The ethical and societal implications of presence from a distance

Pericle Salvini
IMT – Institute for Advanced Studies, Lucca, Italy
ARTSlab Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, Pisa Italy
{pericle.salvini@imtlucca.it}

Abstract

In discussions about teleoperation systems and virtual reality environments, the notion of distance, i.e. in physical space, is often considered as a problem, causing many technological bottlenecks, such as time delay, communication breakdowns, lack of communication services quality, etc. In this paper, however, we propose to shift the engineering viewpoint, and to consider distance from an anthropological standpoint, that is, not as a source of "technological problems" but as the source of moral implications. In other words, we will review some of the sociological and psychological effects that the abnegation of distance, which is currently brought about by telepresence technologies, plays and has played on the moral dimension of human beings.

1. Introduction

Once the technological problems related to spatial distance are solved, internet will become increasingly used by laypeople to act remotely [1] . Currently, a great deal of daily interpersonal communications already takes place via telephone line (internet, email, messenger, chat, videoconference systems), sometimes independently from spatial distance. The case of people working in the same room making appointments for the evening by exchanging emails is often cited as evidence of a growing trend towards relying more and more on mediated forms of presence. Sherry Turkle has pointed out how online interactive environments, like MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) and MOOs (Multi-User Object Oriented) can provide people with liberating experiences [2] , since cyberspace helps overcoming inhibitions and this is confirmed by the increasing popularity of "cyber-flirting", which is notoriously preferred to face-to-face relationships [3] .

There are many other specific circumstances in which technologically mediated forms of presence can be useful in human activities. According to Sally Pryor and Jill Scott, for instance, 'a somewhat disembodied self, mediated via telepresence might be appropriate in environments such as hazardous radioactive situations, modern warfare or in space, where the body is truly obsolete' [4] . Moreover, Pryor and Scott argue that decoupling presence from the body, helps also removing old-problems traditionally associated with corporeality: i.e. fear, violence, racism, sex discrimination, etc.: 'western socialisation involves experience of sexism, racism, power and control and produces an ambivalent and highly-gendered combination of feelings – such as fear, loathing, pleasure and desire – around the notion of body. It is not surprising that the body, subject to vulnerability, pain and mortality, can become something from which it seems desirable to escape' [4] .

Therefore, compared to pre-modern forms of communications, such as letters, bells, drums, light and smoke signals, which allowed for limited extensions of presence [5] , today, the very link between the body and its perceptions and actions has changed. The body is still the source of presence, but is no more the only carrier of presence. As a result, presence is not limited and bounded to the "here and now" of the body as well as to its temporal and geographical narrowed field of actions and perceptions.

However, the detachment of presence from body is also the cause of many concerns. According to Paul Virilio the vanishing of the dimension of space, which is what 'prevents everything from being in the same place' brings about what he calls the 'ubiquity of presence', which consequently has determined the "dissolution of presence", namely, the impossibility to locate it: 'If man's sphere of activity is no longer limited by extension or duration or even the opaqueness of obstacles barring his way, where is his presence in the world, his real presence, actually located? "Telepresence", no doubt, but where? From what starting point or position? Living-present, here and there at the same time, where am I if I am everywhere?' [6]

William J. Mitchell and Oliver B.R. Strimpel point out that an "economy of presence" could emerge, where people 'have to choose among different grades of presence with different properties and different associated costs. […] Unfortunately, it is not difficult to imagine a new class system developing in which access to physical presence will be highly related to economic position' [7] .

In this paper, however, we will deal with the ethical and moral implications of technologically mediated forms of presence. In other words, what are the effects of distance and mediation on presence, and, in particular, on the moral/ethical dimensions of human beings? Is technological mediation hampering or fostering presence?

2. Ethical and societal implications of presence from a distance

In 1936, in the age of mechanical reproduction, Walter Benjamin announced the death of the 'aura'. This was due to the possibilities disclosed by mechanical reproduction

technologies, which brought about 'the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction' [8] . Today, with the advent of technologically mediated forms of presence, the reproduction or copy is not enough anymore. Contemporary masses are characterized by the desire to get hold of the object itself, by accessing its real environment, visually and haptically, from a distance. If, during Benjamin's age the buzzword was "possessing", today is "accessing".

As explained earlier, this is possible since the body has been detached by its presence. However, removing the immediate connections between the body and its sphere of actions/perceptions (i.e. presence) implies also removing the connections between "actions" and "responsibility", and this is the cause of moral and ethical concerns.

Margaret Morse makes a similar remarks about cyberculture in general: 'what concerns cyberculture is not the fact of telematic imagery per se but the telepresent danger of engagement with the image world at the cost – ethical and psychic – of disengagement or remoteness from the actual effect of one's actions' [9] . Contrary to Morse, Catherine Wilson does not believe that abstraction is a consequence of distance. According to her, 'we have reason to doubt that technology implies experiential opacity; it may rather extend the realm of what we perceive and come to know intimately [...] The threat to values posed by technologically mediated remote experience and remote agency actually derives less from the defective nature or lower status of mediated experience than from the opportunities it presents for immersion and engagement of a disturbing sort' [7] .

2.1. Numbing and hiding the body

The demise of the body, which characterizes applications of telerobotics, teleoperation and virtual environments, brings about the primacy of what Peter Weibel calls "machine vision" (vision not visibility!) over the other senses. Weibel speaks of the triumph of the visual in the twentieth century, which, however, has not to be considered as the triumph of the "eye-vision" but, rather, that of what he calls "techno-vision" or "machine vision": 'This can be best demonstrated by the interpretation of the word "video". The Latin word video, meaning "I see", referred to the activity of a subject. Today it is the name of a machine system of vision' [10]

In other words, "machine vision" is a disembodied form of vision achieved by using technological devices (basically a camera and a screen or display). In this kind of visual experience, technology mediates between the visible and the fleshy eye by selecting and purging information. A political difference there exists between visibility, the fact of being seen which may or may not imply the possibility of seeing, and invisibility, that is, unilateral seeing. As pointed out by

Peggy Phelan, "visibility", implies being subject to dangers, since, according to her: '[v]isibility is a trap [...] it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonials/imperial appetite for possession' [11] .

According to Kevin Robins, vision (i.e. eye-vision) is the most detached of the human senses. Drawing on Elizabeth Grosz, he points out that: 'while it is clear that in the case of touch, the toucher is always touched, in traditional philosophical models of vision, the seer sees at a distance, and is unimplicated in what is [12] . However, in "machine vision", detachment and distance are further enhanced by technological devices which allow the seer to go beyond the capabilities of the human eye. Moreover, according to Robins, vision is a way to order the world, and, at the same time, to protect from the world, i.e. from the dangers coming from the Unknown and the Other: 'Vision has always provided a particularly important means of defending against what is unknown, outside and beyond. [...] Technologically mediated vision developed as the decisively modern way to put distance around ourselves, to withdraw and insulate ourselves from the frightening immediacy of the world of contact' [12] . Therefore, what is missing in vision and even more in "machine vision" is a direct contact between the seen and the seer. The two terms have lost their "implication" in each other, in other words, there is no 'intertwining' or reciprocity between the seen and the seer [13] , but only distance and mediation.

The screen plays a determinant role in both processes of abstraction and moral disengagement. Paradoxically, when used in mediated presence technologies, the screen, while brining "things" closer and "at hands", at the same time keeps them apart. The screen performs exactly this function: it is a window and at the same time a shield. It allows to see, but at the same time to screen out the visible. According to Robins, the screen is a space of visibility and invisibility: '[t]he nature and functioning of the screen are crucial. The screen has allowed us to witness the world's events while, at the same time, protecting us – keeping us separate and insulated – from the reality of the events we are seeing. [...] The force of the screen works to make moral response more difficult' [12] .

Likewise, with the current advancements in haptics, paradoxically, touch as well can take place from a distance and in a "disembodied" way. "Tele-touch" is no more characterised by reciprocity (i.e. physical touch always implies being touched). In teleoperation, in fact, touching takes place at a distance, and, without involving the body, that is, preventing any form of response and physical contact. Therefore, tele-touch allows the user to touch the Other and the Unknown, but not to be touched by the Other and the Unknown. The reciprocity of touch is lost in the physical distance between the touched and the toucher. Therefore, far from being a positive sense for experience, "tele-touch" becomes a further dangerous instrument of power. Lev Manovich warns against an unconditioned evaluation of vision over touch: 'Indeed, in contrast to older action-

enabling representational technologies, real-time image instruments literally allow us to touch objects over distance, thus making possible their easy destruction as well. The potential aggressiveness of looking turns out to be rather more innocent than the actual aggression of electronically enabled touch' [14] .

Therefore, in mediated forms of presence touch and vision rest upon *invisibility* (or disguise) and *numbing* of the body. The body is just the source for action, it is a one-way device which does not allow receiving and sensing physically external inputs.

2.2. A case in point: warfare

The moral implications of distance in relation to telepresence technologies are best illustrated in modern warfare. As a matter of fact, it is in war that it is possible to take full advantage of invisibility, distance and numbing effects. In other words, the military logic is one of acting without being subject to any forms of response. To be able to fight war remotely, that is, without risking the life of soldiers, but using robotic doubles or other prosthetic devices is what the military are looking for. The cruise missile and the drone are two examples of these instruments: they replace the human eye for vision and the fist of the hand for hitting. The body is hidden, protected, and invisible, but at the same time capable of executing almost all of its mortal functions, remotely, since these functions becomes just an act of mind or distant vision.

The technologies of remote action and vision provide a protection against pain, a way of erasing the body as the source of death, but keeping it as the source of action. According to Robins: '[m]ilitary strategy has always been about seeing and not being seen; about combining vision with stealth. It is the increasing automation and systemation of this principle, however, that makes the new generation of weapons "smart" and even "brilliant"'[12] .

Not only are distance and mediation allowing to fight war without risking the lives of soldiers, but they allow also to train more efficiently soldiers. Robins, again, remarks how for the pilot of the Gulf War shooting was like shooting in a video game. He also seems to suggest that the processes of abstraction and moral disengagement were exploited by the military in order to facilitate the pilot to execute his or her orders: 'Our technologies keep the world at a distance. They provide the means to insulate ourselves from the disturbing immediacy of the world of contact. Of particular significance in this respect has been the mobilisation of vision, the human sense most associated with detachment and separation form the world' [12] .

3. Conclusions

By detaching presence from the body, teleoperations and tele-vision technologies allow us to shield and protect the body from pain and death. However, pain and death are the most important ingredients of experience. According to Robins, 'what is necessary for experience to occur is the capacity to admit the catastrophic or chaotic foundations of our human existence. There must be the awareness that what is the cause of fearful and a dreadful feeling […] is at the same time the source of innovation and transformation' [12] Hence, avoiding pain and suffering is a way to avoid experience. And this provokes abstraction and moral disengagement.

In a world in which technology has disengaged presence from its physical constraints, and freed it from the physical body, it appears necessary to investigate the ethical and societal implications that the different relations among human beings and proximity, distance and mediation bring about. This study is a preliminary attempt in that direction.

References

[1]   Knoll, Alois, "Guest Editor's Introduction: Toward High-Definition Telepresence", *Presence*, Volume 16, Issue 5 - October 2007.

[2]   Turkle, Sherry, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

[3]   Whitty, Monica, and Adrian Carr, *Cyberspace Romance: The Psychology of Online Relationships*, London, Palgrave, 2006.

[4]   Pryor, Sally and Scott Jill 'Virtual reality: beyond Cartesian space' in P. Hayward and T. Wollen (eds.) *Future Visions: New Technologies of the Screen*, London: British Film Institute.

[5]   Campanella, Thomas J. 'Eden by wire: Webcameras and the telepresent landscape' in Goldberg, Ken (ed.) (2000) *The Robot in the Garden: Telerobotics and Telepistemology in the Age of Internet*, Cambridge (Massachussetts): The MIT Press.

[6]   Virilio, Paul *Open Sky*, trans. by Julie Rose, London and New York: Verso (1997 [1995]).

[7]   Wilson, Catherine 'Vicariousness and authenticity' in Goldberg, Ken (ed.) *The Robot in the Garden: Telerobotics and Telepistemology in the Age of Internet*, Cambridge (Massachussetts): The MIT Press, 2000.

[8]   Benjamin, Walter 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936) online [Available] http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm

[9]   Morse, Margaret *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998.

[10]   Weibel, Peter 'The world as interface: towars the construction of context-controlled-eventworlds' in T. Druckrey (ed.) *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, New York: Aperture, 1996.

[11]   Phelan, Peggy (1993) *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*, London and New York: Routledge.

[12]   Robins, Kevin (1996) *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision*, London and New York: Routledge

[13]   Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 'The Intertwining-The chiasm in The Visible and the Invisible, edited by Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968[1964]

[14] Manovich, Lev 'To lie and to act: Potemkin's villages, cinema and telepresence', in K. Goldberg (ed.) *The Robot in the Garden: Telerobotics and Telepistemology in the Age of Internet*, Cambridge (Massachussetts): The MIT Press, 2000.