Bernd Heimerl, DPG Germany

Illusions behind the screen: On the aesthetics of online video meetings.

The media theorist Allucquère Rosanne "Sandy" Stone illustrates four epochs that mark a clear change in human communication technology. According to Stone, since the beginning of the 90s we have been in the fourth media epoch: *virtual reality* and *cyberspace*. This profound change in communication also means that new social and psychological spaces have emerged at breakneck speed. The virtual space of the *online video meeting* conveys the message that the distinction between inside and outside is becoming fluid.

The modern telecommunication media, the media theorist McLuhan (1962) calls them "magic channels", are nothing more than *sensory prostheses* or *extensions* that extend the reach of human perception and communication. Freud found the term "prosthetic god" for this (1930a). Based on Freud's *prosthetic god* and McLuhan's *sensory prostheses*, the contemporary biologist Donna Haraway currently takes up the prosthetic metaphor again in her image of the *cyborg*. These machines and automata can be inhabited as if by ghostly hands and appear alive and real in a confusing way. In virtual space - invisible and omnipresent - man expands his communication possibilities "god-like" as Freud fantasises into the future (1930). All of these invented prostheses of man are uncanny to man himself.

The worldwide *lockdown* and our forced banishment to private spaces have established the stay in *virtual space*, the *chat room* and *video online meetings* in rapid acceleration as a cultural technique. The perception of an unresolvable tension between the portraits in the boxes is an essential formal element of the experience in the *virtual chat room*. The tension means both the dependence on the technical functioning and the appearance of a real person. In an uncanny way, the image of the other (and one's own) in the *chat room* seems at once distant and oppressive. Distanced because of the different locations between the participants and oppressive because of the emerging fantasies about the space of the other(s). Frightening because we enter spaces that are not represented in the visible space, a space not revealed but invisibly contained. It is the whole performance in the *virtual chat room* in its complex totality that creates an uncanny tension. I would like to highlight two features of the uncanny in the *online video meeting*:

(1) the framing as an aesthetic stylistic device and

(2) the moment of suddenness of the occurrence of a predictable situation.

Along with the *Doubling of the self* (*Doppelgänger)* motif, these two features are essential aesthetic mechanisms of the horror genre.

First, the framing as an aesthetic stylistic device. The selection of *view boundaries* in video conferencing - so-called *framing* - is a technique of visual art and horror film. The box not only shows what is happening on the screen, but also draws attention to the *off*: that is, what is not visible outside the box and this in immediacy. According to Deleuze (1997), every framing determines an *off*. The *off* refers to that which is neither heard nor seen and which is nevertheless completely present. This so-called *cadre* (*Kadrage*) has a special function in the horror genre: it always covers part of the space in order to leave room for fantasies and thus keep open the gateway for the cinematographic horror that always suddenly and from the outside intrudes into the *cadre* of the film image. In relation to Freud's distinction, the uncanny of experience is *on/seen* and the uncanny of fiction is *off/not seen*. Thus both forms of the uncanny interweave frighteningly in *Video Online Meeting*. The German philosopher Juliane Rebentisch describes the particularity of the aesthetic media experience through the separation between the visible events in the *on/seen/hear* and the hidden *dark space* in the *off/not seen/not hear*. This separation creates an exciting tension in the sense of anxiety. It is the aesthetic effect of the ontological separation of two worlds: the real and the fictional. It is the separation of the visible and the invisible world in *Online Video Meeting:* every visible image refers to an *off*, that is, to a private world beyond the edge of the field in which the image is embedded. This *off* is always consciously and unconsciously co-conceived, co-envisaged and co-created in the imagination. Our illusionary gaze falls into this *off*. We know that this space must exist outside the image field, but we cannot say anything true about it. It is the space of our illusions, expectations and projections, our desires, and perversions: a central mechanism of action in horror film.

Another moment of the uncanny is the sudden and unexpected occurrence of the predictable uncanny. According to Deleuze (1997), the camera's *waiting* for a person to come into view and do something is an uncanny moment that simultaneously activates the uncanny. It is the simultaneity of an expectation or a knowing (*Something will happen*.) and a suddenness or a not-knowing (*I don't know when and how it will happen*.). This refers to the death drive. Freud writes in *Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety* (1926d) about anxiety that it has an unmistakable relationship to expectation. When the video portrait opens, a moment of mutual uncertainty and uncanniness arises.

The *video online meetings* pose old and new questions: How can we psychoanalytically conceptualise, understand and use the *off* in the image as a *scene* in the virtual analytic situation - comparable to the absent in the narratives of patients?

*Video online meetings* challenge us to explore the anthropological term animism, the Freudian uncanny and technique of magic for our contemporary experiences. Freud already recognises in the early 1930s: " [...] that this development will not exactly end with the year 1930. Distant times will bring new, probably unimaginably great advances in this field of culture, still further increasing the God-like."