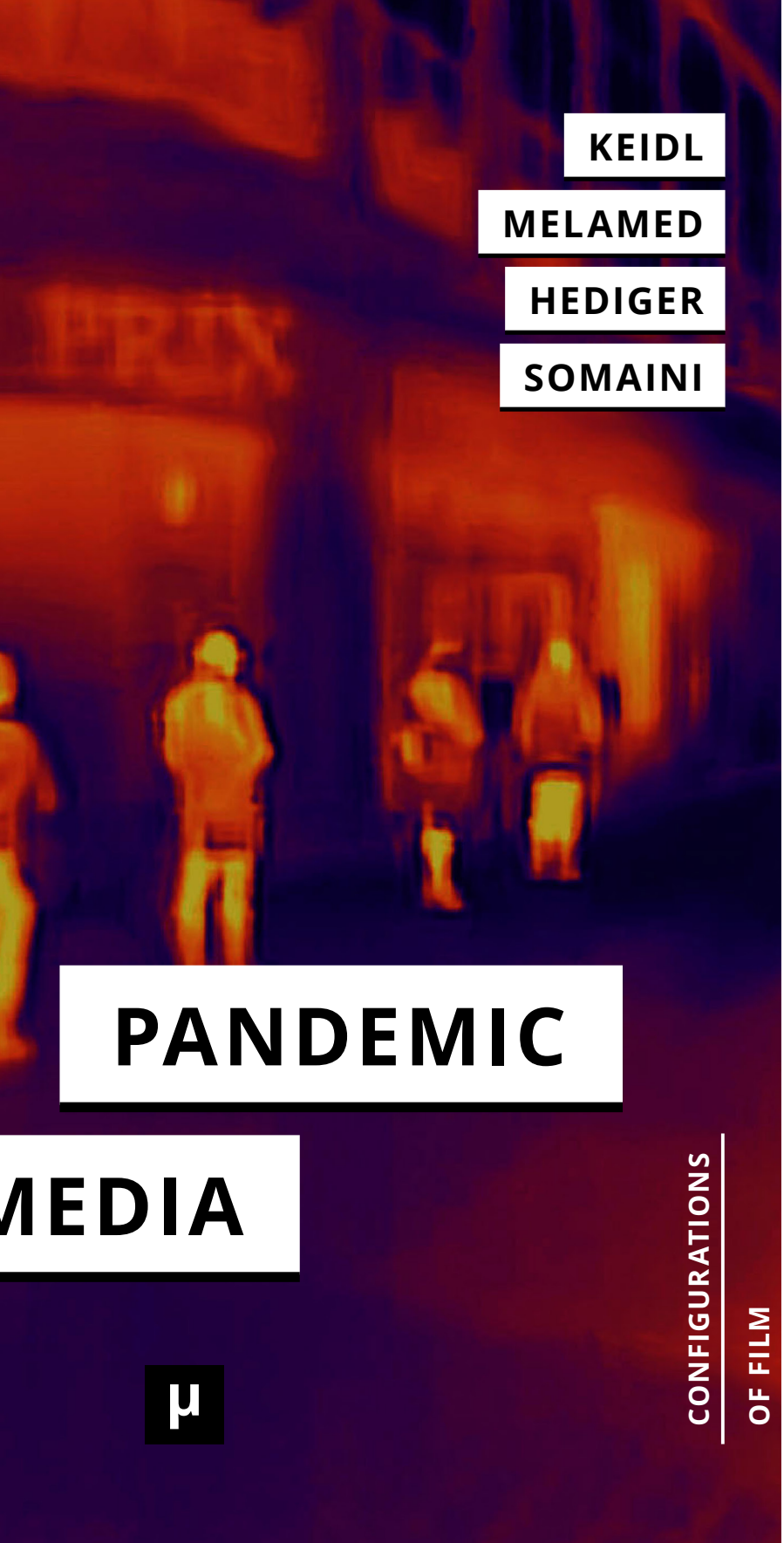

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Configurations of Film Series

Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by
Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini

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Zoom in on the Face: The Close-Up at Work

Guilherme da Silva Machado

Recent configurations of the workplace have revealed the face as an indispensable medium for the organization of labor. An attempt will be made here to show how such configurations rely on a cinematic ideal of human expression to operate as a streamlined space of interfacial communication with performance-regulating effects. The cinematic close-up, which historically embodied this ideal, then assumes a new function in contemporary organizations: that of providing an expanded semiotic system of the face for an accurate communication of psychological traits and states of mind beyond verbal exchanges. The facial close-up, in this perspective, instead of a close range between the camera and the "facial object," defines a relationship to the figurative space according to which its totality takes on a physiognomic significance.

A notable effect of the recent pandemic has been the sudden expansion of public presentations of self at work by cinematic means. For a significant number of workers who had, up until the pre-pandemic period, stood in the position of pure spectators of cinematic public figures, the constraint of teleworking has compelled them to acknowledge the fact that techniques such as the close-up, which usually heighten the emotions and beauty of film stars, TV and Internet personalities, are now tools for their own public magnification. What's more, so-called videoconferencing apparatuses used for work meetings generate situations where workers can both contemplate and be contemplated by all of their interlocutors at will, and from such a distance that the slightest reactions of each person can be equally distinguished by any other. The visual arrangement of these apparatuses enables everyone to enjoy a voyeuristic experience of their colleagues, collaborators, and clients quite similar to that one enjoys while watching a film character. This is due to a blind spot between cameras and screens that makes it possible for everyone to stare at whomever they want without anyone knowing exactly who's watching whom. From this perspective, the pandemic has hastened a reconfiguration of human interactions at work, while making it clear that one indispensable medium of productivism today is—alongside the computer—the human face.

Insofar as this reconfiguration of work interactions is part of a regular trend unexpectedly brought to a paroxysm by a force majeure, one can draw evidence about a shift in aesthetic regimes sustaining labor organization and productive performance. If companies today can dispense with the body as an object of knowledge—and with the architectural, ergonomic, and monitoring systems that make it visible in order to better control it (Rabinbach 1992; Hediger 2009; 2013)—but less so with the face, this suggests that interfacial relations remain crucial for industrial productivity in many sectors. One could then argue that since at least the mid-twentieth century and the rise of technological bureaucracies, an aesthetic regime of work discipline focused on the body and the scientific gaze seems to have given way to another focused considerably on the face and the day-to-day interfacial gaze.

While the convenience of facial observation in work interactions can be simply interpreted as a matter of communicative efficiency, this efficiency is arguably due to a surfeit of events perceived on faces that allows workers to recognize, beyond verbal communication, zones of psychological resonance, fluctuations in the mood of their interlocutors, reasons for admiration, impatience, dullness, and disappointment; that is, a series of conscious and unconscious physiognomic motions, the reading of which enables workers to identify general expectations, factors of satisfaction and discontent, grounds for laudable performance, and their own levels of *fitness*. Such daily observation practices at work were described, from the 1950s, by sociologists like Erving Goffman, who was particularly interested in the way workers try to control and keep

track of the impressions they convey to their co-workers and other audiences (Goffman 1956). In the field of anthropology, and based on communication theory, Gregory Bateson introduced the concept of "injunction" in 1972 to refer to rules, motivational and inhibiting factors transmitted by non-verbal, albeit effective means in what he called secondary levels of communication (Bateson 1987). Following Bateson's concept, the organizational apparatus of companies can be seen as a combination of different layers of communication aimed at regulating performance. These layers are not all at the same level of explicitness. While at the verbal level typical cordialities are maintained, a range of injunctions can be routinely deployed through non-verbal channels, and in particular through dramaturgies of the face. Interfacial exchanges can, therefore, be understood as a secondary communication channel through which injunctions to daily productivity circulate. Its existence and its potential importance depend on both a certain knowledge to interpret faces as signifiers of concealed judgments and feelings, and a particular concern with the design of the public image of self.

The importance granted to the face as a text of the individual soul has a long history. In its recent theoretical articulations—especially after the intervention of photographic snapshots, which have significantly reframed the debate on physiognomy around issues of facial *mobility*[1]—one might consider the work of Georg Simmel to be one of the first critical accounts on the modern fascination with the face as the locus of visibility of personality and psychological processes. In a famous essay on Rodin in 1911, Simmel argued that the modern preference for the face over the body relies on the fact that the former shows "man in the flow of his inner life," while the latter, prioritized by the Ancients, shows man rather "in his permanent substance" (Simmel 1996, 103). For the Berlin philosopher, "...the essence of the modern as such is psychologism, the experiencing and interpretation of the world in terms of the reactions of our inner life, and indeed as an inner world, the dissolution of fixed contents in the fluid element of the soul" (103). Simmel saw the face as a scene with moving features forming countless units of meaning. On such meaningful and permanently moving surface, the restless personality and emotional life of man would thus find their privileged expression: "only the face becomes the geometric locus, as it were, of the inner personality, to the degree that it is perceptible. ... The face, in fact, accomplishes more completely than anything else the task of creating a maximum change of total expression by a minimum change of detail" (Simmel 1965, 279).

1 This was at the expense of essentialist conceptions of the soul, which favored a hermeneutics of stable features and human phenotypes. For a survey of this (significant, but not conclusive) reframing of the physiognomic debate during the nineteenth century, see Gunning (1997). For a good overview of the discourse on physiognomy before the nineteenth century, in particular since the Renaissance, see Magli (1989).

This modern fascination with the face as the revelatory space of the soul was not without an associated pursuit of technical means to reveal the face. Tom Gunning called the "gnostic mission of cinema" its "potential for uncovering visual knowledge." For many early film theorists, such as Bela Balázs and Jean Epstein, "the gnostic potential of the cinema was especially evident in the conjunction of the cinematic device of the close-up and the subject of the human face" (Gunning 1997, 1). According to Gunning, one of the key impulses in the nineteenth-century development of cinematic technologies was a multiple curiosity about the meanings of the face that propelled attempts to master its reading through the classification and archiving of its signifying moving features. These attempts were carried out by scientists like Duchenne de Boulogne, Charles Darwin, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Georges Demenÿ: "The desire to know the face in its most transitory and bizarre manifestations was stimulated by the use of photography; but that desire, in turn, also stimulated the development of photography itself, spurring it to increasing technical mastery over time and motion, prodding it toward the actual invention of motion pictures" (Gunning 1997, 25). In the early days of the motion picture, close-ups offered the spectacle of magnified facial expressions whose attraction derived from their grotesquely rendered details. The "gnostic impulse" for facial revelation thus fueled the market of technological curiosities and entertainment.

With narrative cinema, the close-up came to be theorized as a technique to give the spectator a clear sense of the moods and emotions dominating film characters, potentially inducing empathetic attitudes. For a film theorist like Balázs, a former student of Simmel who defended the art of filmmaking on the premise of the movie camera's capacity to see more and better than the human eye, this mechanic power of vision was truly "artistic" when applied to unveil the human soul. Balázs argued that facial close-ups communicate the psychological complexity of characters by clear-cut visual means, i.e. by magnifying minimal changes in detail that denote total changes in expression. This made cinema an ostensibly richer and more authentic form of expression than the conventional linguistic signs. He called this realm of cinematic signifiers of the soul, micro-physiognomy, and its application in film narratives, microdramaturgy (Balázs 1977). Inspired by German classical idealist aesthetics, he went so far as to extend the idea of physiognomy to the whole universe of filmable things (Koch and Hansen 1987; Iampolski 2010): any cinematic matter was subject to assume a facial function as long as it was stylistically elaborated to take on a subjective signification on the screen. A glimpse of a city, a landscape, or an object may all express a personality or état *d'âme*. The close-up was the ideal technique to make these elements assume the expressive power of the face: "Close-ups … yield a subjective image of the world and succeed … in showing the world as colored by a temperament, as illumined by an emotion" (quoted in Koch and Hansen 1987, 170).

Balázs's theories testify to a reliance in the superior authenticity of the cinematic image in communicating subjective attributes. Faced with the close-up, the spectators are plunged, he said, into a purely physiognomic dimension, the whole screen being set to reflect inner movements and psychic dramas. He claimed that the close-up was an artistically designed situation of spectatorial complicity with the characters' mind states and personalities. The crucial thing about this technique was that it gives visual access to even the unconscious truth of film characters, beyond any representational "make-believe" typical of bourgeois theater. Close-ups of human faces, because of their power of subjective revelation belying any role-playing attitude, make the personalities of characters inseparable from those of the actors who play them: "The film actor is the sole creator of his figures [*Gestalten*], which is why his personality … means style and Weltanschauung. One sees in the appearance of the human being how he sees the world" (quoted in Aumont, 1992, 86).

Curiously, one of the most influential works on the modern "intimate society," Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man*, also speaks about a demise of role-playing in favor of a "more authentic" mode of individual public expression. According to Sennett, public expression is nowadays experienced as an idiosyncratic and spontaneous manifestation, a direct reflection of individual psychological impulses. The expression of feelings, for instance, no longer reflects impersonal presentation models; it is no longer derived from conventional morphologies and significations characteristic of the "public life" which individuals learn to believe in and play with: "Expression in the public world was [once] presentation of feeling states and tones with a meaning of their own no matter who was making the presentation; representation of feeling states in the intimate society makes the substance of an emotion depend on who is projecting it" (Sennett 2002, 314). Insofar as any public action is now experienced as a direct reflection of singular personalities, the principle of "role-playing" is replaced by a principle governing the public life that Sennett calls "narcissistic." According to the latter, both social and material relations that an individual can have all bear a substantially determined relationship with the self; the self is permanently looking for its reflection in experience. Writing in the 1970s and taking white-collar workers as a key example, Sennett portrays modernity as the time when the question of personal identity has pervaded all modes of action, extinguishing role-playing as an attitude that preserves a gap between forms of expression and the self. Modern narcissists, he claims, "treat social situations as mirrors of self, and are deflected from examining them as forms which have a non-personality meaning" (327). Instilled by modern institutions that "mobilize

narcissism" (327), they see all public attitudes as self-revelation, as expressions of their singular personality, personal ethics and motivations.[2]

The "mobilization of narcissism" typical of modern institutions, and the "gnostic impulse" of cinema to reveal the face, have good reason to find a privileged articulation in the current practices of self-branding at work. As practices designed to tie self-identities to personal potential for contribution to business achievements, they request individuals to constantly observe the judgment of others in order to assess personal *fitness*. In terms of rules for personal success, self-branding doesn't involve the adaptation to impersonal models of good work performance. Rather, it requires an ongoing self-revelation attitude—revelation of one's creative, charismatic, motivated, responsible, etc. personality. On the other hand, it's a practice of monitoring the reception of "self" by others (Hearn 2008). If such practices incite narcissistic concern, it's because they erase the boundaries between one's public expression and the assessment of one's innate abilities, character strengths, and other self-related attributes. Both from the point of view of self-exhibition and from the point of view of the inspection of impressions caused by the self, self-branding practices require a network of signs more accurate and more "authentic" than verbal signs. For these too are filtered by conventional courtesy and decorum. It calls for a sign system that is able to communicate the subtle truth of inner drives and personal impressions, to provide a more faithful picture of singular personalities and judgmental thoughts. The fact that the cinematic close-up, with its promise to transform the screen into a space of pure subjective revelation, is now substituting interpersonal relations at work—this should therefore come as no big surprise. It provides self-branders with greater control over their powers of persuasion, as well as greater visual accuracy in detecting meaningful expressions in their critical appraisers—they can thus become aware of the minute motives that trigger this expanded range of judgmental expressions.

Communicational apparatuses operating through facial close-ups and enabling inconspicuous stares do nothing but enhance the same physiognomic practices they capitalize on in the contemporary workplace. By excluding bodies and the environment from the scope of attention, they intensify processes of facial scrutiny. They homogenize a scale of perception that can only be established circumspectly and fitfully in ordinary live interactions. Hence, they situate groups of collaborators in spaces of more rigid interfacial symbiosis. By setting aside signs that don't have a revelatory function of the selves, they compel reciprocal uninterrupted readings of intimacy. Thus, they transform spaces of human interaction into spaces of pure psychological resonance. At the same time, they subject individual

2 Boris Groys (2010) has recently offered an insight on the modern aesthetics of the soul close to Sennett's ideas in his interesting essay on the "obligation of self-design."

faces to a stricter and more meticulous responsiveness within micro-dramatic collective scenes. They sharpen and intensify meaningful correlations between faces. They cause faces to respond to each other in a more necessary, urgent, atomic way, because of the proximity of their reciprocal frontal exposure. Their effect is to ensure the duplication of official exchanges complete with intense exercises of facial interpretation and dramaturgy. In this way, they complement the regulatory function of verbal communication by securing an efficient, but undeclared (and thus secondary) level of communication.

In such spaces where the gaze can only be interfacial,[3] being able to look at one's own face among others is of prime importance. Videoconferencing mirror images link the presentation of self at work with the aesthetics of social networks, where self-branding practices are well established. They consequently extend to the daily presentation of self, one's view of one's own self as an aesthetic object. The gesture that the mirror image provokes is inevitably that of examining the outward appearance of self and its meaning, for verification that it actually signifies what it is supposed to signify—that its forms are *in conformity* with the circumstances. Such gestures attest that if video communication apparatuses prove useful as substitutes for the contemporary workplace, this is not simply because they support efficient first level team communication, but also because they support processes of *facial production*. They are efficient *faciality machines* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987): they multiply opportunities to create and address meaningful surfaces of self to others. Close-up mirror images make faces proliferate; everyone is given the chance to control subtle signs emanating from the self, which aim to persuade and constrain others to take into account messages that are never explicit enough to be stated, and never hidden enough to discount their effects. The space constituted by the close-ups is therefore a space of intensified inter-excitation, with multiple semiotic agents of interpersonal stress.

But it's not just about the human head's face. All the elements within the individual image frames in videoconferencing act as faces, i.e. they give rise to a view of the inner attributes and subjective states of their characters. In the context of the home office, composing one's video background and choosing the objects likely to enter the frame requires reflection on the signification one wants to see attributed to one's personality and psychological traits. All visual and sound forms become signs of inner features. At this level, the problem of whether or not these images are "close-ups" is in no way a matter of measuring "shot sizes" of the human body. It's the fact that they are *integrally* conceived as signifying surfaces of selves, and they endow their figures (even

3 For an original theory of the interfacial gaze as a generative force field of the self, see Sloterdijk (2011).

their background details) with a physiognomic function, which links them to a historical practice of the close-up. The cinematic close-up—the embodiment of an ideal of expression of the soul since the nineteenth century—after its drifts in the market of attractions and film narratives, assumes then a telepathic function in the world of labor, where its new configurations become the default setting for the public staging of self.

In pandemic times, companies have been massively testing new forms of social interaction that don't fail to strengthen their organizational networks of physiognomic injunctions. Communication networks built on physiognomic knowledge manifest a disciplinary power unlike that of specialized (scientific) knowledge applied to bodies at work. They operate as opportunities of putting into practice a widespread hermeneutics that generates the voluntary normalization of productive behavior. One can always gauge the success or failure of videoconferencing apparatuses to replace live work interactions; in any case, these apparatuses deal with the problem of the reconstruction of an aesthetic regime that ensures productivity in contemporary bureaucratic systems of production. This regime is that of the interfacial gaze: a key channel for the practice of self-branding and the reading of psychodynamic effects of individual actions. Workers today care a great deal about faces, they're constantly decoding and encoding faces. The recent cinematic configurations of the workplace are the result of a situation of production where the body has been made disposable—accompanied by a demand for greater visibility of faces. They're the ideal(istic) alternative for the production of a self-disciplined subject immersed in a physiognomic dimension.

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