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THE DISTANCES OF PRESENCE

WHAT DOES IT MEAN
TO BE ONLINE
AND OFFLINE
WITH OTHERS?

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DISTANCE
ON LINE
PRESENCE
CHAT
DIGITAL SPACE

The experience of confinement and the current distancing measures keep showing up the paradoxes of distance, its constraints and its resources. Social distancing mobilises a number of technological, physical and semiotic mediations. In this way social distancing makes us see how presence is constructed, thus revealing the paradox that presence is only the effect of the organisation of several distances. Presence is always an effect of distance. Presence is the effect of differences, mediations, distances,

which as a whole constitute what I call 'play' (or *jeu*), in the French sense of the word *il y a du jeu*, or the notion of play in terms of having slack or space to play with, meaning that there is a gap, an interstice, a delay. In order to have presence, you have to be able to create the conditions for this being 'in between', and this is exactly what the social uses of digital technology do. There is play, and presence consists in the harmonisation –always laborious and never finished– of these spatio-temporal disjunctions.

INTRODUCTION

The Latin prefix *dis* always indicates a dispersion, a disjunction, a separation: in space as well as in time. The word difference shares the same prefix (the distance seems to imply a difference), and the word distraction also shares this same prefix; additionally, distraction itself consists in the fact of thinking about something else, of not being completely present in terms of our attention when we are physically present. Staying with Latin, the verb *sto* means to stand up, to remain in place, to remain motionless, to be situated somewhere. The word distance thus evokes a particular spatiality, i.e. a relationship. To be able to say that we are distant, we must conceive of a relationship with someone or something that is elsewhere, someone or something else, that which we are not. Another body than ours, another place in relation to where we are, another object than the one we hold in our hands. Any distance seems to imply a relationship with an otherness and an elsewhere. If I am here, I am not there, and, in that case, I will thus be distant. When I feel distant, it is because I am not exactly where I would like to be. When I am distant, I am, so to speak, in the wrong place. Distance is not only spatial, it can be misused in time, too, in the past as well as in the future. Each passing second becomes distant, because it never overlaps with the next second, it is already elsewhere.

The day tomorrow is not yet *hic et nunc*, I measure this distance in time as a wait. If distraction can be considered as a psychologization of distance, waiting can be considered as the temporisation of the future. However this may be, it is clear that the very idea of distance is accompanied by difficulties, by uncomfortable and unpleasant situations. According to the traditional conception of presence, we are not really 'with' people who are distant, in space and time; therefore they are not present, if presence requires being *hic et nunc*.

It would be tempting to say that distance disturbs presence, to the point of making it evaporate. But it is not so. The experience of confinement and the current distancing measures keep showing up the paradoxes of distance, its constraints and its resources. Social distancing mobilises a number of technological, physical and semiotic mediations: masks and transparent panels, markings on the ground, queues, recommendations broadcast through loudspeakers, management via time slots, etc. Taken together, these mediations lead me to make a preliminary reflection, which here forms my working hypothesis. Paul Auslander (2012) demonstrates that it is thanks to record technology that we have discovered, by comparing the two in terms of a binary opposition, what the characteristics of live broadcasting are. Greek theatre was not seen as a live performance, as there were no other forms of performance or reception of a performance. Similarly, the performance of any kind of music, prior to recording technology, could not be distinguished from other forms of reception and listening. The feeling of being live is produced by the socialisation of recording technology. My hypothesis here is that, in the same way, social distancing due to the spread of the Coronavirus 2019 –acting as a kind of revelatory indicator– makes us see how presence is constructed, thus revealing the paradox that presence is only the effect of the organisation of several distances.

TO BE ONLINE AND OFFLINE

The child who plays hide and seek, believes he becomes invisible when he hides, closing and covering his eyes. There is no need to go far away, to go elsewhere. 'If I can't see, the others can't see me', he thinks. When he opens and discovers his eyes, others are allowed to see him. Being online with someone may involve a similar experience. Similarly, in several instant messaging ap-

plications (for example, *Messenger*, *Snapchat*, *WhatsApp*) if I'm not online, I can't know who is online: without seeing who is online, no one can see me online. The others see me if I see them. The real time of instant messaging is the convergence of two or more glances, a perceptive intersection in which the action becomes common to the interlocutors, reciprocal and therefore real. This perceptive crossing requires a certain attention, the attention that the situation itself produces. I have to pay attention to what the other does, he too, attention. We pay attention to each other's attention.

In this case being online with someone is a synchronous experience, also because we share the same information about the ongoing process. We participate and witness the technological mediation that unites us, we make it possible, we see it at work. Thanks to the notifications of reading the messages that we have sent and that we are writing, we find ourselves in the situation 'I know that you know that I know, and you know that I know that you know'. We are seeing each other, even without a camera, we are together. While I am writing I know that the other person sees it. And vice versa, I see if the other person is writing and if they have read my message. In this way the chat proceeds: we are on line, thanks to each other. The synchrony of being online is a tactile experience, which seems to be direct, but it takes place thanks to a mediation: when I touch someone, I am touched, and always indirectly.

Touch has a reflective structure, to feel that I am touching, to feel my skin I need an object. Through the object I touch myself (Lenay, 2015). However, there are different ways of being online with someone, more or less synchronous experiences based on the functioning of protocols, algorithms and their respective graphic implementations. Since 2004, the *Internet Protocol Standardization Task Force* (IETF) has been standardizing an instant messaging protocol, *Jabber*, which is a standard and open

system that, among its many extensions, has developed one in particular: *Jingle*, the application that allows the exchange of audio and video messages. Jabber is also a network of decentralised servers that work with XMPP (*Extensible Messaging and Presence Protocol*), or even with a set of standard and open protocols, which –in addition to disciplining instant messaging traffic– can detect when a client logs out of their account and disconnects from their server. The information relating to the start-up, progress and conclusion of our online sessions, transformed into a series of symbols and particular signs according to the graphic set-up of each interface, is public: our friends or contacts visualise our connection status. This information is becoming more and more socially influential in several areas of our daily life, both professional and personal.

The effect of this information is obvious: it is the presence of the other person. If the other person is active, they are acting, so we can contact them, because they are there (on *WhatsApp* or *Messenger*) and now (at the same time). The conditions of the *hic et nunc* are absolutely satisfied. It would appear to us that this status should always be linked to a voluntary and synchronous action, to acts of writing, reading or viewing. However, the evidence of the situation, the evidence of experiments that can easily be made, shows us that this is not the case. We are, very often, present ‘despite’ ourselves. The information broadcast, through graphic set-ups, can easily be inaccurate, whilst at the same time, the impact of these statuses is becoming more and more influential. On the one hand, with the growing social appropriation of certain platforms and applications, which now participate in a sphere of ease and familiarity, information about our status appears more and more credible, entailing many consequences for our private as well as our professional lives. On the other hand, huge commercial and economic interests are at stake: companies that own sites and applications are attempting all kinds of strategies to extend

the length of our browsing sessions, linking up action and reaction, with the ultimate aim of selling their advertising space at the best price. Being permanently connected is thus transformed into the fact that we almost always appear to be online. In the ecology of multi-windowing, we can very easily leave a window open in the background, acting (being active) and being elsewhere, and therefore not feel that we are active on the platform or the application which this window gives us access to. Yet the simple fact of not having closed the window can be enough for the application to detect us and categorise us as being online and active.

The reliability of the presence protocols and algorithms involved in the detection of our activity still seems to be fairly random, with variations and malfunctions that are rather sensitive. These presence protocols and witnesses of our activity represent a digital, and therefore social, systematisation of the conventions and social rites that have always disciplined our dialogues, our encounters, and our being with others.

The socialisation of messaging applications that work with these protocols, far from being neutral, involves a specific perception of presence, and as such, another idea of presence. This perception and this idea are increasingly imposing themselves as a new model. The parameters with which our activity is monitored and –even more importantly in terms of perception– the way it is communicated to our contacts, can vary more or less significantly from one software to another, from one application to another, and can be unstable and discontinuous. The digital socio-technological system produces the experience of being online with someone as being synchronous: being online with someone is meant to be simultaneous, and yet this simultaneity is based on significant disjunctions. Real time is real if it is the same for all participants. The real time of messaging applications is still not real. Each application declines an idea of, and establishes a form of

online presence, a form that can later be socialised and domesticated to a greater or lesser extent. There are many online forums where users show that they are paying a lot of attention to the way their activity is communicated to their network contacts, and the press is beginning to encourage us to reflect on the social impact that this system of notifications and status can have.

Users' concerns are mainly due to the risk of being watched by those they are close to, or their superiors (at work), and being seen, for example, as staying up all night, or being in the middle of a conversation with someone, when this is not in fact the case. The behaviour of certain applications eludes us when it comes to what concerns us most directly: the proof of our being present and/or active, in the eyes of our relatives, friends and colleagues. One aspect that influences the results of measuring our presence, and which is not necessarily known by most users, is that of major groups' financial strategies, which tend to centralise the ownership of the most important online communication services and thus also centralise the processing of connection data.

These are pooled from the various different applications or platforms with and on which we act, while we, at the same time, feel that we are, through our actions, only acting on one platform at a time.

In this way, what, in terms of the user's experience, takes place across a variety of different, distinct digital environments, is reduced to the production of seemingly unambiguous connection data. As soon as *WhatsApp* was acquired by *Facebook*, for example, *WhatsApp* login data became available to *Facebook*, which therefore now has access to our (*WhatsApp*) activity status, despite it taking place on 'another' application. In addition, whenever you use your *Facebook* or *Google* account to register on any platform, your login information is received and processed by the corresponding account servers. *Skype* offers us a range of different statuses.

We may appear to be *Online* or *Offline*, *Away*, *Invisible*, or in a *Do Not Disturb* mode. These statuses correspond to as many forms of presence, which vary according to our availability to be contactable and thus to be contacted by others, and our distance from our computer(s). The importance of these statuses is not limited to the platform, as they actually constitute a valid dramatization for distinguishing the numerous ways in which we can be present, or not, to different degrees: more or less available, more or less attentive, and more or less indifferent. The delicacy of this variety of statuses provides a model for us to compare the statuses of other instant messaging applications against.

Compared to *Skype*, *Messenger* imposes a polarisation of options: we can only be 'active' or 'inactive'. In *Messenger*, as in instant messaging on *Facebook*, in order not to appear as active, it is not enough not to be acting on the application, if the window is running in the background or if the computer is simply left on, with a *Facebook* window open in the browser bar. In both *Messenger* and *WhatsApp*, to not appear to be 'active', it is not simply a matter of not acting on the application, as one still appears as 'active' if the window is running in the background. On *Messenger*, 'normally speaking', the delay between the moment we no longer touch the application and the moment when our status changes from 'active' to 'inactive' is close to ten minutes. After these ten minutes have passed, an individual is classified as 'active five minutes ago', half of the time that has actually passed. When we close the window, it is only after three minutes that the application will report us as inactive and show our friends that we were active 'a minute ago' (when in reality at least four minutes have passed).

We may be far away from our laptop and be considered present on an application we have already left: the presence of absence, one might say. The timing indicating our last connection continues to be calculated minute

by minute, then, after 60 minutes, the values are rounded off to the nearest hour, before, after a day without connection, *Messenger* no longer displays this information.

Messenger creates an idea of real time while at the same time producing delayed times. We might be tempted to think that the difference due to time shifts is unrelated to our presence, and that, as a whole, all these inconveniences produce non-presence: the appropriation of the use of *Messenger*, an act or appropriation that is emotionally very intense, leads us to consider that these disturbances are symptomatic and emblematic of the presence effects of *Messenger*. On *WhatsApp*, you need only to have just clicked on the icon and you are almost instantaneously online. In fact, there are no settings available in order to not appear online on *WhatsApp* while viewing our contact list or rereading a message. Just like in *Messenger*, having the window open in the background is enough for us to be declared as 'online'.

In this case, our perception, the perception we have of what we are doing, and of being somewhere, differs significantly from the information that is transmitted to our contacts, which in fact establishes a different version of the facts. We think we are present in one way, while we are present in another. We believe we are present in a certain 'here', whereas we are perceived to be present elsewhere. The application provides time markers and read notifications to reassure us that our contact has received and read our message.

The double blue check mark is always supposed to appear when our contact has read our message, but communication between someone who has disabled this notification and someone who continues to use it is of course slippery. Only in this difference, in this distance, presence is produced as an effort, a doubt, a possibility. The possibility of concomitance. In reality, delay, lags, equivocations, misunderstandings create the space of presence. Presence needs a gap.

THE EXPERIENCE OF A HYBRID COURSE: WHERE SHOULD I LOOK?

The University of Technology of Compiègne rigorously applies safety distance measures. For the academic year 2020-2021, the Department of Technology and Human Sciences has devised a hybrid teaching model. I teach *Industries culturelles et médias numériques*. The lectures are not held at university. For my lecture, I record a podcast, which I publish every week on the University Moodle. I also publish a PDF support. The contents are partially different, students have to integrate them. I record the podcast live, without cuts, without pauses: in this way I hope to make listening more stimulating and keep my concentration, for me it's as if the students are listening to me at that precise moment. I think it could be the same for them. The concept of 'recorded live' is also one of the topics dealt with during the course, in an authentic meta-discussion. I publish the podcast and pdf just before the usual start of the course, at 1:00 pm. Students then have one hour to listen to the podcast before participating in the tutorials.

The first dissociation to be recomposed is just that, when the students find me after listening to the podcast. For me too it is an enigmatic moment, a surprise. Actually, I don't know who has already listened to it. The podcast comes first, of course, if the student has listened to it first. Otherwise, it will come later. So I don't know if I'm talking before or after, I don't know if the students already know what I said or if they still don't know what I'm going to say in the course I've recorded. We are all between before and after, someone knows someone else doesn't: we are not in real time, we don't share the same information, we are not on *WhatsApp*. In the show *La Gioia*, Pippo Delbono only takes the floor when he is off stage. When he's on stage he always has the microphone in his hand but the voice that you hear is recorded, he doesn't even

play back, he just listens. The audience listens to him listen, as Szendy would say (Szendy, 2001). The voice of the moment, the present voice, is elsewhere, in space and time. The voice of the moment, of the live broadcast, is invisible, it is obscene. As Paul Auslander writes: “Live performance now often incorporates mediatization to the degree that the live event itself is a product of media technologies. This has been the case to some degree for a long time, of course: as soon an electric amplification is used, one might say that an event is mediatized” (Auslander, 2008, p. 25).

In the tutorials, students work in pairs to create a monothematic dossier on a theme of their choice. Each week, two groups of students are divided into sub-groups of 12 people: one half comes to the university, while the other is online. The turn-over system allows this difference, this distance, to be equally distributed. I can describe here the experience of a week ago, early afternoon tutorials. I will not make pedagogical considerations, but a simple phenomenological analysis.

For your live, I use *Jitsi*. A few days before I sent the link of the meeting to the students. I asked them to come to the university with the pc to connect to *Jitsi* too. Why? Because I don't want the students not in the hall to be spectators of the course taking place in Compiègne: I want everyone to be able to participate in the same course. *Jitsi* therefore functions as a connecting space which allows me to combine the room in which I am also in with the rooms in which the students are located. This junction space has its own semiotic rules, as every *Jitsi* space requires you to follow certain rules. For students who are not in the classroom it is easy, for others it is much more complicated. Some students enter the classroom, following the spacing instructions on their desks. They are sitting about two metres apart, 12 students in a room that may contain about 70 students. At the same time, other students arrive on *Jitsi*.

I ask the students in the classroom to enter the *Jitsi* meeting, as their colleagues are doing.

The mask inhibits communication, moves the gaze. I have to speak louder than usual, the mask forces me to make lip and vocal effort. I have to get used to it. All the students are on *Jitsi*. I talk into my pc microphone and try to look into the room. The feedback of the camera attracts and distracts me: I look at myself while I am talking, so I do not look at those in front of me in the classroom or the others. We are in front of each other but we don't see each other. Looking at myself in the back of the camera ensures that everything works: if the image slows down, then it means that there is a connection problem. My reflected body guarantees me that others see and hear me. I see myself as others see me, that is, those who are not in the classroom, because those in the classroom see something else, they see everything. I cling to my image, when I lose the return of the room, to share the screen, I am afraid that I am no longer there.

Students cut out their microphones.

I speak. "Can you hear yourself? Yes, it works!".

Someone in class didn't cut out the microphone, the return of my voice makes us smile, behind the masks. On the screen, I see black rectangles with the students' initials. I don't really know where to look: I would like to look only in my room, to respect the protocol that I propose to the students myself, but every now and then I raise my eyes and look at the class. So I notice that some students are looking at the screen, while others are not and act as if *Jitsi* wasn't there.

Their computer is connected, but they prefer to be only in the classroom, without *Jitsi*. When I look back 100% at *Jitsi*, I feel like I am walking away from the class. We are all on *Jitsi* in reality. Finally I invite the students to take the floor: I close the microphone. The interventions of the students who are not in the classroom are fluid, following the custom of this kind of communication.

The students in class, on the other hand, are awkward: they look at me, they don't know whether to raise their arm to ask for the floor or to click on the raised hand icon. These are two different socio-semiotic registers, but they mean the same thing in two different spaces. They forget to open the microphone and so the others, those from home, cannot hear. I should cut the sound of my pc when the students speak in the room, but I forget to do it, once, twice. I embark, I participate and witness a series of hesitations. We are hindered, slowed down, in difficulty. The connection to *Jitsi* complicates things for us who are together here in the same class. Our physical proximity is disturbed, distracted. It seems we are not in the same class, we are far away. These are two different socio-semiotic registers, these are two different social gestures, but they mean the same thing in two different spaces. I take the floor, but forget to open the microphone. My movements are interpreted as those of a person who wants to speak: *Jitsi* then asks me "Do you want to speak? The microphone is cut off". A student writes to me: "Monsieur, your microphone please".

Someone writes to me in chat to ask me a question: I immediately think it's a student not in the classroom, I don't associate chat with the physical proximity. I am wrong. And a student sitting in the second row writing so that everyone can read her question. These moments create a bit of embarrassment, the embarrassment of not knowing what to do to be present. These moments of emptiness, of emptiness, of uncertainty, make us see how complicated it is to be present. The transparency in this case, the transparency of physical proximity, obscures things, while the opacity of technological mediation reveals them. We are at the carrefour of multiple mediations, material, semiotic, symbolic.

Every action seems to be always frayed, incomplete. We are in a "mediating conjuncture" (Larrue & Vitali-Rosati, 2019, p. 52).

The lesson continues, the students' participation becomes more active step by step, everyone finds his or her point unstable, in the classroom or on *Jtisi*. I look a little bit and a little bit there. I have to get used to a new space.

PRESENCE IS AN EFFECT OF DISTANCE

With Michel Lussault (2017), I consider human space, that is, social space, as a construction of distances. Human beings have had to develop several technologies of distance to overcome this major inconvenience, which the geographer calls 'the separation principle' which is, at the same time, a resource. Space, in this perspective, is the system of relationships that individuals and organisations have with distance, with the aim of organising what they have at their disposal according to proximities that are more or less efficient and desirable. The arrangement of distances creates spaces: the many spaces, material and symbolic, urban and political, private and public, in which we live. These distances can be online and offline. Digital technology does not erase distances. By connecting to the Internet, the web and everything we can access through it (things, people, information), new distances are being created, while the distances of the past are being rearranged and transformed, but never really obliterated. A new spatialization encompasses our social spaces, of which it constitutes the connection and articulation space.

What digital uses bring to our experience of space is not a dematerialisation or a removal of spatial constraints because, although they lighten burdens and charges linked to previously known spatial limits, they format and standardise other measures of distance, which are both resources and constraints at the same time, requiring know-how, a certain dexterity, basic equipment that requires a certain maintenance. Certain spatial struc-

tures seem to have partially slipped into time (connection time), other distances are reflected in presence protocols, in the given number of clicks, in a list of shared friends (as on *Facebook*), in the hierarchisation (which itself amounts to a form of spatialization) of content provided by any search engine.

With social networks, instant messaging and mapping applications, spatial asperities, lumps and bumps, do not disappear: distance is a structural and irreducible element of our being in the world and of our being online, because today we are in the world according to the forms of being online and, therefore, offline. By trying to conjure up distance in order to enjoy immediate presence, we create new distances, which are not always more flexible and more pleasant than those of the past, because they often involve major and increasingly anxiety-inducing expectations. But no relationship with objects is truly direct, every experience is the result of mediation: as Fritz Heider writes (Heider 1926), everything is a medium, and whatever we do we have already carried elsewhere; we are always further away than where we are: we are elsewhere, we are distant, we are in-between. Vilém Flusser maintains that when we make gestures, and we live by making gestures, we are already at a distance: the reflexive distance in which and through which we see ourselves as making this or that gesture.

Dominique Cardon (2019) points out that digital practices are eminently reflexive because they consist of a structurally reflexive activity such as writing, and that the visual-tactile and frontal use of the screen puts us first in relation to ourselves. In addition, I can add, being online means being online in relation to something (modem, server, browser) and to someone (the person with whom we are interacting). We are seen, and the gaze of the other, as Sartre said, sends us back to ourselves. When I am in front of others, I think about what I am doing. So if I am, in this sense, distant, I am situated at a self-scopical dis-

tance from the gaze that I cast upon myself. I am between myself and myself, I am this 'between' myself.

The irreducible distances that we inhabit, this 'in-between', is one of the objects of study of the theory of intermediality, which is concerned with studying what is in-between, namely, media. What is between media? A medium that media produce, whilst being itself produced by this medium. The theory of intermediality argues that media form the medium from which they are born. This mid-place, this place that is 'in between', produces presence. This presence is the effect of differences, mediations, distances, which as a whole constitute what I call 'play' (or *jeu*), in the French sense of the word *il y a du jeu*, or the notion of play in terms of having slack or space to play with, meaning that there is a gap, an interstice, a delay. In order to have presence, you have to be able to create the conditions for this being 'in between', and this is exactly what the social uses of digital technology do. We are 'between': between being online and offline, above all, between being on the street and on Instagram, between several screens, between one application and another, between our email addresses, between the different statuses that attest to or prove our activity, between our various social media accounts, between the people next to us and those with whom we are online. There is play, and presence consists in the harmonisation –always laborious and never finished– of these spatio-temporal disjunctions.

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