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► **To cite this version:**

Bruno Bachimont. SEPARATING BODIES, SYNCHRONISING MINDS THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN MEDIATING DISTANCE. *IMG Journal*, 2021. hal-03139681

**HAL Id: hal-03139681**

**<https://hal.sorbonne-universite.fr/hal-03139681v1>**

Submitted on 12 Feb 2021

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# SEPARATING BODIES, SYNCHRONISING MINDS

## THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN MEDIATING DISTANCE

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## ESSAY 43/03

WRITING  
DIGITAL  
TIME  
MEDIATING

Digital technology reconfigures the organization and status of archives. Immersed in the eternal present of their technological youth necessary for their consultation, digital archives potentially no longer bear the marks of time, whereas they show the past. They gain a new appetite, based on the communication uses of the moment. But how then to give them their sense of archive, how to restore their own temporality? The challenge is to allow what we call 'historical empathy' without falling into

psychological anachronism. We argue here that the mediatization of digital audiovisual archives must allow us to feel concerned, with the concessions no doubt necessary to the technology and aesthetics of the moment, while perceiving the strangeness of the contents and the definitively bygone aspect of this past.

It is therefore a particular critical hermeneutic to build, where mediation must show a past that technology displays in a permanent and persistent contemporaneity.

## INTRODUCTION

Communicating is obviously a matter of time and space. The canonical figure is conversation, dialogue, where we share the same time, the same space, the same encounter between eloquent bodies. It is built on the basis of a co-constructed experience, where openness to others and to their irruption constitutes the principle of a successful, happy conversation, to use an analogy with the happy memory of Paul Ricœur (2000). But how can we communicate, dialogue, share, and build an experience when we do not share the same space, it is the 'dislocation' of bodies, nor the same time, it is the 'desynchronisation' of minds? Our cultural traditions have bequeathed us with different tools and multiple approaches to enable communication in such conditions. To understand them, it is useful to situate and compare them in their capacity to overcome these obstacles and to propose effective substitutions. From the epistolary relationship, to historical narration through fiction, information, literature, etc., there are innumerable forms of mediation to enable the hoped-for encounter between distant bodies and non-synchronous minds. But all of them are based on the very possibility of human consciousness to meet others, to project itself onto an elsewhere, to mobilise itself towards something else. It is therefore a phenomenological matrix that should be proposed in order to analyse the forms of mediation proposed. This is all the more necessary as digital technologies have recently asserted themselves as being precisely capable of abolishing distances and restoring the conditions of an immediate encounter: digital technology is asserting itself as mediation removing the discrepancies of mediation. In 'real-time', in 'teleconference' or 'videoconference', in 'live', the digital, and with it the various techniques of telecommunication, audio-visual teletransmission, claims to restore the properties of shared presence. Is it a decoy, an illusion, a reality? Probably a bit of both. The challenge here is to be able to situate the contribution of digital technology to

these different mediations both to underline its innovative and irreplaceable character and to insist on the ineffaceable technical mediations. First, we will come back to a phenomenological matrix of human consciousness, between manipulation and synchronisation, then we will approach the traditional mediations and finally the digital mediations that we will situate and criticise from this matrix.

#### AWARENESS BETWEEN MANIPULATION AND SYNCHRONISATION

Contemporary and traditional mediations do not only consist in bringing things closer together in a human proximity, in spatial and temporal coincidence, but also in bringing people, individuals, consciences closer together. Why such a need? It is that being human is to constitute oneself as a consciousness by interacting with one's environment and others. Taking up the phenomenological inspiration of Husserl (1928/1964), without claiming here an exegesis of his work, we understand consciousness as a temporal flow that is constructed by synchronising itself with external flows, whether it is the course of experience where an object is revealed and constituted at the end of a flow of perception or perceptual sketches, or when others are encountered when we synchronise ourselves with their words and actions, through listening and interaction.

According to the approach we adopt, and which is no longer Husserlian, human consciousness is deployed in two complementary components, two operations, which are manipulation and synchronisation. Manipulation refers to technical consciousness, which seizes objects in order to arrange them and produce an action. Whether direct or instrumented, manipulation is a technical grasp by the hand, whether or not augmented by the tool. Manipulation can also be seen solely from the point of view of what is being manipulated, i.e. the objects

grasped and arranged. Manipulation becomes a sequence of operations, an algorithm where only movements and arrangements are considered. Synchronisation, on the other hand, is the flow of time in which the manipulations take place. It corresponds to duration, the one that takes a certain amount of time and not another (Bergson, 1990). Manipulation is a succession of technical captures, integrated into a flow but remaining indifferent to the actual duration of the captures and the times separating them: a succession of operations can remain the same succession even if it is more or less rapid. Synchronisation is built from a flow that has its own duration, regardless of what happens in it. The two notions are complementary: a synchronisation without manipulation is a duration where nothing happens. A manipulation without synchronisation is a virtual calculation, an algorithm without execution. These two notions are linked via the notion of rhythm which articulates them: rhythm is what structures a duration by giving a grip to the input: repetition, substitution, reordering, etc. Reciprocally, rhythm gives a reality to the input: it corresponds to what makes it possible to speed up or slow down the succession of inputs.

Between manipulation and synchronisation, consciousness is structured between the different tempos or rhythms it needs to articulate or take into account. Indeed, the technical grasp is grasped of something which is not peculiar to the grasping consciousness but is external to it (even if it is fictional). It is a form of intentionality, the fact of relating to something. Moreover, duration corresponds to a process imposing its duration and its flow. This process is not peculiar to consciousness, it is undergone by it. Thus, at the crossing of a double exteriority, that of the seized realities on the one hand, and that of the processes imposing their duration on the other hand, the consciousness is constructed as a rhythm which is determined by its capacity to articulate itself to the different rhythms of its exteriority. These rhythms are multiple: first of all there are our own

biological rhythms, the rhythms of our physical environment, the rhythms of social life, and finally the rhythms referring to the presence of others. Consciousness then becomes the place where these different rhythms resonate, each consciousness being an original result of these multiple resonances. Among all these resonances, it is the resonance with others that interests us here, because it is a question of being able to determine in this framework how communication can be understood as a rhythmic synchronisation with others, that is to say the resonance of our own rhythm with that of others.

We will hypothesize, based on the possibilities logically constructed by our matrix, that there are three possible configurations: either our consciousness is wedged on the time of the other, the rhythm of others; or on the contrary, its time becomes a declination of our own rhythm; or finally, the two rhythms enter in resonance and build a common rhythm. The first figure is that of the narrative: the time of consciousness is projected into a narrated time, which structures and gives rhythm to our own conscious life.

One reads oneself while reading another, it is the projection of our time in that of the other that makes us return and gives us the opportunity to discover ourselves in this way. The second figure is that of play, where the other's time is reduced to being the echo of our actions. Too often, what we call interaction in computer tools is only the resistance encountered by our actions in their own rhythm without there really being an alter-ego, an encounter with others, even if there is an otherness that resists. Finally, the third and last figure is that of resonance, where two subjectivities articulate and rhythm each other. This figure of resonance, recently revived by Rosa (2016), in particular, is that of communication in the literal sense, of encounter and dialogue. The different mediations between individuals can be situated according to these three configurations of projection, reduction and resonance.

## TRADITIONAL MEDIATIONS

Mediations become necessary as soon as there is a desynchronisation of minds and dislocation of bodies. How indeed how can we meet others when we do not share the same space at the same time? Traditionally, the very fact of not occupying the same space implies desynchronisation because one cannot reach another place instantaneously: it takes time. Therefore, separation implies desynchronisation. In order to overcome dislocation and desynchronisation, material representations, essentially graphic and textual, were invented. But whereas graphic representations allow us to represent a world without being able to access it or live in it, thus becoming a pretext to synchronise with what representations evoke in us, texts, through the form of narrative, allow the representation of other people's time and to project oneself into it. The narrative, whether historical (bringing back a past that has disappeared) or fictional (imagining an elsewhere), is based on empathy where the other is a transcendental figure allowing synchronisation.

These two modalities, graphic or textual, pictorial or linguistic, refer to two particular resonances: the first is the resonance with oneself, where the image is revealed to the consciousness according to modalities that are not those of the represented object but those of the perceiving consciousness. In fact, a photo of a house does not allow one to have an experience of the real object that is the house (I cannot enter it, go around it, touch the materials, etc.), but only of the object that is the photo and its manipulation. As the experience of the photo is not that of the object photographed, I resonate with my past experiences of the object, which can lead to losing myself in memories, an endless meditation. Rosa (2016) evokes Petrarch who, at the top of Mont Ventoux, loses himself in what inspires him to the majesty of the place instead of investigating the place itself. In short, here, the other is me. I tell myself through this resonance triggered by the graphic object. In the textual experience, the relationship is different because the time narrated



is no longer mine but that of the writer, which I assume by my very act of reading: if it is written, someone has written it. The resonance can only be made then with the other's time as it is revealed through the discursive and narrative structures of the text. It is even a cinematic commonplace: a letter shown on the screen is initially read by the reader's voice and then switched to the writer's voice. Because reading means listening to a voice that speaks to us. This is why epistolary relations are so effective and have such a rich tradition. However, the resonance we are talking about here is a projection, not an effective articulation: in other words, the other is constructed like an alter-ego that I project, but it is not there, of course. The textual content proposes an exit from oneself without yet being an encounter with the other. This is why, here again, it is an encounter with myself that is inaugurated, reading myself through my reading of the words of another, of the history of another.

The figure of the narrative therefore calls for another, that of the narrative actually told, of the narrative played and represented in a lively way by an actor, an orator, a mediator present here and now. It is the figure of the theatre that would be the ideal-type for this mediation. The theatrical narrative does indeed present a story of what is neither there nor present, but through the presence of an eloquent body that is indeed there, in the flesh. The experience of living art is to live with the actor an experience of resonance of what is not there but projected. This is the magic of the book told in person: the speaker's present voice makes it possible to live, like a dialogue since it is to us that he tells the life of what is not there, of those who are not there. But beware, for magic to work, there must be a shared presence: the recorded book, for example, does not give the same experience, even if the voice, even if recorded, is the very medium of presence, of the coming to the presence of myself thanks to the encounter with the voice of others. But there is a gap, a difference between the eloquent body present, bothered by a fly while it is telling a story, and the recorded voice, which nothing can come to bother me except a defect in my audio player.

In the same way, we can take, through the figure of the cinema, the ideal-type of another communication experience. Indeed, cinema shows us, in our present, an actor who lives another present to tell, to represent an elsewhere. There is therefore no shared experience in this configuration. Cinema is a purely projective narrative, without sharing the experience lived with the actors. Theatre presents the story of an elsewhere in a shared experience with actors. Cinema presents a projected time in a singular experience. The theatre makes present, the cinema allows to escape. Two singular experiences here opposed. These same modalities therefore distinguish the audio book from the book told in person. But all these examples are precisely the occasion for us to take an interest in technological media, particularly digital media, which reconfigure the very nature of mediations.

#### REAL-TIME MEDIATIONS

Indeed, mechanised artificial representations (audiovisual and digital for the main ones) have made it possible to create dynamic, interactive, immersive representations where the potential for resonance has been multiplied: with oneself (recorded audiovisual), with the world (immersion), with others (interaction, direct audiovisual). What characterises them is the possibility of suggesting an experience lived here and now with the very object of the experience: immersion in an absent object or direct communication with someone who is not there. We will focus here on the latter configuration as the main experience representative of the possibilities of digital technology, without claiming for all that it sums them all up.

The very possibility of these mediations as a direct face-to-face encounter is, however, a paradox. Mechanisation is in fact the result of manipulation, as mentioned above. A mechanism consists in the execution of a succession of steps whose calculation is the ultimate formalisation. And a calculation consists in the simple manipulation of formal

symbols. Between two steps, time can be arbitrarily short. A formal symbol is only defined as that which is distinguishable in type (it is a 0 or 1) and in position: two 0 symbols can be distinguished in the manipulation space independently of the distance between them (this is why miniaturisation does not question the laws of calculation, contrary to that of physics). In other words, the content becomes a signal, in an arbitrarily low time, in an arbitrarily small spatial density. It then becomes possible to transfer it at the speed of signal transmission, therefore close to the speed of light, for a human being, in other words instantaneously.

Thus, by representing the content in a calculatory way, i.e. as a pure manipulation independent of any consideration of duration, the content can be transmitted instantaneously (physical light time) and restored according to the appropriate rhythm: its absence of its own duration, of intrinsic rhythm, allows it to match at any rhythm. It is not a question here of resonance, because there are not two rhythms to harmonise, but a manipulation which is executed according to the rhythm proper to the context of its realisation.

The result is prodigious. For the first time, dislocated content can be simultaneous. Distant individuals can have 'real-time' communication. But what happens to these communications in separate spaces and simultaneous (human) time? What is the status of these remediations and resynchronisations across distances? Several factors have to be considered: on the one hand the formatting of the communication which inserts a fundamental gap between the people communicating, on the other hand a simultaneous interaction allowing each person to experience the unexpected of the other. In other words, digital technology would introduce a new configuration of communication, between narration, play, and theatre.

So there is format. In fact, all digital communication is based on a prior recording that formats, segments and de-contextualises. Even if the conditions of capture and trans-

mission are technically faithful, they introduce a bias (a particular framing, variable image and sound qualities) and are subject to the famous 'live' hazards, i.e. the hazards of transmission which can be altered. In particular, the communication situation is particular in that the only effective sharing during the communication is the technical quality of the communication, since each interlocutor, being in his or her own place, is immersed in a particular context.

The temporal simultaneity does not cancel out the fact that it is not the same presence because there is no split context, the screen becomes a frame, and the frame becomes a screen. In other words, I know that what the other is experiencing is not what I am experiencing: it is at a distance. The characteristic of presence is to establish, even if locally and temporarily, a shared destiny. There is nothing like this with live communication: if the other person is burned, or is caught in a catastrophe, I for my part remain untouched by it (hence an even greater trauma induced by the feeling of powerlessness and empathy having to accept the failure of an impossible sharing of experience).

However, as these examples or commonplaces suggest, technically mediated direct communication makes it possible to discover what the other person is experiencing and the unforeseen events he or she encounters. Recently, in the periods of confinement due to the Covid pandemic, the frequent videoconferences that have made it possible to continue communicating and exchanging have marvellously illustrated the unforeseen events of daily life that interrupt the normal course of these exchanges: a delivery boy ringing the bell, a child saying hello to the camera, a cat barging in on the keyboard. These communications therefore allow us to suddenly project ourselves into the life of another, to experience events that we do not experience ourselves, except in representation. And, unlike a cinematic experience, the unexpected is not calculated, is not reportable to a scriptwriter who would have planned everything in advance.

In other words, this is not cinema. The other is the actor of his own life, now and over there, and we are the spectator. In the same way, we live our lives before the eyes of the other. So there is a common but not shared experience.

From this perspective, digital can pose a problem if it passes off as a shared presence what is a re-mediated distance. From the perspective outlined here, interactive digital tools are closer to a shared narrative than to direct communication. Like narrative, they make it possible to project oneself into the time of others, and to live what one is experiencing at the same time as the other. But living at the same time is not living together. Living at the same time is not a shared destiny. Simultaneity alone does not allow for a co-constructed resonance between individual rhythms that pair up to produce a unique experience (in the sense that it is the same for both interlocutors, and is potentially not repeatable in its idiosyncrasy, any successful conversation opening immediately to nostalgia for its advent that is over and gone). From this point of view, digital communication would therefore be the symmetrical aspect of the theatrical experience as we have idealised it above: the theatre brings together a spectator and an actor who, for an instant and in the common space of the theatre, share the same experience to project themselves into another time. Live mediated communication allows us to project ourselves into the now of another. Simultaneity therefore does not cancel out the fact that there is projection, it simply modifies the projection towards another time. To sum up, theatre is a common space-time to reach a projected spatio-temporal elsewhere, live mediatized communication is a common time allowing to project oneself in the present lived by the other.

Distance remediation does not abolish distance but enables communication with what is absent or distant. If digital promises a shared presence, it becomes a decoy mechanism, since it always remains a hidden part, inherent in the very fact that digital is a formatting, a recording, a transmission. That the *hic et nunc* encounter with others always consists of

an unfinished dialogue should not be confused with a dialogue masked by mechanical mediation. The hermeneutics of the infinite and always open interpretation of dialogue or co-presence is not of the same nature as the hermeneutics of deconstructing the decontextualization effects of recording and transmission. The former is based on an encounter, from body to body, from word to word, from loving dialogue to intellectual exchange, while the latter is a projection built on a shared temporal guide, the flow of image and sound. The separation of bodies cannot be overcome: being in the same space-time is the principle of shared experiences and assumed by the interlocutors because by definition what happens to one happens to the other. This community of destiny gives the charm and the interest of these exchanges and conversations, where the resonance allows the construction of a shared elsewhere, other resonances consequently, but projected these while the resonance of the eloquent bodies present is effective.

## CONCLUSION

Communication and dialogue are a singular experience where individual consciences resonate, articulating their own rhythm with each other to build a common experience. To this basic experience, others can be declined: that of the narrative where the reader's time is articulated on the projected time of the narrative and of the other who speaks to him through him, that of the game where we reduce the relationship to the other to the consequence and the response to our actions. Co-construction, projection, reduction are therefore the three essential figures in the construction of meaning by individual consciences. The latter are in fact to be understood as a singular rhythm, composed of duration and grasping, synchronisation and manipulation. Since manipulation implies grasping something, and synchronisation a temporal flow printed by a process, every consciousness must be

constructed by articulating itself to grasps of objects which are external to it in relation to flows which are also external to it. All consciousness is thus the resonance with a transcendence, an exteriority to the consciousness.

Beyond these three figures, particular compositions are constructed according to the contexts of communication and exchange. Two of them have interested us here: theatre and direct mediated communication. The first one consists in a living experience, here and now, shared between the spectator and the actor, the latter allowing to project himself in a spatio-temporal elsewhere, which is not lived by either of them. The theatre brings back into the shared living time an elsewhere lived by neither of the protagonists. The second composition, direct communication through the media, allows at the same time, to project oneself into the experience lived by the other but not by me. Attending an event in real -time is not necessarily living it or considering that it happened to us: it happened to others, and we were there, but at a distance... As a result, direct communication through the media would be close to the cinematic experience, where we would watch the film at the very moment it is made.

This allows us to conclude on the interest of digital technologies and their ambiguity. Indeed, if our analyses are correct, digital technology allows us to have a new type of experience. It is therefore important to resist the temptation to assimilate it to an existing type of experience in order to praise its efficiency in reporting it or, on the contrary, to denounce it in its incapacity to do so. Digital is not the expected means of being together when we are not, allowing us to have a dialogue, a conversation, a shared destiny here and now: believing it is a mistake, pretending it is a decoy. But as soon as we consider for ourselves the communication that digital technology makes possible, and we do not try to relate it to a pre-existing type, a ideal-type of direct communication mediated by digital technology emerges: the simultaneous time of a projected lived experience. What digital technology allows here is therefore irreplaceable and unprecedented,

without calling into question pre-existing communication experiences. This is to be welcomed and not to turn it into a panacea for communication.

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**Article available at**

DOI: 10.6092/issn.2724-2463/12247

**How to cite**

**as article**

Bachimont, B (2020). Separating bodies, synchronising minds: the role of digital technology in mediating distance. *img journal*, 3, 54-69.

**as contribution in book**

Bachimont, B (2020). Separating bodies, synchronising minds: the role of digital technology in mediating distance. In M. Treleani, F. Zucconi (Eds.), *img journal 03/2020 Remediating distances* (pp. 54-69). Alghero, IT: Publica. ISBN 9788899586164



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