*Zoom, silence, the gaze and the mask*

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Consider why it's so disturbing when we are on Zoom, giving a talk or a lecture, and there's this absolute silence. On the one hand, that's the demand. – the "affordance" – of the technological encounter. On Zoom, everyone has their mike muted – it's that little icon that is both modern (the red slash glyph) and slightly dated (the 1940s-looking microphone, even though most mikes are invisible, a dot or hole in your phone or computer). Also, telling someone they're muted (you see them talking -> like a silent movie) vs not telling them (so you don't have to listen to them). And it's now a cliché, when multiple people in a meeting tell the person they're muted/turn on their mike, try unplugging their headphones, etc) – but also "you're muted" is saying you're silenced – by the technology.

So your listeners' mikes are muted so they can hear you and not anyone else. But we then realize that back when we used to talk in public places, pre-Covid, we relied on hearing, if not peoples' talking, at least their rustling, and so on. So much so that if we can hear nothing, we either think, they are rapt, they are holding their breath, you could hear a pin drop, (you could hear a rat pissing on cotton, as Melvin van Peebles once put it),[1] or we wonder if our own mike is working.

Or we call it "radio silence," a metaphor from – war movies? Maintain radio silence before the big maneuvre begins? A metaphor we also use when we haven't responded to someone's text or email for a while (as if texting or email were *noisy* activities).

Some Zoom events now "pipe in" crowd noise or even applause.

But Zoom silence is an important phenomenon, I argue, because silence is now an object. It is jarring, akin to the silence of the analyst – that is, it functions as *objet petit a.* Zoom silence is the Real. Ed Pluth & Cindy Zeiher (in *On Silence*) say that psychoanalysis values both language and silence; we might describe such a silence as constituting the "apophatic" (Pluth & Zeiher) or self-contradictory condition of Zoom. Does "zoom" refer to zooming somewhere, in a hurry, saying it's a quick meeting (yet not communicating) or to the visual field, to the camera lens movement from a wide shot to a close-up. Again: self-contradictory, not unlike its main competitor, MS Teams, which offers the simulacra of the social link, the business metaphor.

Roland Barthes, in his famous essay "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers",[2] tells us that the teacher is the reverse of the psychoanalyst: "the teacher is the person analyzed." "I speak, endlessly, in front of and for someone who remains silent." This pedagogic ideal is the condition of Zoom, of the Zoom silence. Barthes continues: "I am the person who, under cover of *setting out* a body of knowledge, *puts out* a discourse, *never knowing how that discourse is being received* and thus forever forbidden the reassurance of a definitive image – even if offensive – which would *constitute me.*" Later he adds: "though every teacher occupies the position of a person in analysis, no student audience can claim the advantage of the opposite situation … because the

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[1] In Isaac Julien's *BaadAsssss Cinema* (2002).

[2] Roland Barthes, "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers." In *A Barthes Reader,* ed. Susan Sontag. New York: Hill and wang, 1982. 378-403

psychoanalytic silence has nothing pre-eminent about it" – that is, the analyst's silence is trash, it is garbage. Whereas should the student, Barthes adds, "remain obstinately silent, this is simply to give voice to the obstinacy of his muteness." This is the Zoom silence: obstinate, *mute*, but machinic.

Finally, Zoom silence has everything about it of what Lacan called "empty speech," the *blah-blah* or *yadda-yadda*[3] of actual language. The Zoom silence speaks, it reflects our own anxieties back to us. "The mirror is empty," Barthes says, "reflecting back to me no more than the falling away of my language as it gradually unrolls." When Zoom is silent, and we can just see our own face in a square, or the students faces, looking away embarrassed, or the multiple Malevichian black squares, we hear our own voice, our language, falling away, but also caught in the network of our microphone, our ear buds or computer speaker, smuggled by wifi and dataplans to other interfaces, other cities and countries, other bodies, that are, for now, silent.

Ed Pluth has pointed out the imaginary dimension of teaching, that we think if we can see someone's face or look that that means they are listening to us (email, 26 Sept. 2020). The differences of scale – from the one-on-one tutorial to the small seminar room or classroom to the lecture hall – are probably irrelevant, as anyone who has taught across such a spectrum will be quick to admit. And here the dyad of the Zoom gaze and Zoom silence is key. What we take for a feedback loop, that is – the visual sign of comprehension – is imaginary because the first time a student opens their mouth we realize they've understood nothing, they want to know what is on the exam, or they are still working through something you said 10 minutes ago. (Remember Barthes was describing in-person lectures when he lamented being "forever forbidden the reassurance of a definitive image.") What this means is that when we are confronted with the void qua Zoom we are encountering the Real of the pedagogic relation. But then consider how Zoom silence and the Zoom gaze interlock: this has to do with the affordances – perhaps you are narrating a powerpoint or reading from a text – so you see mostly your own images/text rather than the students' or audience's face, which again is not that different from reading from a text in a classroom or auditorium (which, thinking etymologically, is a space for the auditory, where people can audit your class, listen to you), especially for professors of a certain age, who, with or without corrective lenses, may only be able to focus on one or the other. More fundamentally, we are never assured of the other's comprehension (since all readings are misreadings anyway, to cite Paul de Man, or all meanings are, again, imaginary).

Think too, as Cindy Zeiher prompts us, of the spatial differences between the analyst's discourse and the university discourse (email, 26 Sept. 2020). In the former, the analysand is on the couch, perhaps, and thus cannot see the analyst (although many times now the patient sits face-to-face due to humanist psychological fallacies) – again, the Zoom paradigm; whereas in the university space, the professor is set up as big Other, via the architecture of the classroom (and regardless of it, no matter where the professor sits in the seminar room, for instance) – that is, they see each other.

There are other media and technological aspects to the Zoom non-relation, of course. First of all, questions of privacy and the like, from early 2020 worries of the company owning IP (always
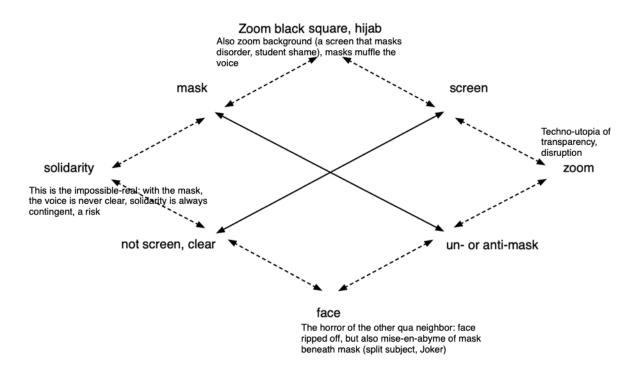
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[3] In *Seinfeld,* "yadda-yadda" stands in for: sex, crime (shoplifting, manslaughter), and trash-talking.

narcissistic), and so-called Zoom-busters (qua neighbor or other), to the role of Zoom backgrounds (usually the most banal touristic sites or corporate logos) that both "screen" (or mask)  the individual's spatial privacy but also disavow the WFH inequalities that Zoom has benefited from.


In an essay forthcoming from the British Psychoanalytic Council's *New Associations* magazine, I compare the not-quite-meeting-your-eyes gaze of the Zoom call to the sardine can in Lacan's *Seminar XI,* when Petit-Jean says to the young Lacan "You see that can? It doesn't see you!"

Perhaps we can bring two Covid-era technologies, the mask and the Zoom screen, together. The mask covers part of our face but also makes it difficult to hear: it is an analog mute button. The screen both shows and covers up. Consider this semiotic rectangle:



Zoom black square, hijab
Also zoom background (a screen that masks disorder, student shame), masks muffle the voice

mask

screen

Techno-utopia of transparency, disruption

zoom

solidarity

This is the impossible-real: with the mask, the voice is never clear, solidarity is always contingent, a risk

not screen, clear

un- or anti-mask

face

The horror of the other qua neighbor: face ripped off, but also mise-en-abyme of mask beneath mask (split subject, Joker)


- the mask and the screen are now brought into an antinomic or dialectical relation in the Covid era
- the mask covers up, the screen shows
- but the screen also thought of as both covering up (Freud's screen memories) and showing (the movie or cellphone or computer screen)
- if something is not screened, it is clear (but also: tests for Covid are themselves a form of screening)
- that which is un-masked is revealed, and anti-masking is not *only* the practice of right wingers (just as anti-vaxxers vary in their politics)
- so, to go through the four combinatory positions:

- on the left, the mask combined with that which is not a screen, is clear – this is the practice of wearing a mask as an act of solidarity, that utopian collectivity of the pandemic – we wear a mask to care for others; and this is "without a screen" in the sense of IRL, we wear a mask in the crowd, in a social situation (or in the hallways of my university and other interior spaces: *a mask is extimate*)
- but on the bottom, when we are not screened, when we do not have a mask on – that is the face, in all its naked vulnerability; the face suddenly a collection of orifices, so not quite the Levinasian face of the other, nor even the face of the neighbor that Žižek wants to rip off, *because it is already ripped off* (and yet it is still the face of the neighbor as hostile other – the anti-mask protestor yelling at us, spraying us with their spittle (the bottom of the semiotic rectangle, Jameson tells us, is the dystopian position)
- on the right, again no mask, but with the screen: this is Zoom, which of course screens us from each other, provides us with a screen onto which we project our image but also our fantasies (and screen memories of how great it was before Covid) – and Zoom, or the digital, is also a contested space, rife with the alt-right, censorship of antifa on social media – and also unmasked in the sense that there still circulates here the "unveiling" of truth, critical thought, and the like
- and then the top position, both mask and screen, is that void of the blank or black Zoom rectangle, when we are confronted, as teachers, with students who refuse to show their faces (for good reasons and bad, because of social or digital inequality or laziness or resistance), but also the mask as the Zoom background (cliché calendar art or corporate logos), (and yet who would wear a mask on a screen; the vexed position of the hijab or veil: reviled in Québec and France and elsewhere under the claims of secularism (but also "transparency" for state surveillance) now suddenly moot with the paradox of masks mandatory and hijabs still banned.