# Telepresence and the Posthuman: Pedagogical Tact and the Limits of Representability

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> "The problem, actually, does not lie in telepresence, which amplifies our own possibilities to the level where distance is abolished; but in tele-absence, which withdraws from its own access."[1]

## INTRODUCTION

Tablets and smartphones, together with new communication services such as Skype and Facetime, have changed what it means "keep in touch." In changing communicative practice, these media are also delimiting new experiential horizons, providing phenomenological research with novel variations on lived experiences of space and embodiment, self and other. Going further, one can say that they are changing what it means to be human, allowing for new possibilities of sense, meaning, and action that are celebrated as the technological "posthuman." We become *posthuman*, as Katherine Hayles explains, through our awareness being "seamlessly" extended or even embodied through technology, meaning that the body of flesh and blood is only "the original prosthesis" for the mind. However, the practice of extending our awareness through technology and its prostheses goes back hundreds if not thousands of years. Specifically *textual* communications, posted either online or on paper, have long been shown to bring with them a dynamic tension between sensed presence or embodied absence, between the immediacy of reaction and mediation of response.[2] Such tensions are already long


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familiar from analyses of epistolary fiction,[3] and from debates and theory about speech and writing, presence and absence, from Plato to Derrida. New televisual communication, on the other hand, brings with it a different set of issues, involving representations of embodiment, speech, hearing, and vision, and resulting in a rather different interplay between immediacy and mediation. Together with virtual reality, audio/visual communication has been characterized as bringing mediated experience into a "post-symbolic" era,[4] delimiting horizons that include the (relative) immediacy of reciprocity and disjuncture of embodied self and other, of voice, hearing, and gaze.

Microsoft's Skype,[5] Apple's FaceTime and Google's Hangouts boast that their users can be "in two places at once," that "conversations" can be brought "to life" or that distant interlocutors can literally be brought "face-to-face." Freedom and intimacy are reconciled and conjoined. However, at the same time, a great deal of empirical research on these and other technologies of telepresence brings attention to multiple communicative challenges and educational pitfalls. Despite having coined the term "postsymbolic" to describe virtual technologies, Lanier also admits that "videoconferencing seems precisely configured to confound … nonverbal elements [of] human interaction."[6] Since Lanier made this (relatively) early but significant observation, videoconferencing as a technology of telepresence has certainly changed in its availability, but not in its fundamental technological and physical configurations.

What is the experiential and educational import of these varied claims and realities? Do popular audio/visual technologies *actually* enable everyday and educational communication that is "as good as" face-to-face? What is the nature of face-to-face pedagogical experience, of the literal and relational space between student and teacher? If something might be missing or "confounded" through telepresence, what might it

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be, how is it experienced, and how could it be addressed? In this article, I respond to these questions through a phenomenological investigation of the lived, embodied "spaces" opened up by these mediating technologies, comparing them with those familiar from face-to-face engagement, specifically in pedagogical settings. To explore some of the more subtle nuances of these pedagogical experiences, I look specifically at the relational phenomenon of tact, of ethically sensitive pedagogical action.[7] However, in addition to exploring how these experiential dimensions may be both connected and disrupted in audio/video communications, this paper will also show how there is more at stake: This is not something that is captured in terms of access and presence, but through a type of *absence* that Bernhard Waldenfels conceptualizes in his phenomenology and anthropology as "withdrawal." Waldenfels' philosophy focuses not on the human "other" that we might encounter on the other end of a televisual experience, but on a radical form of alterity, one that is both human and non-human, and that he calls the "alien."[8]

## TECHNICAL POSSIBILITY AND "OPTIONALNESS"

As befits the (post-)humanist emphases of this edition of the Yearbook, the phenomenological method is understood here as utilizing four broadly human or anthropological dimensions of experience as key heuristics: time, space, relation, and the body. Given that the *tele* in *tele*presence or *tele*vision designates distance—and shares the same root with *telos*, destination or goal—the primary emphasis in this article will be placed on space, with significant but secondary attention paid to embodiment and relation. An important aspect of the phenomenological method utilized in this article is the editic reduction, which Husserl characterized as "free variation in imagination:" the shifting of "actual perception into the realm of non-actualities, the realm of the as-if."[9] However, I believe that when

investigating experiences of mediated communication, it is now possible to move many variations on "non-actuality" from the realm of "as if" into the domain of concrete perceptual experience. The proliferating forms or modes of communication and representation made accessible by these technologies can be fairly readily isolated, manipulated, and combined, to produce different combinations of color, sound, tone, vision, visibility, and other elements of remote seeing and hearing. Indeed, there are a growing number of public accounts and expressions related to experience with these technologies and the experiential permutations available for variation, comparison, and contrast.

## VARIATIONS ON AUDIO AND VIDEO

Telepresence and other technologies of virtuality take the varied non-actualities described by Husserl from the realm of imagination into that of simulation. A simple example of one of these variations applies to cell phones—a type of telecommunication technology that typically involves only audio or voice communications. An important aspect of this experience is illustrated in the long-lived tagline of an American mobile phone network, "Can you hear me *now*?" One can venture that this is a question that would not have been asked before the intervention of telecommunication technologies into our lives. Face-to-face, we are able to monitor our speaking as a function of the acoustics of the room, a slight echo and other subtle indicators of sonic ambience that allow one to judge the reach of one's voice. Our communication in this context is also based on the assumption and confirmed in the awareness that others hear and more generally perceive the world in ways very broadly similar to us. Speaking in this room today, I have a sense of the volume and tone of my voice, as well as having an impression of how I am being heard (or not heard). However, in working with technologies of

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audio transmission and recording, these impressions and the mutuality of perception underlying them is interrupted in a variety of ways. This is illustrated not only by the need to ask someone if they can hear you "now;" it is also illustrated, for example, when one speaks with one's mic unplugged or muted in tele-conference settings.

For a second variation, we can focus on visual communication, in which similar and perhaps more obvious forms of disruption are evident. Consider again the article on videoconferencing from Jaron Lanier, which focuses on its visual aspect. It speaks specifically of eye-contact as a key illustration of how this communication medium "confounds" non-verbal communication:

> It is impossible to make eye contact properly for instance, in today's videoconferencing systems, because the camera and the display screen cannot be in the same spot. This usually leads to a deadened and formal affect in interactions … Furthermore, participants aren't able to establish a sense of position relative to one another and therefore have no clear way to direct attention, approval or disapproval.[10]

This lack of structure for directing one's attention is illustrated through an incidental warning in an article on videoconferencing in the classroom. Describing the experience of being a remote guest projected at the front of the class via videoconferencing technology, the authors advise as follows: *"Even if … you are not 'on,' you are on-screen, and probably larger than life-size. If you surreptitiously pick your nose, chances are that everyone can see you doing it."*[11] Joking aside, this scenario illustrates both how videoconferencing disrupts visual orientations and confuses the way attention is or should be directed: The "guest" teacher likely faces a webcam and, below it, an often poorly lit, two-dimensional image of the classroom space. Those

in the classroom, however, are likely to see a talking head that fills much of the screen at the front of the classroom, and whose visual characteristics can be carefully scrutinized. Indeed, instead of such audience "surveillance" being at all observable to the guest him or herself, it may well appear to the speaker as rapt attention.

In the absence of other communication, such a scenario seems to present a variation on what Merleau-Ponty describes in conjunction with the silent, skeptical, or "inhuman" gaze:

> The other transforms me into an object and denies me … This is what happens, for instance, when I fall under the gaze of a stranger. However, this takes place not so much in combination with other acts of communication, as in their absence … [My] objectification … by the other's gaze is felt as unbearable only because it takes the place of possible communication.[12]

Telepresence technologies have a particular power to objectify since they disrupt what Merleau-Ponty elsewhere calls the "reversibility" of our senses and our bodies. This is a notion he articulated primarily through reference to seeing and touch:

> There is a circle of the touched and the touching, the touched takes hold of the touching; there is a circle of the visible and the seeing, the seeing is not without visible existence… As soon as we see other seers, we no longer have before us only the look without a pupil, the plate glass of the things with that feeble reflection, that phantom of ourselves they evoke by designating a place among themselves whence we see them: henceforth, through other eyes we are for ourselves fully visible.[13]

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In most social settings, to be seen by another is also to see him or her; to hear another is also (at least to have the possibility) to be heard; to touch is also to be felt (as ritualized in the handshake). Even in seeing another's gaze (while not necessarily "catching" it), we are generally able not only to understand what another is seeing—the object of their attention—but often also *how* she sees it.[14] Moreover, we gain some sense of how we might be seen and heard—similar to the act of writing for a specific person or audience. But let me focus again on the visual, which, as Merleau-Ponty has already intimated, reaches its greatest communicative acuity in *mutual* eye-contact:

> I look at him. He sees that I look at him. I see that he sees it. He sees that I see that he sees it … Well, even though in principle reflections upon reflections go on to infinity, vision is such that the obscure results of two glances adjust to each other, and there are no longer two consciousnesses with their own teleology but two mutually enfolding glances.[15]

In seeing and being seen (as seeing), as Merleau-Ponty suggests, a kind of perceptual alignment is achieved. This alignment extends to the awareness of both involved, which becomes enfolded in a way that subverts any teleology implied in any single, isolated perspective. In everyday expression, to say something while looking another "in the eye" is often to "really mean" what is being said, and to presume to have been heard and believed. In many social settings, we believe we can feel that the gaze of another upon us. "Many children," as both Piaget and Merleau-Ponty have noted, "have the idea that two gazes which cross can clash or get mixed up. They also say that they 'feel a tingling on the cheek' when being watched."[16] Correspondingly, there is no shortage of quantitative

evidence on the value of eye-contact in a range of educational contexts.[17]

However, as Lanier has already made clear, this type of reciprocal contact is broken or fractured in the videoconference. The necessarily different positions of the camera and screen in videoconferencing systems necessarily disrupts precisely this "mutually enfolding" potential of the gaze. Eye-contact of a kind *can* occur, but in such systems it cannot be *simultaneously reciprocal*. You cannot *truly* look an interlocutor in the eye as literally seeing another's eyes means looking at the screen. You can give the *appearance* of making eye-contact, but this actually requires looking *away* from the other, into the camera, generally above the screen.

But what are the pedagogical implications of these disruptions of reciprocity and reflexivity of the senses? Returning to the anthropological element of lived space, we can observe the concern with space and distance that is evident in recent educational buzzwords, for example, in speaking of teachers moving from the "sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side." The change of teacher locus thus suggested is associated with a shift in the task of the teacher from one of "directive … presentation" to one of supportive "facilitation."[18] Similar concerns can also be traced in the venerable 200-year-old tradition of German *Pädagogik*, which has reflected more explicitly and systematically on the embodied position and relation of teacher vis-à-vis the student or *educand*. For example, in an 1803 lecture on pedagogy and pedagogical "tact," Johann Friedrich Herbart asks his readers to imagine an ideal private tutor or teacher for a young boy, such as Émile's patient tutor. Herbart's tactful teacher is different:

> a teacher [is] not so much the companion of every step, as Rousseau [imagines] … not the warden, the slave chained to the boy, whom he and who him deprives of liberty. He is instead the wise leader from afar, who by profoundly penetrative words and strength of conduct

> at the right time knows how to make sure of his pupil,
> and then dare calmly leave him to his own development
> in the midst of play, and contest with his mates.[19]

Writing in a 1962 book on *Pedagogical Tact*, German *Pädagogik* scholar Jakob Muth describes the central characteristics of this specific type of "tact." Muth begins by explaining that in everyday relations *outside* of education, tact involves a kind of *protective* distantiation. In this context individuals often distance themselves from others in order to guard their own privacy and autonomy. Because this occurs based on one's own perception of one's needs, it can sometimes result in a kind self-reinforcing regression or "isolation" as Muth observes. *Pedagogical* tact or distantiation, however, is different: "It expresses itself through the maintenance of a type of distance that is necessary to the pedagogical relation," according to Muth. It is undertaken not for the sake of the teacher and her protection, but is "exercised specifically for the sake of another, the student."[20]

Focusing on examples from the earlier years of education, Muth emphasizes that this pedagogically tactful reserve and reticence must simultaneously be highly responsive to "the uniqueness of the child and the singularity of the situation that arises in a pedagogical relationship" with the student.[21] This pedagogical reserve and reticence "preserves a golden mean between the educative help of the teacher, and the possibility of the child to help him or her*self*."[22] It is a distance which allows the adult to respond to a question or to prevent a mishap or an all too embarrassing or discouraging failure—and also one at the same time allows the child to develop his or her independence, autonomy, and "self-activity."[23] As such, Muth stresses, this manifestation of tact is indispensable to the teacher's very "being as an educator," their *Erziehersein*[24]

The complexity and multidimensionality of the spaces of com-

municative contact, of pedagogical and extra-pedagogical reserve and relational distance obviously exceed the limits of any analytic treatment. Muth, and before him Herbart, made it clear that this complexity and multidimensionality are part of the (gradually and often reflexively acquired) repertoire that make up a teacher's tactful disposition vis-à-vis his or her students. Both Muth and Herbart emphasize that appropriate engagement with the multiple and changing specificities and singularities that make up a pedagogical relation is not a question of theoretical knowledge nor of following a set of fixed rules or plans. Indeed, in his original 1803 definition of pedagogical tact, Herbart stresses that is "a quick judgment and decision" to meet "the true requirements of the individual case."[25]

So how is it possible to register such a responsive reticence and discrimination as a telepresent teacher? How might it be possible to work in a tactful embodied manner in a setting where mutual eye contact and voice "contact" are not only impossible, but also subject to mis-recognition and mis-perception? From a posthumanist perspective, as mentioned earlier, the body is only the first of any number of possible prostheses for the many possibilities and adventures of a liberated, posthuman consciousness. What, then, does telepresence—as one of these prosthetic possibilities or liberations—tell us about our posthuman future? If the examples discussed above are any indication, it tells us that we are constantly reminded of our finite, embodied humanness when attempting to extend or escape it, rather than feeling ourselves to be somehow augmented or emancipated. We are reminded of how our anthropological and cultural inheritance is schematized in the body and its possibilities and limitations, and of how hard these are to fully recognize and thus impossible to reproduce. Speaking of man as gradually becoming a kind of "prosthetic god," Freud's 1930 observation still rings true today: Namely that our "auxiliary organs have not grown on … [us] and they still give [us] much trouble at times."[26]

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All the same, for the sake of argument, I am happy to admit that technological innovation may someday be able to overcome the difficulties of reliable audio capture and video reproduction. It may even work around the challenges of mutual eye contact. It may someday be possible to use screens that, like our eyes, both see and communicate from the same place at the same time, or audio that is resonant with what others hear. Conventions or technologies may emerge that frame participants visually in such a way as to give them "a sense of position relative to one another." These may indeed eventually allow for a reliable sense of a spatial relationship and proximity, a feeling of being "truly" face to face and "immediately" present.

The quote from Bernhard Waldenfels provided at the outset of the article, however, suggests that this will not be enough. Even more, it suggests that the better our technological prostheses become, the greater the difficulty we will face. Waldenfels' words come from a longer passage from his book *Ortsverschiebungen, Zeitverschiebungen - Modi leibhaftiger Erfahrung* (*Displacements in Place and Time – Modes of Lived Embodiment*), which forms the basis for this article's brief conclusion. Waldenfels is discussing the notion of withdrawal into absence, which he sees as the way in which the most radical dimension of "otherness," the "alien," becomes manifest:

> The problem, actually, does not lie in telepresence, which amplifies our own possibilities to the level where distance is abolished; but in tele-absence, which withdraws from its own access. The withdrawal of the alien … is like a shadow that cannot be grasped … [it] exceeds my own possibilities in that it transforms them into lived *im*possibilities …[27]

The alien for Waldenfels is manifest only in its withdrawal; it has none

of the symmetry or mutuality that is implicit in "the Other" of Levinas, for example, which I can encounter and to whom I am to be bound in a relation of respect. Self is not simply opposed to other for Waldenfels, nor is alterity conceptualized as something that is "encountered" or to which one is bound in "respect." Instead, Waldenfels sees the self as expressed in its possessive inflection, in the term "own"—or as he puts it, in and through its or my "sphere of ownness." This is a domain that is "mine" or "ours," and that is constituted precisely through its opposition to that which is alien to it. Unlike "the other," Waldenfels explains, the alien:

> does not arise from a mere process of delimitation [between self and other]. It emerges from a process which is realized simultaneously as an inclusion (or blurring of boundaries; *Entgrenzung)* and an exclusion *(Ausgrenzung)*. The alien is not opposed to the same, rather it refers to the *Self* (αὐτό , *ipse*), to myself or to ourselves, including the "sphere of ownness" … from which it escapes.[28]

Waldenfels' anthropology—his phenomenology of the body, of relationality, and of displacements in (experienced) space and time—is marked at every turn by the alien and its withdrawal. The body, for all its reflexivity and reversibility, for Waldenfels manifests a kind of:

> noncoincidence … which refers to itself and at the same time evades itself. … When we look at ourselves in the mirror, hear our voice on the tape, or touch a sharp knife with our fingers, we surprise ourselves. We are captured by our own image, bewildered by our own voice, or we simply cut into our own flesh.[29]

If the alien in Waldenfels' anthropology is manifest even in the non-coincidence of the body and its performances to themselves, then certainly we

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must wonder whether this could be anything but extended and amplified through our high-tech prostheses. Our everyday language for orienting ourselves in space, time, and relation reflects the way that our sphere of "ownness," through its very constitution, entails the exclusion and withdrawal of the alien:

> Think of the difference between nearness and remoteness in time and space, as in the distinctions between here and there, now and then, or once upon a time; think of the alternating worlds of waking and sleeping; … think of interpersonal relations like those between man and woman, between child and adult; [think finally,] of social exclusions on account of class, profession, and culture.[30]

All of these pairings or categories include and exclude through a threshold structure. This threshold means that we can only be one or the other— adult or child, then or now—and that we are not masters of any change or return, and finally, that we cannot linger (at least for long) at any point in-between. Given that this logic of ownness and alien can be taken, in effect, as Waldenfels' anthropology or theory of the human, the question remains: Is it truly beyond any improvements in technology—through better ways of capturing and representing our image, voice, and surroundings? Waldenfels' answer reads as follows:

> Even a video camera, which not only registers our voice and breathing, but even the lifting of the eyelids or the creasing in one's brow, would fail when it comes to the glance that is more than something that is seen, or to the voice that is more than something that is heard – because voice and glance disrupt, incite, interrupt. Here technical media run up against the limit of representability, without being able to represent this limit themselves … [31]

By virtue of their very efficient and effective operation, the most advanced technologies of telepresence would simply more thoroughly ensure the alien's "withdrawal from its own absence." This is of particular importance for education and pedagogy, for pedagogical tact and the pedagogical relation: It has long been clear—tacitly if not explicitly—that the literal and figurative positionality of teacher and student is not simply a matter of ever greater proximity and immediacy. Instead, it is characterized by minutely and carefully cultivated moments of self-effacement, reticence, and reserve on the part of the teacher. The eyes of the teacher and modulation of her voice can work to express availability, concern, and affirmation—all at the same time. How does one negotiate such a communicative "space," negate by infinitesimal degrees one's own immediate and insistent presence, when one is connected with instrumentation that is designed with instantaneous immediacy as its *raison d'etre*? In attenuating or eliminating the negative dimension of contact and, more importantly, by also erasing the very perception of its absence, these technologies rob us of these potentialities for pedagogical reflexivity, reticence, and reserve. And it is these very qualities that are believed to constitute our very "being" as educators—and more broadly our being as humans in mutual interrelationship.

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1 Bernhard Waldenfels, *Ortsverscheibungen, Zeitverscheibungen: Modi leibhafter Erfahrung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009), 110.

2 See e.g. Norm Friesen, *The Place of the Classroom and the Space of the Screen* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011); Esther Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Email Technologies of Presence* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

3 See e.g. Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1982).

4 Jaron Lanier, "Virtual reality: an interview with Jaron Lanier," *The Whole Earth Review* (Fall 1989): 108-119.

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5 560 million people have used Skype as of 2016.

6 Jaron Lanier, "Virtually There: Three dimensional teleimmersion may eventually bring the world to your desk," *Scientific American* 284, no. 4 (2001): 66-75, 68.

7 Max van Manen, *Tact of Teaching: The Meaning of Pedagogical Thoughtfulness* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

8 Bernhard Waldenfels, *Phenomenology of the Alien: Basic Concepts* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011).

9 Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 70-71.

10 Lanier, "Virtually There," 68.

11 Becca Barniskis and Lisa Maren Thompson, "The Art of the Videoconference Lesson: Practical Application and Implications," *Teaching Artist Journal* 10, no. 1 (2012): 15-23, 19.

12 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge 2002), 420.

13 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 143.

14 Bernhard Waldenfels, *Antwortregister* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), 497.

15 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 17.

16 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 142; Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World* (London: Routledge, 1929), 48.

17 See e.g. Jeremy N. Bailenson, Andrew C. Beall, and Jim Blascovich, "Mutual gaze and task performance in shared virtual environments," *Journal of Visualization and Computer Animation* 13, no. 5 (2002): 1-8.

18 Alison King, "From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side," *College Teaching* 41, no. 1 (1993): 30-35.

19 Johann Friedrich Herbart, *Herbart's A B C of Sense-perception, and Minor Pedagogical Works* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1896), 23.

20 Jakob Muth, *Pädagogischer Takt: Monographie einer aktuellen Form erzieherischen und didaktischen Handelns* (Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer, 1962), 56.

21 Ibid., 60.

22 Ibid., 55.

23 "Self-activity" is a term that is frequently used in German discussions of tact, and was introduced into the English language by John Dewey. It refers to the child's independent, often self-directed activity and goals; John Dewey, *School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915), 112.

24 Muth, *Pädagogischer Takt*, 62.

25 Herbart, *Herbart's A B C of Sense-Perception,* 20.

26 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961), 39.

27 Waldenfels, *Ortsverscheibungen, Zeitverscheibungen*, 110.

28 Bernhard Waldenfels, *The Question of the Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press 2007), 7.

29 Waldenfels, *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 49.

30 Ibid., 14.

31 Waldenfels, *Ortsverscheibungen, Zeitverscheibungen*, 110-111.

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