one who looks at me.

This potential exists for me, in my objective body, whereas the *possibility* of my looking at Kyle is a function of the level we collaboratively construct. I experience this potential as a screened zone of reversibility, where (ir)reversibility hinges on the willingness of the other to

include me in their sight. As I look through the screen at Kyle's locational space, my faculties are screened for the visual and the audial, and only they are allowed to transition into Kyle's. In the case of sight, the capacity of my eye to view Kyle's world is extended at the same time that it is constrained by the prosthetic eye of the camera. Analogously to how the camera screens the prison guard for his own visibility, Kyle's camera, whose feed is on *my* screen, screens my sight at the same time that it screens for my mobility. Kyle has this camera in his world and his material possession: we are both of his camera's space but only he is *in* its space. In this way, an asymmetry of potential can begin to sediment into a pre-objective level: locational space and lived space become laminated, and possibility becomes equivalent with potential. The space that either I or Kyle are in become the same as that which we inhabit.

The screen screens out my capacity for actively *catching* sight of his world, and leaves me instead, on my side of the screen, with but the capacity for passively *viewing* it. It is as though the entire videocall apparatus has flattened my experience of the world that Kyle and I would share in reducing him and his world to mere objects for my senses to soak in and my consciousness to cogitate. Yet, in typical older-brother form, I am taking too much credit even in my pretensions to passivity. It is not just that Kyle has ceased to focus on me and instead looks at something else. Rather, when Kyle looks at our mother as she sits behind his computer his sight ceases to include my embodied sight to the extent that my sight no longer forms a system with *my* embodied mobility; instead, my embodied mobility forms a system with his willingness and ability to move the camera to include me. It is in this moment that I recognize the limitations of my physical embodiment in screened interaction— that the eye, the camera, which furnishes the visibility of Kyle's world (rather than my embodied ability to see) is in fact in Kyle's possession.

Kyle has his visibility for me. I sense the dislocation of my field of view from my faculty of embodied vision as a displacement from the world that Kyle and I had been sharing. The divergence of the site of my vision and the site of my visual field amounts to a displacement from Kyle's world to the extent that I can no longer "negotiate" with the same things with which he negotiates. I seem to cease to (have) sense at the moment I cease to have Kyle's look within our shared perceptual horizons. This inability to negotiate appears as a second-order negotiation, or negotiation to the first-order challenge of intercorporeal depth's negotiable horizons of sense. In the case of intercorporeal depth, as we saw with Merleau-Ponty and Guenther, this challenge is issued by the other who "annexes natural objects by diverting them from their immediate sense," by taking them up according to their own unique perceptual horizons (or point of view) even as I take up the same spatial object according to mine (Merleau-Ponty 370).

Of course, 'Kyle's 'eye' is in my possession, inset and unblinking above my computer's screen. Here, then, I recognize that although I cannot move myself *in* Kyle's space, despite being *of* it, I can still cancel the potential for his vision to be in my own space. I can perform actions similar to his own: I can look up, or walk away. Kyle and I are both rendered vulnerable to the vagaries of the other's vision. Thus our world is truly a shared one to the extent that we share responsibility for holding it open to one another. The recognition of this responsibility is one way of rising to the second-order challenge of horizons of sense, which is the challenge to in the first place begin negotiating. It is because my field of view belongs to his world of sight, but my local body does not, that I am not permitted to take up Kyle's world of sight, challenge it, or navigate. As the world has meaning for me through its evident openness to a multitude of overlapping viewpoints, this second-order challenge of screened space is issued by the limitations that the

technology of the video call places on this very negotiating power. My ability to divert, challenge, or engage in the sense of an object or person is itself diverted. It is nevertheless the spatial sense that I retain through my vision and visual access to Kyle's lived space that allows me to sense these limitations. That I can sense the dislocation of my field of view from my faculty of vision as a displacement at all confirms for me that I am of space rather than merely or "primarily in it"—for by what other measure could I sense that I am no longer *in* the shared space of Kyle's screen.

There is no question that I retain my sense of "'here' from which I encounter every 'there'," given my sense of embodiment (Guenther 168). The question instead shifts to the conditions for the possibility of continuing to experience Kyle's space as a co-locational inhabitation. Insofar as my field of view belongs to Kyle's through the video call's distribution of cameras and screens, the video call enacts in a technological register the phenomenal experience that Merleau-Ponty describes as the completion of my system of the world through another (368). That Kyle and I belong together in a shared world means that no one has total control of it. Inhabiting such a world clear of control is a commitment to vulnerability: it is what holds open the possibilities of a future where Kyle will once again look my way. As I perceive Kyle over FaceTime, and perceive my displacement as a function of our limited locational community, I "commit to an entire future of experiences in a present that never, strictly speaking, guarantees that future" (Merleau-Ponty 311). The condition for such a possibility is not just our willingness to include the other in our space, but our *faith* in the other's attention as a function of this will's possibility (that is, the attention of the other is a function of my willingness to include them in my space and vice versa). It is not merely that Kyle's presence means the world to me, but that

his attention and his care mean the possibility of such a world at all. It remains to be seen how the limits of this faith are tested and complicated when the tactility of the mouse, as a way of nixing the other's vision by ending the call, is mobilized as means of coercively screening out the other field of view altogether.

Chapter 3 The Crepuscular Spatiality of The Screen: The Phenomenological Basis of Laura Marks's Haptic Visuality and Its Ethical Implications

3.1: The Third Side of the Screen

Tell me—and I will take it up—any way of beginning a conversation over video-calling technology that does not see me and my interlocutors at odds with our own bodies. Right now, Zoom appears to be the most ubiquitous videocalling (videotelephony) technology in professional and educational settings; FaceTime and its peers seem reserved for family affairs or for friends.²⁷ We are at odds, though, with *what of* our own bodies? I phrase the question as if these bodies can be pared apart in experience—when we are paired, face-to-face, on screen—as they can so easily be pared apart in language. As we saw in the last chapter, in the current generation of videotelephony, the configuration of the camera with respect to the screen prohibits eye contact in the way that it would occur if two were to meet face-to-face. Over the videocall, I

²⁷ Both Zoom and FaceTime, as brandnames, gesture rhetorically to this fragmentation of the human body. While the latter does so through metonymy (taking the face and its exposure to another as the measure of interpersonal quality time), the former evokes the cinematographic technique of zooming-in. The zoom shot decontextualizes the filmed subject from its surrounding scene-scape and, in so doing, permits an economy of projection-identification to play out (Marks 332; one could compare this assertion, grounded in feminist critique, to the early socio-cultural and marxist readings of the Kuleshov effect in montage).

do not meet my interlocutor's eyes; by definition, then, they do not meet mine. Such a meeting can occur if and only if both parties see the other seeing them, if the other's eyes' vision is *a* vision for one's own vision. This does not mean that I see through the other's eyes, for phenomenology makes it clear that this is not possible anyway; it does not even mean that I have to be able to see what the other sees. Rather if Kyle's vision is a vision for my own, then his seeing me is co-extensive with his being seen, and *vice versa*. His capacity for vision is enjoyed in my very sight of him.

Already, however, in speaking about being present with one another I have reduced this presence to the corollary of a single organ. Here, at least in linguistically expressed reflection, we see that vision becomes a property of the eye, just as the eye is partitioned off from the rest of the body when considering vision in its active, or intentional, aspect, one in which it takes an object. Just as much as the eye, so has the vision in this rendering become cameral (*in camera, huis clos*, sequestered). This impossibility of eye contact is one of the bodily arrangements, or composesures, that the material infrastructure of the video-call enforces on its participants. It is here that I once again encounter the risk of locating Kyle as a mere object in the homogeneous space of my surveillant vision. Despite this risk, the call's infrastructure in combination with the arrangement and rhythm of my body provokes an anxious ocular choreography, or saccadic arrhythmia, of trying to catch the other's eye. This choreography is one in which we find a starting point for thinking through the tension that begins in the crow's feet and ends, with the call, as a film over the whole body. It is as though this tension is the result of the friction of my gaze against the other's—as the two gazes overlap on their paths between the camera and the screened image of the other's eye.

When I introduced this scenario of corporeal tension to the concept of intercorporeal depth in the last chapter, it was to assert that the screen was not so much a univocal or neutral site of vision, and that likewise there was no neutral vision, but a sedimented level according to which perception unfolds. I furthermore elaborated how the screen brings two individuals—facing each other, though not face-to-face—into what Lisa Guenther calls intercorporeal space, and how it allows for the maintenance and expression of two individual subjectivities. The screen is on this account a surface with depth. And finally, insofar as my field of view belongs to Kyle's through the video call's distribution of cameras and screens, the video call enacts in a technological register the phenomenal experience that Merleau-Ponty describes as the completion of my system of the world through another (PhP 368).

At the level of experience, this completion nonetheless leads to a certain asymmetry of seeing. There is something surveillant about the way that we see each other over FaceTime if I can meaningfully describe Kyle's vision as though it is dislocated from him and relocated in the socket of my computer's camera. Either I am confronting the means by which I am watched (the camera), or I am watching the onlooker (their image) of my own watching in their equally surveillant composure. Thus this asymmetry appears to reassert the privileging of some medium, the screened image and the camera, that liaises between the one and the other. This chapter aims to deepen an understanding of the pre-personal zone upon which such a sense of separation or dislocation is predicated—that is, which such a sense tacitly presumes. In other words, while an analysis of Guenther, Merleau-Ponty, and Sobchack has shown that the possibility of action is always tangent with a sense of space, or that space always presumes an anterior spatial level, it

remains to be seen how such a spatial level is possible, and is in fact possibilized (or rendered as a *potential*, a lived capacity).

It seems that such friction as one finds in the paths of overlapping vision and intra- and inter-corporeally over the videocall is the result of what Merleau-Ponty would call a naive perspectival outlook on the world—one in which “[o]ur perception ends in objects” that are distinct from the subject that sees them (PhP 69). Such an objective looking is congruent with the traditional strains in media studies that equate the screen with an ontological flattening, a “fetishization of presence” (del Río 102)²⁸. Unlike the logic of this naive realism, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology holds that we cannot reconstruct actual experience in terms of its conditions of possibility because these conditions of possibility are only revealed as such through the lens of our experience. Such realist constructions operate at the level of factual reflection and project the sort of objective space, or *thetic space*, that we saw in the mirror and the portal.²⁹ Facts are always constructed on the un-reflected ground of perception: they are protracted, belated.

Phenomenology asks whether we can understand the possibility of experience by beginning from its alleged contents, or whether we must first understand how it is that we communicate, as it were, before we can begin to examine the contents of communication. The (semantic) subtlety of this difference only adverts to the intertwined, chiasmic nature of the problem. And in short, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology would respond to this either-or query with a, ‘yes’—which is to affirm the value of both questions while denying the validity of the

²⁸ Cf. Chapter 1 on the logics of the mirror and the portal.

²⁹ Cf. Introduction for a finer exegesis of this realism.

binary premise. It is in this vein that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology works (away) at the margins of the transcendental subject, or ego, that grounds every consciousness—itsself always consciousness *of* something of the world—as the wellspring from which meaning and reality flourish. In her introduction to the work of Merleau-Ponty *vis-à-vis* the phenomenological canon, Lisa Guenther compares this marginal (or “anonymous,” or “unreflected ground of perception”) subjectivity with that of the Husserlian transcendental ego. One crucial difference, Guenther elaborates, between transcendental phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty's (more) critical phenomenology:

is the degree to which intentionality is understood as the *orientation* of an intentional act (noesis) toward and intentional object (noema), where noesis constitutes noema without being reciprocally constituted by it, or as a *relation* in which feedback loops interweave noetic processes with a noematic field and vice versa (*50 Concepts* 12, original emphasis).

Merleau-Ponty, then, adopts the position of noetic-noematic reciprocity. Although Merleau-Ponty sees value in both, the likes of transcendentalism and science produce a “second-order” experience: they reflect on the products of reflection without taking into account the pre-reflective unity that they indeed take for granted (PhP lxxii). Similarly, consciousness, or thethetic, reflective thought of quotidian life, typically takes for granted the non-thetic unity of pre-reflective sensibility, the priority of perception: “reflective analysis ceases to adhere to our experience and substitutes a reconstruction [of experience] for a description” (lxxiii). The task of phenomenology is therefore to describe our pre-reflective engagement with the world while recognizing this very possibility as a “*presumption* [...] and] as the fundamental philosophical

problem” (64). That is, even a putatively transcendental reflection can only begin (and end) in the world in which any such reflection is always already situated.

Nevertheless, it furthermore seems that over the video-call the planar surface of the screen, the material distribution of image-bearing monitors, and the cameras that feed these monitors’ projections, all work to form a zone in which the difference and integrity of beings is diminished and the hypertrophy of Being is augmented. Perhaps strangely, Merleau-Ponty himself attributes this lack of bodily investment to the cinema screen when he writes that it “has no horizons,” suggesting that it contributes to, if not quite a transcendentalized viewing, then at least the naive one of the “natural attitude,” one that removes the subject from the field of view as much as it renders the imaged object as an unquestioned given to the subject (*PhP* 70).³⁰

Though I take up this position below, suffice it to say for now that at this point in the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty means to emphasize that the *camera* seems to disappear from the field in which it ‘views’ the scene. Elsewhere, he celebrates the film for its capacity to instruct vision in a phenomenal way of viewing the world.³¹

These qualifications notwithstanding, it is tempting to search for a cure to our videotelephonic tension in the rebuttals to Cartesianism and Kantianism. And yet, can I deny that when I direct my gaze towards the means by which the other sees me (the camera imbedded above *my* screen where their image appears) I am not seeing their image? I do not look at them

³⁰ This is contra the phenomenological analysis of Vivian Sobchack, who lauds the cinema and its screenic logic of corporeal engagement, both in *Address of the Eye* (Princeton UP, 1992) and in *Carnal Thoughts* (UCP, 2003), discussed later. Nevertheless, both Sobchack and Merleau-Ponty disparage screens in one form or another, and for similar reasons. It is arguable in Merleau-Ponty’s case, though, that he takes up the cinema screen as a concrete metaphor for how vision has been figured in the sciences.

³¹ Here I am referring to his essay “Film and the New Psychology,” which was produced in the same year he published *Phenomenology of Perception*.

when I engage with their vision and look them in the camera, their eye in my possession. And even if I see ‘them’ in their cameral vision, which I posit as a flake of their being that deposits itself on my pupil, I cannot deny the sense of an asymmetrical eye-contact. I see their vision (their seeing) and I do not see them: I see that they are looking at me, but our eyes do not meet. The response to this asymmetry, this surveillance, is a reconnaissance after one’s own vision (that is, the other for whom one is a vision) in the dance of eyes from camera to screened image. Surely the same infrastructure is at work in the other’s experience.

Speaking in the onto-phenomenological register of Merleau-Ponty’s work (parts of the *Phenomenology* as well as his late essay “The Intertwining—The Chiasm”) offers insight into a “third genre of being between the pure subject and the object”—my body, the body of an I (PhP 366).³² In the words of Elena del R  o, this third genre is later re-worked and expanded as flesh in “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” and amounts to “a reconfiguration of the body itself—one that extends its limits beyond the objective frames of visibility and presence” (del R  o 95). The flesh, then, similarly to the third genre of the body discussed in the *Phenomenology*, does not ‘position’ itself in a space that presumes the prior existence of subject and object (which are always *for* a subject in the first place), and so does not come *between* subject and object like a body that is only another object among objects. Indeed, neither the body nor the flesh posit the pre-existence of an absolute spatial plane as necessary for the communion of one and the other³³. This third genre, especially through the work that recent critical phenomenologists have contributed, opens

³² As Olkowski notes, this third genre is expressed in a (largely) Sartrean vernacular during a later section of the *Phenomenology* as a subject “located at the conjunction of the for-itself and in-itself” (Olkowski 528).

³³ Here I do not explore what the flesh *is*: indeed, to ask after it in this way is already to reduce an ontological concept (being) to an ontic one (beings). What is important here is that the flesh is not the ‘flesh and blood’ of my body, nor the material density of any other object, organic or otherwise.

up discourse around such disconnections as we feel over electronic audio-visual communications media. Yet these critical phenomenologies also do not reduce these feelings of disconnection to the effect of some vestigial naive dualism or transcendentalism. Rather, they imply that any theory which does so commits to the same flattening which that theory would disparage. The critical phenomenologies of Merleau-Ponty's successors, namely those of Alia Al-Saji and Dorothea Olkowski, and the haptic visuality and "surface tension" of screen studies scholars, such as Laura Marks and Elena del Río, share a concern in their attention to the role that the body plays in the experience of a world with others (del Río 101). At stake in the experience of videotelephonic communication is the opportunity for recognizing the conditions for the possibility of embodied alterity, or intersubjectivity.³⁴ This intersubjectivity is one that resists the threat of philosophies of realism: those "that leave consciousness behind and take as given one of its results," those that work according to the logic of subject and object (PhP 48). The implications of a lived recognition of intersubjectivity therefore (at least partially) consist in always situating the viewer in the world that she views before any eidetic reduction of vision, or eye, or sense is possible.

If the rejection of such realism begins at the epistemological implications of dualistic and transcendental ontologies, then it can also be extended to the ethical and the lived. In particular, I shall attend to the thinking of Laura Marks on the difference between the optical and the haptic in sensory experience. Marks's essay "Video Haptics and Erotics" defines ethical viewership in terms of an erotics of interaction which avoids imposing the distance necessary for a presumptive identification with the image that is normally associated with screen-based image

³⁴ In this sense, intersubjectivity is also an intercorporeality.

media, what she calls its flat, optical mode. I argue that Marks's work on the screen-body interface offers a quite concrete, lived, and ethical coda to Merleau-Ponty's more elemental, onto-phenomenological analysis of fleshly dehiscence in *The Visible and the Invisible*.³⁵ As such, I propose that haptic visuality both respects the unique circumstances and effects of screened images while also deferring any view that sees the screen reduced to a diffusion of bodily significance. I draw on the phenomenological work of Al-Saji, specifically her notion of sensory life, to demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty's ontological category of the flesh can indeed be felt or lived "affectively," bodily, as haptic visuality, while nonetheless remaining outside of consciousness, or thetic sensory perception (which takes itself as a synthesis).

By inflecting Marks's reading of haptic visuality with Al-Saji's insights into the temporality of the Merleau-Pontian pre-personal (the anonymous, or unthought, described above), I also offer an amendment to a strain of Marks's thought that risks sinking back into the naive realism of screenic reflection where the image subsumes the viewer. Marks's haptic visuality thereby becomes aligned with the task of Merleau-Pontian and critical phenomenologies insofar as it can be an instance of lived ontological non-coincidence. The affectivity of temporo-sensory life gestures towards the ever-folded-over inside of lived experience's outside in which, Merleau-Ponty is clear, the thetic distinction of subject and object, seer and seen, persists as an imminent reversibility, realizable potentially but never in fact (VI 147). Finally, this gap in thetic consciousness is tantamount to a recognition of the horizontality (if not the particular horizons) of our being in the world as a "past which has never been present," a past that is my heritage but not mine, and certainly not mine alone (*PhP* 252). What

³⁵ Hereafter cited in-text as "VI."

Merleau-Ponty frames as an inaccessible past, which is in other words outside the purview of a full reduction, I maintain is tantamount to the grounding force of community that precedes individual co-presence in the register of (tele)communication.

3.2: From Homogeneous Space to the Temporality of the Flesh

If haptic visuality causes us to hesitate in the operation of our objectifying gaze by drawing attention to the pre-personal fund of sensory life, we must first see how temporality structures this pre-personal basis of lived experience and thetic consciousness—and more, how it opposes what is otherwise absolute space’s contamination of time. Al-Saji’s work sketches a map of ethical action based on a critique of the underlying temporal dimensions of bodily space, the recognition of which is lived affectively in what she calls “hesitation.” As I show in section three, haptic visuality, at the levels of experience and of reflection, as theory, is capable of expressing such hesitation. In Al-Saji’s essay “A Past which Has Never Been Present,”³⁶ measuring the ethical implications of the temporalized body (or the lived inheritance of a “past which has never been present”) means accounting for the ways in which this temporality, what she terms “sensory life,” allows for the possibility of the future being different from the past.³⁷ Here, ethics in part means undoing the fossilizing work of sensory (and screenic) perception, the naive realism of planar space and spatialized time. The other half of the equation, which is,

³⁶ Cited in-text as “PNBP.”

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty uses this phrase to describe the goal of phenomenological reflection as one takes it up following the reduction. At the end of the first chapter (“Sensing”) of Part Two (“The Perceived World”) of the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty writes that phenomenological “reflection only fully grasps itself if it refers to the unreflective fund it presupposes, upon which it draws, and that constitutes for it, like an original past, a past that has never been present” (252).

again, taken up later in terms of haptic visuality, means working out the degree to which this revivification of perception as sensory life does not itself become reified once more as a means of reducing others to the (moral) index for my own actions. This would be a hesitation that leads to paralysis—not only of the self, but of the other as well in structures such as ableism.

Al-Saji posits sensory life as the “condition of possibility of perceptual experience and of the existence of different sense fields” (PNBP 48). Importantly, as a condition of possibility, this sensory life or original past is not recognized in thetic consciousness, and not therefore reducible to a historical moment. Yet neither can the specific inherence of the body in a given world be read out: as Merleau-Ponty will write in “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” “one can indeed say of my body that it is not *elsewhere*, but one cannot say that it is *here* or *now* in the sense that objects are” (147, original emphasis). Al-Saji argues that Merleau-Ponty’s insights concerning time, specifically his notion of an original past or sensory life can be traced to and explicated in terms of Bergson’s concept of *durée* in *Matter and Memory*. The result is that “perception may be, not an instantaneous act, but a temporal process that involves diachrony” (PNBP 44).³⁸ The temporality of the lived body in perception is thus one that includes delay, process, or hesitation. Accordingly, any perception that is so structured contradicts the ontological assumptions of the screen’s immediacy, or fetishization of presence. This temporality ensures perception’s “impossibility as full and instantaneous presence to the world,” and indeed as a “non-coincidence” between subject and object (47).

³⁸ As noted in Chapter 1, such an instantaneity is an in-principle denial of the very possibility of communication, and indeed of action in the world. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no such thing as immediate perceptual experience; rather, such an immediacy is theorized in terms of a scientific realism, as a reconstitution, and called ‘sensation.’

Beyond the disjunction between subject and object at the level of perception, this temporality persists as a structuring level, or original past, that inflects or possibilizes perception at the level of everyday life.³⁹ Indeed, “the basic structure of this process [of perception] is dictated by the original non-coincidence, or asynchronicity, of the rhythms of body and world that coexist in sensory life” (55). This is to say that the conditions of the possibility for perception have to do as much with a pre-conscious, pre-personal body as they do with the body’s inherence *within* or inhabitation of space. What Al-Saji means by “rhythms of body and world” is, as she admits, somewhat opaquely borne out in the *Phenomenology*. But we see in “The Intertwining” that this rhythm manifests in terms of movement and affect, which is to say in terms of processual becoming: “my vision does not soar over [the things of the world, objects], it is not the being that is wholly knowing, for it has its inertia, its ties” (147). These ties, this grounding level that perception requires *and cannot itself perceive*, become the original past or sensory life of the perceiver: the ties polarize lived perception as an original “differential infrastructure that allows a [lived or conscious] perceptual form to appear (PNBP 56). Equally important, these ties begin at the level of conscious thought that are then sedimented or *habituated* over time (54). I would suggest that this same pre-personal infrastructure of perception is borne out in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh: the “coiling over of the visible upon the sensing [seeing, *envisioning*] body” expresses itself as a certain compulsion or active affinity that Merleau-Ponty describes in terms of motricity: I “*follow with my eyes the movements and the contours of the things themselves*” (146, original emphasis). This fleshly

³⁹ My use of the words temporal and temporality issue from Dorothea Olkowski’s distinction in Bergson and Merleau-Ponty between lived or vulgar ‘time’ and pre-personal, or ontological, ‘temporality’ (Olkowski, *passim*, 2010). In the current chapter, temporality and *durée* refer to the same structure.

relation between toucher and touched, not itself a substance or objective in-itself, forms a “close-bound system that I count on” (146). To the extent that this system of non-coincidence or non-fusion becomes sedimented as an original past or orienting level, sense and a sense of “continuity [become] a function of difference” (PNBP 54). Behind every lived perceptual form, then, is a constitutive gap, or lack, or “dehiscence,” or non-fusion, that is not its opposition, but its clear zone of possibility. As we shall see, this fleshly dehiscence operates according to a similar contronymous logic that the screen does: in cleaving apart as lack, flesh cleaves together as a lack borne across time and body.

In contrast to this corporeal time of sensory life in all its diachrony, the projection of a homogeneous space is the reduction of time to a broad, unblinking present (PNBP 47). This projection is moreover the contraction of inhabitation, one’s ties, to mere location and the reduction of rhythm to monotony. As Bergson takes it up in *Matter and Memory*, *durée* in the naive and spatialized sense is time—time such as we think of it in the everyday.⁴⁰ In her article “*Durée*,” Al-Saji observes that this vulgar *durée* is seen as possessive—duration *of* something (100). Time, as vulgar *durée*, or as spatialized time, separates the perceiver from the perceived

⁴⁰ In *Matter and Memory* Bergson shows that one of the key metaphysical conceits that inhibits thinking “perception and matter,” or subject and object, together is the “prejudice of action” (293). It is therefore through an analysis of this prejudice, or Merleau-Pontian naive realism, that the positive dissolution of planar, geometrical space, spatialized time and their concomitant transcendental subject is possible. This prejudice consists in the projection or abstraction of a homogenous space that supports the posit of infinitely divisible matter against a unified or indivisible mind. Bergson explicitly links this “diagrammatic design” of homogeneous space, from which homogeneous time is derived, to its quotidian utility for us: by attributing space and time as properties to things we “fix” them as objects upon which we can act (280, 289). (Merleau-Ponty uses the same language of “fixing” in the “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” to describe the structure of the natural attitude. In this case, the fix likely refers to the mordanting operation of photograph development [131].) If we take in earnest this call to disavow our prejudices of action through a revision of homogeneous space, we first of all find that actions do not take place within space, but that space becomes a function or tangent of action (289). On this account space is not a natural given; and any account of the screen that disavows homogenous space cannot say that the screen is the flattening of some otherwise essentially protean and inscrutable dimension. In turn, space neither antedates nor causally generates the grounds of communication. To use Al-Saji’s Merleau-Pontian vernacular, space and communication are *co-naissants*, or in a relation of *co-naissance*, “coexistence or communion” (PNBP 49).

through the institution of an absolute space and the concomitant need of a transcendental subject. *Durée* is thus perceived in terms of some otherwise stable thing which pre-exists it: indeed, *durée* becomes the property of the object that it has in the first place been said to support. The thing or phenomenon then becomes the projection against which *durée* appears—and *durée* is conceived in terms that paint it as a contingent attribute of things. There is then a shift (at the onto-epistemological register, at the register of the noematic action of the subject): it is precisely through *durée* that things appear, as though on a screen; it is as though *durée* first appears in things and then, noticing its inherence, we make the leap to *durée*'s causal relationship to that thing in which it is manifest. On this reading, *durée* becomes the container, medium, or measure of interval “*in which*” phenomena take place (100).

Time becomes a way of measuring, identifying, or recognizing things rather than as a way of understanding how any recognition whatsoever is possible. Put otherwise, through a sort of metalepsis, the same system that renders *durée* a contingent *quale* of extended phenomenon (or objects) also mistakes this *quale* for the apparent (causal) essence of these phenomenon. *Durée* as linear time acts as both the medium and the mediated—it plays on both side of the screenic metaphor: it is both the screen and the projection, both the means by which something less apparent (or less accessible) becomes apparent, and that which in itself is less stable than that absolute or transcendental other against which it appears. *Durée* as time is that whose effects we read but whose implication we read out. For all that this naive notion of *durée* relies on a *genitive* relation, it is not *generative*—that is, creative.⁴¹ In the broad unblinking present of

⁴¹ Olkowski echoes this in her work “In Search of Lost Time”: “Indeed, as Merleau-Ponty indicates, any state of such a system may be repeated as often as desired, the system has no history, and nothing is created” (530). Such a system of onto-epistemological description as spatialized *durée* exemplifies is the fulcrum of scientism’s focus on measurement. Things become predictable and measurable to the same extent that they are contiguously related in a homogeneous space.

spatialized, homogeneous time, the possibility of a future that might be different from the past is reduced to a series of presents and presences that are only ever the latest unfurling of an extra-temporal force.

If it is the case that “perception is an act of recognition that relies both on a distinction being instituted between subject and object poles and [...] on their coexistence” (as in the reciprocity of noesis and noema), then the thetic consciousness (subject-object position) that carries perception along requires that these subject and object poles be defined and fixed in advance in order that perception obtain (PNBP 48). From the point of view of thetic consciousness and its attendant theoretical system of realism, I can only recognize what I have in some sense already known. I can after all only measure how long a metre is if I can measure it in terms of some other index. Yet rather than denote a sense of being in the world where I am always already enmeshed in it, this sense of perception as recognition, as a function of thetic consciousness, is congruent with a sense of the past that reduces it to a present, and the self to a point that persists outside of the network of relations which it construes. Phenomena become dilapidations of some otherwise inaccessible ideality that is commensurate with reality, one that no one lives: the present is always too late. Al-Saji emphasizes that perception relies on the “coexistence” of subject and object, and, I would add, on their co-constitution—rather than on their mediation by some disinterested consciousness.

Al-Saji approaches the ethical question of Bergson’s thought by situating *durée* as ontologically prior to the division of quality and quantity and the correlative projection of geometrical space. *Durée* “escapes quantification while grounding measure” (“*Durée*” 101). Thus *durée* is an operative, or pre-reflective, factor in the institution of matter-for-action and the

experience of space. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty's sensory life is "anterior to the distinctions of subject and object and to the divisions between the senses; it is the generative ground of these divisions, of experience, of things, and ideas" (PNBP 48). If sensory life is anterior to the divisions of the senses, then this sensory life is senseless—that is, lacking in the division of particular senses such as sight, hearing, or touch. Sensory life is thus the perceptual equivalent in terms of meaning and action—in short communication—to what the anonymity of the body and lived space are in terms of individuality or subjectivity. There is no sensation in sensory life, let alone a power that manifests in conjunction with a particular part of the body such as the eye—as our above realist description of videotelephony seemed to suggest. I do not mean by 'senseless' that this pre-thetic level of perception is without any meaning for us. Sensory life, as the ground of perception in thetic consciousness, is not so much synthetic as synaesthetic. Sensory life is that function which makes it possible that meaning make sense rather than that synthetic operation which collects and makes meaning of various, putatively raw, sensations.

This same synaesthetics is at work in Merleau-Ponty's description of the chiasmic relation of the senses in "The Intertwining": the "delimitation of the senses is crude [...] the touching subject passes over to the rank of the touched" (133-4). Neither Merleau-Ponty's nor Al-Saji's programme therefore seeks to "replace perception within the things themselves" in the sense that an unequivocal, stable, immediate knowledge of them is possible through Bergsonian intuition (Bergson 237). The ethics of temporality is not founded on an ontological *synthesis* of subject and object that can be distilled in *and* from perceptual experience. This would only repeat the logic of realism that Merleau-Ponty seeks to avoid. Rather, the ethical dimension of temporality

is cut out of the synaesthetic zone of reversibility that obtains between the toucher and the touched, the sentient and the sensible.

While I am in the world as both a seer and a seen (a vision for the seer-interlocutor), and there is thus a certain reversibility in my power (or potential) as a body to be both subject and object, this power does not manifest its two sides (obverse and reverse) simultaneously. Reversibility is not the same as simultaneity: the former is a true actuality, or an actual possibility; the latter, like the synaesthetics of sensory life is “always imminent and never realized in fact”—or, it *is* virtually, available not as a lived “power” in objective experience but as a thinkable possibility (VI 147). Such a simultaneity, such “coincidence[,] eclipses at the moment of realization” *into an affective comportment of hesitation expressed as attention*: “When one of my hands touches the other, the world of each opens upon that of the other because the operation is reversible at will,” such that the hand that touches can slip into the role of being touched (147, 141). When Merleau-Ponty later writes that I am “always on the same side as my body,” this does more than confirm that I can only experience the world through my body, that I cannot see through the other’s eyes (148). It also reaffirms what we already knew from his *Phenomenology of Perception*, namely that every view is always a partial view from someplace within the world that one views—what Merleau-Ponty calls the partial truth of solipsism (PhP 377). Indeed, for a seer to see any thing, she must “be one of the visibles,” she must see eye-to-eye with the other in the sense that the videocall apparently prohibits (VI 135). The difference between the simultaneous and the reversible is thus, at the ethical dimension, the dimension of action, the difference between possibility and power (*pouvoir*). The reversibility of

the flesh signals the possibility that is in my power, that is a possibility *for me* based on my habitation in the world.

With this parallel difference between reversibility and simultaneity on the one hand, and power and possibility on the other, measuring the ethical implications of the disruption of homogeneous space must mean a double-recognition. First, this is a recognition that the non-coincidence or hesitation of perception cannot itself be lived cognitively, but only “rhythmically,” through our emotional and motor capacities as a reception to a world that precedes us—but one which is neither determined by us nor wholly determinate of us (PNBP 49-50). The rhythm of sensory life, taken up in “affective” and “motor” habits is the token of our being always already in a world, but a world upon which our view is only ever partial. The second face of temporo-sensory non-coincidence is therefore the difference between what is possible and what is actual: the world is *for me* inexhaustible because I am of the world. This is to affirm that the correlative to this first consequence of the disruption of homogeneous space is that sensory life is the condition of possibility for the future being different from the past.

3.3: Haptic Hesitation and the Sense of Absence

It is worth pausing here to recall that screenic imposition of homogeneous space that Vivian Sobchack discusses in *Carnal Thoughts* and which I ended chapter 1 by examining. As I noted there, Sobchack argues in her phenomenological analysis of screenic media that “electronic presence,” such as one both exhibits and experiences before “television screens and computer terminals [...] randomly disperses its being *across* a network, its kinetic gestures

describing and lighting [sic] on the surface of the screen rather than inscribing it with bodily dimension” (158). The electronic screen lacks depth, or dimension, according to Sobchack. It is on this account that the electronically presented body can “ignore[...] its own history,” the sedimented background circumstances that in the first place allow one to take stock of objects and phenomena by polarizing or orienting one’s field (162). Now we see that, to an extent, Sobchack’s view of the screen as tensionless surface and Merleau-Ponty’s horizonless cinema screen are in accordance. Indeed, as Merleau-Ponty writes in the *Phenomenology* in the context of understanding bodily space: “being [in the world, versus Being,] is synonymous with being situated” (263). Sobchack suggests that the screen prohibits such a situation.

Our exploration of homogeneous space thus goes some way in accounting for the screenic paradox of disembodiment and what Sobchack sees to be its detrimental lived consequences. We further recall that this screenic paradox is expressed materially in terms of a screening from sight and a provision of space in which objects may appear. The screen conveys access to truth at a distance, apprehension without contamination—again, an asymmetry—and so opens itself to the canon of (feminist) critique of the gaze. Screenic seeing’s asymmetry, the apprehension without contamination for which it allows, is a superficial and distanced seeing that aligns with the lack of depth that Sobchack identifies in the electronic. Indeed, Sobchack might suggest that the tension we can all identify over the videocall is a result of the deep world that surrounds our computers clashing with the utter transparency of the screen. And yet this same account of homogeneous space which lends credibility to Sobchack’s depthless screen also signals its rejoinder. Sobchack founds her critique of the electronic screen on the possibility of homogenous space, whereas I have rejected the possibility of a real homogeneous space on the

basis of sensory life's reality.⁴² We can recall that for Merleau-Ponty, the foundation of the eidetic reduction, the intuition of any truth claims that go beyond mere facts, "is that of a phenomenological positivism grounding the possible upon the real" (PhP lxxxix).

In short, the tendency to describe the meeting or the communication in terms of a pre-existing spatial plane that undergirds the generation of communal space is the reduction of becoming to ineffable Being and static beings. This reduction is the institution of what Elena del Río, in "The Body as Foundation of the Screen," understands to be the cinema's screening function: the maintenance of a "univocal site of [the image's] fetishistic presence" which in turn sustains "the illusion of a narcissistic ego-logical identity" (105, 109). On del Río's reading, in order for this univocal site to operate the cinema screen "must remain invisible throughout the film's projection" (105). In the phenomenological terms of sensory life, we might say that the screen sustains the natural attitude in the mode of a synthesizing rather than synaesthetic vision.

Contrary to such a synthetic view, Laura Marks proposes that media other than film can indeed resist the flattening fetishization of presence by bringing the image's material history to the fore at the cost of easy symbolic recognition. While she locates haptic visuality in the medium of video, I believe that there is also ample room to apply Marks's theory to the experience of the videocall and more generally to the electronic or digital screen. For example, over the videocall it appears that the eyes bear the foremost pressure to adapt to the rhythm of

⁴² Another way of expressing the difference between my own view and Sobchack's is that she portrays homogeneous space not as the objective substantiation of pre-personal possibility, but as the necessary or fated (fatal) actualization of such a possibility. Homogeneous space certainly obtains in the natural attitude, and can indeed risk sedimenting into a level and the level of the possible. However, Sobchack's view is not so much a description of the conditions of the possibility of experience, or its structure, as it is an assertion of its contents. For Sobchack, homogeneous space seems to be a structural necessity of screenic experience. For me, it is only ever in fact a structural possibility.

perception and attention—communication—that the videocall demands. Over a videocall, there are several material experiences that echo what Marks identifies to be the peculiarly haptic. In a person’s attempts to see eye-to-eye with their interlocutor, their eyes oscillate between the camera and the image of the other on the screen. I understand for myself that the camera is the other’s eye in my possession when, on account of lag, I catch a glimpse of myself meeting my own eyes through the mirror-view feature. Reciprocally, the other’s field of view onto my geographical space (the space that I ostensibly occupy ‘physically’) is one that my camera dictates. I must accommodate the direction of my gaze and the position of my body in order that the other feel she in fact has my attention: if I stretch, my head becomes invisible; if something beyond the camera’s field of view catches my eye, then the other is powerless to turn themselves to see it and must rely on my repositioning the device.

Marks identifies this sort of bodily restlessness across the surface of the screened image as a “baffled vision” (Marks, in Sobchack 64)⁴³. For Marks, this corporeal reaction is correlative with the materiality of the image (the grain, aspect ratio, focus, and substratum) and which, together, form what she calls haptic visuality (Marks 332, 339). In contrast to the ossifying and objectifying optical, “haptic images are erotic [...] because they construct an intersubjective relationship between beholder and image.” (341). Now, when Merleau-Ponty characterizes the phenomenological task as proving that there can be “*for-us an in-itself*,” another way of expressing the third genre of being in the world between subject and object, he is not using the first-person plural in the sense of the third-person neutral (the one) (PhP 74). He is speaking rather about the possibility of sharing a subjective truth. Accordingly, we must read haptic

⁴³ Sobchack quotes a presentation Marks gave; the phrase “baffled vision” does not occur in the cited version of Marks’s published essay.

visuality as being neither a quality of the image or the screen nor as a quality of the viewer. These models would attribute the haptic to a stable essence that preexists it. In this vein, Marks describes the haptic as something of an interstitial zone: “Haptic looking tends to rest on the surface of its object rather than plunge into depth” (338). The haptic rests, “lingers [and] caresses” the image in “what may be described as a respect for otherness, and concomitant loss of self” in the presence of such otherness (336, 347). The haptic poses the recognition of a fundamental leeway, or play, in the constitution of subjectivity, and in so doing proposes the basis of sensing as an absence, as “[s]omething more which can perhaps only register as something less” (Taussig, in Marks 345). In the temporal terms of the last section, we might say that this something more-as-less that the haptic registers is the not-yet of a possible future—a future in which I see potentials for myself. The propinquity of the haptic’s open future is one that guides, platforms, and empowers, rather than one that stifles.

The haptic is a certain closeness that poses difference as becoming, as ever incomplete, and hence as inexhaustible and horizontal. It is this proximal (and primary) difference that serves as the fundamental pre-condition (necessary, but insufficient) for the possibility of consciousness of others and a world distinct from the self in the experience of a medium such as the videocall that would otherwise reduce Being to the transparent presence of beings. Haptic visuality “activates this awareness of absence, in a look that is so intensely involved with the presence of the other that it cannot take a step back to discern difference” (345). Taking up Marks’s own language, this emphasis on a distancing difference is that of what we might call a surface distance, a skin-deep difference. The distance of haptic visuality is opposed to the mastering

distance of the screenic gaze; and it sits rather like a film or laminate in palpating proximity to that with which it engages.

Nevertheless, the haptic distance that Marks identifies in the medium of video still runs the risk of falling into a logic of immediacy, where immediacy is figured as a full presence to sensory experience. Indeed, this is the mode in which Marks sees optical visibility to operate: where what the screen portrays is available because it is on or in the screen, and the viewer has corporeal access to the screen without the risk of being sensed in turn. Or else, the screen is the agent of the subject's displacement and disembodiment. Indeed, the latter is what Marks suggests is the beneficial and heuristic quality of the haptical: the exposure to a loss of self. Yet how is it that I could be completely subsumed by the other in haptic experience and still say that it is *I* who am subsumed? As del Río notes, the wholesale displacement of the body by technology (or, at least the claim that this is possible and actually happening) does not essentially differ from the idea of the body as a synthesizing presence "since, in both cases the body is subsumed under a rhetoric of visibility and immediacy" (97). Both views portray the body as a self-contained unit distinct from the field in which it perceives. This is to say that the body is read as entirely absent, ineffective and un-affective if it is not perceivable. Yet as we have understood through Merleau-Ponty's sensory life, Bergsonian *durée*, and the flesh, to the extent that one sees one is also capable of being seen. If the body can be displaced by technology, then it must be a self-contained unit, with a defined edge, subject to no contamination—otherwise, the action of displacement performed by technology would rather be one of misplacement, of something of the body being left behind; there would be a trace. In this way, hesitation, flesh, or absence of substance risks being reified as yet a substantial absence.

This is to say that the *medium* of screen is still nested within the plane of a unified space that posits objects to be contiguously related. Therefore, if we are to understand the “paradox” of the screen as a *lived* paradox, and not as one that can be constituted according to the logic of a post hoc realism, we must understand it in terms of the flaws of homogeneous space that give rise to onto-epistemologies of immediacy. This is to insist that the screenic paradox is constitutive of screenic experience rather than constituted by it, rather than being the effect of some defective sensory-cognitive apparatus or mind-matter pansynthesis that might otherwise render experience, the world, and itself entirely transparent. It is also to suggest that when critics such as Marks argue that such a screenic flattening is possible in the mode of the electronic or the optical, it is these theories themselves that have been screened.⁴⁴ To recuperate Marks’s theory from the throes of realism we must review the absence of sense and of self that she sees in the screen’s potential for haptic visuality. This is to suggest that Marks’s theory is capable of resisting the reification of absence.

Marks’s theory resists the reification of hesitation, what we might call a paralysis, in two ways. For one, she is not talking about the limits of a specific sense, such as sight, but about the limits of sense in general. Regardless of the function of any given sense, everyone has a body; and if this is the case then everyone operates at varying degrees according to the natural attitude of synthesizing sense. The second way that Marks resists this paralysis is through her discussion of language and metaphoricity. For “it is necessarily through metaphor[s]” of space, touch, skin,

⁴⁴ This does not say that no flattening of experience is possible, that certain possibilities for me do not become foreclosed as a result of the sedimented milieu in which I take up a given action (cf. Al-Saji 2013 and Guenther 2012 for analyses of how racism and the sensori-social rigours of solitary confinement respectively contribute to such a flattening). Instead it suggests that any theory which proposes such a flattening must account for the ways in which these milieux are pre-reflectively sedimented. It is in this way that Merleau-Ponty can be understood to criticize cinema in his early work without contradiction; or else, he simply adapted his analysis of cinema in later works.

and proximity “that we approach such models of knowledge” of otherness and subjectivity (346). Marks acknowledges that the way “theorists have written of vision/knowledge as an act of yielding” is subject to critiques that paint it as “romantic, organicist, exoticizing” (345, 346). In this way, of course, a description of the haptic’s intimate distance, its “caressing” gaze, can itself risk re-inscribing that speculative distance of the screenic paradox, that is, as mastery through language.

Marks argues that haptic visuality alerts us in a quite bodily way, through a ceaseless lingering, to the extent that sensibility always underlies our conscious and cognitive efforts. Haptic visuality represents in lived experience, in the senses, that general sensibility which ever supports them as diffuse, unpolarized power. As a lived sense, haptic visuality, *qua* haptic, will always be lived as a certain incapacity. This is the incapacity of a totalizing view, of a view that makes sense at the level of the socio-symbolic, it is true: here we recall that Marks identifies the haptic primarily with the low-fidelity of video relative to film. But this incapacity is also felt as a limit of sense in general. As an incapacity, the haptic sense is always bound to what it is not, but only experienced from *this side*, that side which it is. For Merleau-Ponty, this is what it means to suggest that there can be “no vision without the screen”; and for Al-Saji, it is what it means that sensory life is the unmeasurable infrastructure of perceptual experience (VI 150). This is the truth of the necessary metaphoricity of the haptic: as a metaphor can only have meaning on the basis that the tenor and vehicle are *not* the same, so does the haptic acquire a dimension of meaningful absence by brushing up against what it is not. Finally, we understand that the interruption or hesitation that haptic visuality installs, like the saccadic arrhythmia of the eye over the videocall, is still indeed a rhythmic intertwining of body and world. The opposite of

rhythm is not properly an arrhythmia, in the sense that anything's opposite cannot *be* an absence. In what would the opposition of such a nothing consist? That is, the opposite must be a positive and contrary force. And so, unlike the opposite, something's absence is always tucked away in itself, the way that an absence of sight is not the lack of eyes or of a visible, but the hollowed socket behind my eyes, "the central cavity of the visible which is my vision" (*VI* 146). The absence is always a lived absence of this life.

Haptic visuality cannot therefore seek to "supply a plenitude of tactile sensation to make up for a lack of image," since this would only subscribe the tactile and the proprioceptive senses of the haptic mode to the logic of opticality, and moreover to the logic of perception that forgets its ground of sensory life (Marks 346). Therefore, along with not being a property of objects or of subjects, hapticality is not first of all a matter of the tactile or the proprioceptive, for all that movement, differentiation, and attention are important to it. Hapticality is primarily a mode of sensing otherwise, which can be sensory-specific as a seeing otherwise than vision.⁴⁵ As a mode of sensing, hapticality posits a synaesthetics of sensibility rather than a synthesis of or in terms of particular senses. Finally the modal nature of haptic visuality invests it with a resistance to the structures of ableist normativity: the haptic does not suggest that we praise a 'disfunction' of vision or difference in visual capacity as being closer to some truth of perceptual experience.⁴⁶ For one, this sort of logic often forgets that many of these incapacities are only lived as a result of socio-historical sedimentations that institutes a norm from which the differently-abled person can be said to diverge. As a synaesthetics, a mood or mode of sensing, hapticality draws attention

⁴⁵ "Seeing otherwise than vision" is a phrase from Al-Saji's "Critical-Ethical Vision" (2009, *Chiasmi International*)

⁴⁶ cf. Joel Michael Reynolds, "The Normate," in *50 Concepts for Critical Phenomenology*, 2020; and "Am I Normal?" in *Chiasmi International*, Forthcoming.

to the limits of sense in general; that is, it poses a difference at the level of sensory life rather than perceptual experience.

At the onto-ethical ground of this sensory life there are not first of all stable and self-identical beings who touch and are touched, who see and are seen, but visibles, or what Merleau-Ponty might call in sense-neutral language dehiscences, folds (VI 130-55, *passim*). These visibles, these folds of sentient-sensibles are defined as facts—stable *visions* or givens (*donné[e]s*)—after the fact (*fait*, in its verbal and nounal functions rather than adjectival, which would paradoxically render being a property of itself). Indeed, it is by explicitly disrupting the viewer's sense of spatial mastery in the form of the gaze that haptic visuality lends itself to thinking the altogether fleshly creativity of any meeting between two who sense one another. More than bearing on any particular act, haptic visuality, through the prism of fleshly sensory life, shows how any Being that might be “for-us” is only ever recognized as a lived relation. Finally, this suggests that the meaning of sharing space is more than sharing a geographical location and that the meeting which occurs as a failed eye-to-eye is nevertheless a meeting of vision, one of “sensory life,” if not one that always ‘makes sense’ or satisfies: the screen supports a synaesthetics rather than a synthesis.

Coda: Motivation and Inspiration

I did not begin this study with an epigraph, though I considered opening it with an apostrophic address to Kyle. I had figured that rather than let the words—whether arcane, ironic, or plainly relevant—of some other echo through the space that my own thoughts would soon chart, I would let the absence of the one for whom I was writing ring into the future. So, while my aversion to the epigraph was at one level a matter of taste, it has also reflected relevant structural and thematic elements of my argument. But an apostrophe is always addressed to one who is absent in the hopes that, like a diary entry or an unsent letter, it might somehow, at some point, be received by the one whom one addresses. As I have tried to communicate, this absence to which apostrophe might respond always comes too late, just as subject and object come belatedly to experience. Likewise, I leave no still image, no figures, no video files that would testify to the optics of the call. Not only are these optics already too familiar to most, they would also end up misrepresenting the movement, the itinerancy, the frustration, and the intimacy of the experience itself.

At any rate, I am virtually alone at the moment, at the desk, on a kitchen chair, because the desk chair is worn out and knots up my neck and back. My partner and I have moved, and things haven't found their proper places; the house laid out behind me remains all out of order, and the radiator reports the day's hot hours are through. Now, it is as though since I woke up I had only been leasing out those little daily satisfactions, lending to myself, on credit, simple victories—a little sweeping, some straightening and folding— and now suddenly it is too late;

now I want to talk to someone, redeem something of the day as my own through the prosthesis of the other's approving nod.

But already in this conclusion I have interrupted or even falsified the premise that would be its motivation. In committing the recognition of solitude to expression I have already occluded what I meant to show: now I have introduced the possibility of its mutual understanding in introducing a potential communicant to it. How can I ask a reader to sit with me in the solitude I want to describe without making of it something like a shared solitude, and therefore no solitude at all? I have asked of myself and the reader to turn this scene into an image that we view as if from above. It seems that rather than communicate experience I have elaborated a reflection for my interlocutor and myself. Still, there also lingers in this interruption the hope or optimism in recognizing that sort of solitude that comes on at the end of the day, and at which point motivation seems to ebb. It is true that only I can experience the sort of listlessness that comes with the evening light, which antiques all the domestic objects in a flash. But it is also true that in the moment it takes to reflect on this—the sepia aura of the house, the previous youth of the home—I have already grown distant from the experience of this shift. The recession or interruption of motivation is also the birth of inspiration. Here, inspiration measures the lived effects of that notion of the in-principle incommunicable state of being by oneself and the concomitant lived compulsion to be with others.

Yet I must not make a second error, as I did when I almost discounted optimism above. Here, what is incommunicable is not so because it is absolutely inhospitable to measure, or communication. Rather, it is incommunicable in the sense that a rope is immeasurable if one only has *this same* length by which to measure it. In other words, the community which the

communication of solitude always presumes in its objective expression is in fact the ground of communication. This unsaid solidarity at the margins of solitude's ebb *is* my inspiration. Of course, this is all to say that I can be and have been alone; it is just as much to say that I only appear as such against the background of this pre-objective, or pre-reflective, faith that I have not been and will not always be so. And finally, if the above formulation amounts to saying nothing but that the ground of communication is community, and thus appears to be tautological, then this tautology only appears as such because the two are so often conflated. The communication is not simply the coalescence of disparate elements, communicants—but it is the lived recognition, the recognition *in community* of its un-lived (incommunicable) antecedence, the antecedence to individuals.

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