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Pandemic Media

Configurations of Film Series

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Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by

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



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PHENOMENOLOGY

SERIALITY

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

VIDEOCONFERENCING

“Thus isolation is a project.” Notes toward a Phenomenology of Screen-Mediated Life

Shane Denson

The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly shifted the parameters of our lives, focusing much of our activity onto screens as we communicated with one another online. Videoconferencing took on an unprecedented importance in many peoples' daily lives, drawing attention to paradoxes of screen-mediated interactions, which serve at once to connect and to isolate. This essay foregrounds these paradoxes for the purposes of a social and existential phenomenology of screen-mediated life.



[Figure 1] Screenshot of Zoom conversation with Vivian Sobchack, Scott Bukatman, Elizabeth Kessler, Karin Denson, and the author (Source: Shane Denson 2020)

“Thus isolation is a project.” I encountered these words again in May 2020—a good two months into California’s statewide shelter-in-place order during the COVID-19 pandemic but still a week or so before video of George Floyd’s brutal murder at the hands of the Minneapolis police would spark tremendous protests, bringing millions of people back into the streets across the US and around the world. In this fragile, liminal moment I found myself confronted with what felt like an illuminating paradox as I repeated the words: “Thus isolation is a project.”

This sentence, originally published in 1960, appears in the middle of Jean-Paul Sartre’s massive *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre 2004, 258)—a later work in which the philosopher turns from the apparently individualistic, subject-centric approach of his early existentialism to a more socially oriented project, one that is explicitly Marxist in its politics. The book’s central problem can be summed up in the question of how the modern subject, existentially free and yet structurally and materially alienated, can overcome its isolation and establish robust forms of political collectivity that would embrace radical freedom for liberatory projects. For Sartre, the problem is that all too often we choose not to even attempt this endeavor, instead embracing isolation or anonymity as an existential “project” in a social form of bad faith. Under conditions of quarantine and social distancing, however, isolation had become a different kind of project: one designed to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus. There was something paradoxical, if not downright tragic, afoot: being “together apart”—despite the prosaic propaganda of such slogans—had become an important political project, but a wedge was thereby driven into

the heart of social reality, complicating the conditions of collectivity by making our collective well-being depend precisely on the alienation of social distance that Sartre had hoped to overcome.¹

Thus, some six decades after Sartre discovered the project of isolation, many of us re-discovered it in a new form. We began distancing ourselves physically while at the same time accelerating and multiplying the connections we made via screens—communicating with one another over Skype, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and Hangouts, and the suddenly omnipresent Zoom. Life itself suddenly took place on screen. We held virtual meetings, Zoom-based happy hours, video calls with distant friends and family (fig. 1). For academics, teaching and advising was abruptly shifted online, much of it taking place in the form of videoconferencing. In this new world, the screen both connected us and kept us apart, driving home Stanley Cavell’s insight that the screen had always led a double existence as both a window and a shield, simultaneously extending our perception out into the world while also *screening us from the world* (Cavell 1979)—in this case, serving as a physical barrier, a virtual face shield. The multistability of the screen now became even more apparent as we found our vision bouncing around between the many faces arrayed in grids across our screens, shifting from box to box, frame to frame, peering into others’ apartments, and quite often winding up looking at our own faces as if in a glitchy digital mirror. Phenomenologically, this also meant that we were constantly oscillating between what philosopher of technology Don Ihde calls “embodiment relations,” in which we look *through* the screen as if through a window, and “hermeneutic relations,” in which we re-focus our perception to look *at* the screen (Ihde 1990)—for example, when we relax our focus on a speaker and scan the screen as a whole to see who’s talking now, alternating from figure to ground and back again.² The screen’s duality, as both communication device and as personal protective equipment, requires rapid shifts of focus and attention.³ This new project of isolation, we quickly learned, was utterly exhausting.⁴

1 “Together Apart” is the title of a *New York Times*-produced podcast: <https://www.nytimes.com/column/together-apart>. Similar slogans, such as “together at a distance” or “together at home” (the title of an event organized by Lady Gaga in support of the World Health Organization), abounded in the early days and weeks of social distancing and foregrounded these paradoxes.

2 For an application of Ihde’s concepts to cinema, see Sobchack 1992. See also Denson 2020 for an application to digital images.

3 As my references to the screen’s function as “personal protective equipment” or a “virtual face shield” suggest, the screen in question here—at least in the context of the pandemic—must be seen in relation also to the face mask and its own oscillations between visibility and invisibility, distance and proximity. Both the screen and the mask are at the center of simultaneously phenomenological, epidemiological, and sociopolitical transformations.

4 A variety of popular articles and op-eds have dealt with the phenomenon of “Zoom exhaustion” or “Zoom fatigue.” See, for example, Bailenson 2020; Fosslie and Duffy

Nevertheless, safety demanded it, and “thus isolation is a project.” I had read this sentence many times before without taking much notice. But now it positively jumped out at me while re-reading Sartre’s *Critique* in preparation for a directed reading class with a graduate student—conducted, of course, remotely via Zoom. The sentence, previously unobtrusive but now commanding all of my attention, itself oscillated like my screen between transparency and opacity and thereby illuminated the screen’s paradoxical role as both a condition of and an obstacle to collective life in the present. Sartre’s sentence thus raised a crucial question about media, but this was also a question about a radical transformation in the function of media in the constitution of our experiential and social worlds.

In order to appreciate this transformation, consider the sentence’s original context. Sartre is describing a modern city, presumably postwar Paris. He suggests that the city is a “medium” rich with agency, the “exigencies” of its infrastructure shaping our comportment towards the world and one another (Sartre 2004, 257, 187–96). He conjures a mundane scene: people are waiting for the bus at a bus stop.

These people—who may differ greatly in age, sex, class, and social milieu—realise, within the ordinariness of everyday life, the relation of isolation, of reciprocity and of unification (and massification) from outside which is characteristic of, for example, the residents of a big city in so far as they are united though not integrated through work, through struggle or through any other activity in an organised group common to them all. (Sartre 2004, 256)

In short, the assembled people just *happen* to be at the same place at the same time; they have no common project, though their individual projects require that they share a common relation, instrumental in nature, to the built environment—in this case, to the bus stop and the bus that they await to take them, each individually, where they need to go. Sartre terms this loose, anonymous collective a “seriality,” as opposed to a proper “group,” which involves a common goal and operates more like a collective subject.⁵ In the seriality, individuals are obstacles to one another, not categorically different from the dumb materiality of the built environment itself—what Sartre calls the “practico-inert” in recognition of the way structures and technologies store human *praxis*, or past living labor, while condensing it into

2020. The present essay intends to add a phenomenological dimension to such analyses.

5 As examples of the seriality, in addition to the queue at the bus stop (Sartre 2004, 256–69), Sartre also considers radio broadcasts (270–76) and markets (277–93). In Fredric Jameson’s opinion, in his 2004 foreword to the *Critique*, “the notion of seriality developed here is the only philosophically satisfactory theory of public opinion, the only genuine philosophy of the media, that anyone has proposed to date” (Sartre 2004, xxviii).

inert objective form.⁶ In the practico-inert, the active component of praxis carries over into the present and towards the future, as the built environment and its technologies present themselves as instruments to be utilized towards the realization of our goals; but the *inertia* of the material object and its rootedness in the past (the time of its manufacture) stands as an obstacle, resisting the facility of use with a "coefficient of adversity"—a term that Sartre, as early as 1943 in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*, had borrowed from Gaston Bachelard in recognition of the friction that materiality and embodiment introduced into phenomenology (Sartre 1992, 324). In the circumstantial collective of the seriality, the individual Others gathered at the bus stop similarly tend to present themselves instrumentally, oscillating between coefficients of utility and adversity, and thus standing out quite often as obstacles to the realization of my goals. There are a limited number of seats on the bus, and everyone else becomes a competitor for a seat. But the competition is anonymous and passive, the individuals ignoring rather than confronting one another while occupying the same physical space. Alienation is therefore not just a psychological shortcoming, but materially enforced by way of the built environment, with its underlying exigencies and scarcities. And in this situation, one might embrace anonymity and further materialize it: a newspaper serves as a shield, protecting me from the other's gaze—and "thus isolation is a project," as I choose to wield the practico-inert and reinforce the separation constitutive of the seriality (Sartre 2004, 257–58).

Today, of course, this familiar fact of public transportation persists, but with a difference: Sartre's newspaper has now become a mobile screen, e.g. a smartphone or a tablet. The gestural cliché (inauthenticity-become-habit) of shielding one's vision persists, but the medium is radically different, both technically and existentially.⁷ Rather than an inert object that, like the newspaper, simply records or preserves past labor, the screen is dynamic and changing; importantly, its dynamism is based in a feedback loop that incorporates present use, the casual or incidental labor of clicking and

6 Sartre identifies an "anti-dialectic, or dialectic against the dialectic (dialectic of *passivity*), [which] must reveal *series* to us as a type of human gathering and alienation as a mediated relation to the other and to the objects of labour in the element of seriality as a serial mode of co-existence. At this level we will discover an equivalence between alienated *praxis* and worked inertia, and we shall call the domain of this equivalence the *practico-inert*" (Sartre 2004, 66-67). For Sartre, in other words, this "anti-dialectic" describes the force or exigency of matter, which constrains existential freedom and commingles human and inanimate agencies in the serial production and consumption practices of industrial capitalism and the anonymous collective life of urban environments.

7 Various accounts of digital media foreground their isolating effects; see, for example, Turkle 2011. What is missing from most such accounts, however, is close phenomenological attention to the spatial and temporal vicissitudes of these new technical and existential forms.

scrolling, into the ongoing production of value.⁸ Moreover, screen-phenomena are generated out of predictive, future-oriented processes, like autocorrect algorithms, that actively anticipate and thereby shape the subjectivity of the user.⁹ This anticipatory logic is also at the heart of our videoconferencing sessions, which depend on compression protocols that predict changes at the level of the pixel, microtemporally generating images on the basis of which parts of the scene are expected to remain static (e.g. the background) or change (e.g. the figure of the speaking subject). As a technological artifact, the screen remains a practico-inert object, storing the labor of factory workers and engineers while embodying a dumb physicality: it sits there, inert on my desk or in my lap, a material barrier between me and my interlocutors. But in operation, the screen instantiates a new temporality that transcends its physical inertia. Its protentional, predictive processes endow it with greater agency as its anticipatory dimensions intertwine with my own being-towards-the-future.¹⁰ Engaging with one another through these digital mirrors, our reflections warped both by microtemporal delays and by predictive generativities, the present of our subjectivities—and the conditions of life itself—are radically altered. Life now takes place in what Vivian Sobchack has called the “screen-sphere” (Sobchack 2016).

Importantly, this condition does not end when we leave the bubble of the video chat, when the world “re-opens” and we emerge from quarantine. For what the pandemic-induced project of isolation reveals to us is a more basic transformation: the practico-inert, while still very much a condition of our social existence, has given way to a new condition that might be termed the *practico-alert*. Alertness, always being ready, is both a technical fact of predictive computation and a constant demand on our attention; present experience no longer takes place against a neutral background of the past distilled in the form of inert objects and built environments, but in concert with “smart” devices, even “smart cities” that anticipate our every move.¹¹ Our predictive technologies, always alert to the contingencies of the ever-shifting future, demand that we too are always alert—and it is exhausting.¹²

8 See, for example, Pasquinelli 2009.

9 These generative, future-oriented processes, which distinguish computational media from the past-oriented recording processes common to cinema, photography, and phonography, for example, are a major focus of my book *Discorrelated Images* (2020).

10 As I argue in *Discorrelated Images*, this intertwining means that computationally rendered images affect us on a pre-personal, “metabolic” level.

11 On smart cities and the way their computational infrastructures enforce new forms of governmentality, see Halpern 2015. For an argument that cities have always, in a sense, been “smart,” see Mattern 2017.

12 This shift from the practico-inert to the practico-alert, along with the phenomenological, aesthetic, and political implications of the transformation of media technologies from a recording-based or retentional to a predictive or protentional functionality, is the topic of my next book project, tentatively titled *The New Seriality: Political Aesthetics in a Digital Lifeworld*.

Returning to the streets, for example to protest police brutality and proclaim that Black Lives Matter, is thus hardly an escape from screen-mediated life. Rather, we subject ourselves to increased state surveillance and media scrutiny, thus appearing as bodies and biometric data on countless screens. But mobile screens can also serve, in this environment, as literal shields, when the camera is turned towards the police for purposes of accountability and deterrence. And our screens are of course essential to organizing. Thus, the duality of the screen, which the project of isolation foregrounded in dramatic fashion, might be seized upon as the basis of reversal, from seriality to solidarity, from passive alienation to active resistance. This more deliberate form of union will require hard work and redoubled alertness—but perhaps there is a sliver of hope for a more just future amidst the horrors, injustices, and isolations of screen-mediated life.

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