Hair Matters: Digital Acceleration in Social Distancing Times
Robin Yerlès
15th May 2020
—

April 21, 2020. An almost ordinary day for an art school student. I get up, eat breakfast and get dressed, then sit at my desk, turn on my computer and open the link to the Zoom group conversation that hosts my virtual classroom for the morning.

My department, whose pedagogical team is nonetheless particularly aware of the contemporary stakes of technology, has indeed decided to opt for this platform as a matter of urgency, to the detriment of freer alternatives. In spite of some reticence on the part of students who raised its problematic policy regarding the use and processing of user data—some universities have banned it entirely for that same reason—the consensus that came out was that Zoom is currently the most suitable tool for hosting our courses and group work sessions.

On the screen appears the face of my professor and those of my classmates. Several of them keep their cameras turned off. Some do not have the privilege of being alone in a room to follow the course. Others don't have a stable enough connection to maintain the necessary bandwidth for their video output. Nevertheless, we are happy to meet up again in this sober and functional interface. After the usual greetings, we switch off all our microphones except for our teacher who then begins his class in a brave monologue.

In the absence of physical feedback, the cognitive effort to maintain his concentration is palpable. In front of him, a wall of names and faces with little expression. Teaching in these conditions is a truly draining performance, as every person who had to lead a virtual meeting can testify: the rhythm of the conversation is clumsy, and the voices are overlapping in intermittent succession with the cold silence that regularly punctuates the interventions.

To a certain extent, keeping our cameras on allows us to support our orator.

We are a few to be attentive, even if it also requires a redoubled effort of concentration. The temptation to drift into other applications is sometimes severe, as notification sounds occasionally vent from a microphone left open by mistake. Some students switch seamlessly from one screen to another with their phone in hand. Others are disrupted by a roommate or family member barging in. Sometimes students disconnect and reconnect in the background of the dialogue somehow establishing itself around the topic of the lesson.

The course is particularly relevant to current events. Indeed, it proposes to question the place of digital technology in our social interactions. We discuss how acts of transgression are easily assimilated into the normal, in a process of which the digital is the systematic vehicle. In a post-truth, post-shock, post-normal era, our most fundamental landmarks are lost. Our professor then asks us the following question: is there still an "outside" that escapes this logic? Is it still possible to go against the system when any transgressive act will be instantly absorbed, catalogued and normalized, thus rendered harmless? The question seems important although somewhat incongruous given the setting in which it is formulated.

We're nearing the end of the course. The emotion is tangible, it is the last of this semester, our last academic appointment before the great unknown: we do not know when we will meet again. Nor do we know if school will resume normally next year. Our expressions and insistent wavings betray a certain solemn gravity, closer to a farewell from the Navy than a goodbye from schoolchildren.

Closing the virtual window, back to reality. I am in my room, dressed from head to navel, facing my cluttered desk. The abrupt break between the moment of comradeship I've just experienced and the solitude of my workspace leaves me a little disconcerted. Luckily, I am fortunate not to be alone during this confinement. I move into the living room and snuggle up against my lover E., whose own online course has just started.

So she goes to her classroom, even though her teacher is thousands of miles away from my house. Indeed, E. had to return to Europe for fear of getting

stuck in Israel, where she had gone on an exchange program. Today, the distance doesn't prevent her from pursuing her education, since all her classes switched overnight to Zoom meetings. Questions suddenly come to my mind: what would be the incentive to enrol in your local school, if in the future all courses were to take place via the internet? What will happen when online universities offer cheaper courses than their offline counterparts, will on-site education become a luxury that only the most privileged can afford?

On the screen, I discover the same Zoom interface. The faces are more numerous, in fact, in this class, a completely different discipline is imposed by the teacher: everyone must leave their camera on at all times. This obligation seems to me to be a clear violation of privacy, but fortunately all students are privileged enough to have a computer, a stable internet connection and a private space. It is undoubtedly the bubble effect of art school, I tell myself, that these things are taken for granted; many universities, vectors of greater social diversity, must indeed face an increased precarity of their students, and a variety of material situations compromising the exercise of studies. In my school, when the decision was made to organize end-of-year presentations online, the question of whether or not all of us could comply with this format did not even arise.

I move away to get out of the frame and observe E.'s screen sideways with curiosity. The teacher, visibly medicated on some serious antidepressants, speaks slowly and rigidly. She seems to be reciting her lecture as if she were reading through a teleprompter. There's an atmosphere of a descent into hell under Xanax, and I feel sorry for E. for being stuck in front of this sad spectacle, her attention constantly monitored. What medicine will it take to endure days of these insipid virtual courses? Evidently, the pharmaceutical industry will be the big winner in this educational delirium.

Suddenly, I notice the colourful hairstyle of one of the students. Her long hair ranges from fuchsia pink to pistachio green in a very harmonious gradation. The effect has a little psychedelic feel that catches the eye. I ask E. about this: "wow, this girl has really funky dyed hair!" As an answer, she simply gives me a malicious glance, and then throws at me with leniency: "it is not a dye, it is a

video filter—look carefully when she moves." I remain flabbergasted. Coming into my thirties, it's one of the first times in my life that I feel fooled like an old schmuck by technology.

I observe the girl's hairstyle with fascination, my first reaction being to want to try this embellishing filter myself. I too could wear this fantastic colourful hairstyle at my next virtual meeting! Then I realise what is most striking about this story: the fact that neither the teacher nor any of the students in the class felt the need to highlight this stylistic detail, which nonetheless raises the flag of a revolution in aesthetics. From now on, it is completely accepted and even normal to go to school while freely manipulating one's virtual appearance.

Of course, the other pixelated portraits that appear on E.'s screen are already the result of numerous digital treatments that alter the raw data flows of her classmates' webcams. Still, those whose computers are equipped with the best cameras appear to their advantage. Moreover, aesthetic filters, like for example the one that allows you to hide the room you are in, require a certain amount of computing power and are only accessible to owners of decent computers. Thus, I tell myself, it's not hard to imagine that in the near future, the best looking kid in your class will simply be the one whose parents were able to buy them the best graphics card.

In fact, that digitally enhanced hairstyle is the mark of a major event: In a conventional sociability framework such as school, it is the shift from physical appearance, historically imposed on everyone from birth, source of many disorders and traumas, to the notion of the avatar. From there, anything is possible. If we imagine that this transformation also takes place in the work environment, we would witness a real disappearance of the physical appearance, abstracted from any relational field outside the home. Wearing a mask during our now rarefied physical interactions would thus end up drawing the landscape of a new world where the face, linked to a fixed and immutable identity, no longer exists.

Faced with this phenomenon of digital acceleration, I tell myself that there will certainly be no turning back. Indeed, at the end of this crisis, what teenager will

still have the desire or the psychological capacity to set foot in a physical classroom, after having crossed a city full of pollution, been harassed on public transport and bombarded by advertisements, tracked and stalked by cameras, robots and drones; all this only to have to wear the ridiculous face and the dull hairdo that their parents' genes gave them?

As I share my thoughts with E., her teacher suddenly activates her microphone without warning, surprising our private conversation and broadcasting it to the whole class. Caught up in an Orwellian scare, I decide that this is too much and abruptly close the laptop screen, freeing us from this authoritarian nightmare of a virtual classroom. Faced with E.'s stunned gaze, I burst out laughing: if not encouraging at all, the world to come still promises us some pretty good hairstyles.