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the paleotechnology of telephones and screens: on the ecstatic permeability of the interior

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abstract

This article argues that the essentials of the complex relationship between interiority and exteriority, and the mediating role of teletechnology, are already present in the interiors of Paleolithic caves. As philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone argues in *The Roots of Thinking* (1990), cave art emerged from the primal fascination with 'being inside.' Yet at the same time, these first interiors were most likely created to establish a form of communication with an exterior, the 'augmented reality' of the spirit world, made possible through rudimentary technological and biological extensions. It also required a specific use of the spatial qualities of these caves, both sensory and atmospheric. This complex hybrid constellation of interior space, the human body and (psycho)technology created a permeability between different human and non-human actors. According to prehistorian Jean Clottes in *Pourquoi l'art préhistorique* (2011), the 'permeability' between inner and outer worlds is indeed one of the concepts that are crucial to understanding the Paleolithic human outlook on the environment, and is a concept which is still relevant today.

Ever since these animistic Paleolithic works of art, teletechnology reveals what philosopher and literary theorist Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei calls, in *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature* (2007), the 'ecstatic' side of the quotidian. In this article, I follow the traces of this animistic, ecstatic experience in literature, in Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1932-8) and Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927), and in cinematography, in Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) and David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983). The imagination of now outdated technologies creates a kind of anachronistic, defamiliarizing perspective that helps to grasp the animistic, mythical dimension of our daily domestic immersion in contemporary teletechnologies (from video chats to ASMR-videos). These anachronistic experiences we find in art allow us to better reflect on the ecstatic role of media-technology in relation to our spatial and psychological interiors, and the (psycho) technological conditions of contemporary dwelling in the interiors of the communication age.

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teletechnology and the anachronistic phenomenology of ecstasy

As a child, before falling asleep, I would sometimes look up at the wooden ceiling. In the erratic pattern of pine wood textures and knots the elongated face of a fox appeared, staring intensely at me.

One day, I was playing with my older brothers' bright-red electronic toy telephone. They said they were going to call my godmother. Expecting a prank, I was very startled when I actually heard her voice on the other side

of the line. Obviously, the toy was more sophisticated than I thought, as my brothers had managed to connect it to our landline.

What both these vivid childhood memories have in common is the unexpected intrusion of my familiar surroundings by an exteriority that was virtual in the first case, real in the second one: an intrusion that in both cases was the result of teletechnology. I would broadly define teletechnology as any technology that is able to present something that is not materially there. As the apparition

Figure 01:

Panel of the Horses, Chauvet Cave (replica). Photo by [Claude Valette](#), 2016. Licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

of the fox demonstrates, teletechnology is a part of the human mind itself. Imagination, from deliberate daydreams to involuntary hallucinations, can be seen as a very archaic, innate teletechnological device, evolutionarily hardwired in the human brain. And precisely because it is part of our mental make-up, we engage so strongly with technological devices that are able to summon the disembodied voices and visions of absent beings: the telephone and the screen.

In *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature* (2007), philosopher and literary theorist Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei stresses the phenomenological value of childhood experiences like the two I mentioned above. Because a child's relation to its environment is much less defined by habits and presumptions, and still strongly interwoven with imagination, quotidian objects and events can evoke a kind of ecstatic experience. Gosetti-Ferencei defines this experience as 'the stepping outside or "ecstasy" of the ordinary feeling of the self's familiarity with the world.'⁰¹ For Gosetti-Ferencei, art is able to capture the same ecstatic experience of the quotidian by describing or depicting what is well-known in an unexpected way, presenting it as something new and strange: an aesthetic technique which literary theorist Victor Shklovsky called 'defamiliarization.'⁰² A good example of this technique can be found in Craig Raine's 'A Martian Sends a Postcard Home' (1979):

In homes, a haunted apparatus sleeps,
that snores when you pick it up.

If the ghost cries, they carry it
to their lips and soothe it to sleep

with sounds. And yet, they wake it up
deliberately, by tickling with a finger.⁰³

Seen from an adult perspective, the experiences of a child already offer a similar defamiliarization of the quotidian as those of Raine's imagined Martian. That is why modernist authors like Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and Marcel Proust (1871-1922) made extensive use of their own childhood memories in their description of domestic life.

The concept of the ecstatic is especially useful for exploring the triangle between interiority, domesticity, and teletechnology. Here we should not overlook the etymology of ecstasy: to be transferred to another place, to be 'standing outside' (from ancient Greek *ékstasis*).⁰⁴ There is indeed something inherently ecstatic about teletechnology, exposing its users to something that lies outside their actual environment. Because the telephone and the screen have become a crucial part of domestic life, especially since the smartphone combined these devices, their ecstatic dimension is easily overlooked. In order to explore the ecstatic, defamiliarizing aspect of teletechnology, I want to supplement the individual anachronistic phenomenology of childhood memories with a collective anachronistic phenomenology. I will consider the specific interiors of the Paleolithic caves of Chauvet and Lascaux

as examples of the first human ecstatic experiences of teletechnology.

It might seem a bit provocative to put forward the oldest surviving created interiors of humankind as a starting point for the exploration of contemporary teletechnology and the interior. But as Walter Benjamin remarks in *The Arcades Project*, '[o]nly a thoughtless observer can deny that correspondences come into play between the world of modern technology and the archaic symbol-world of mythology.'⁰⁵ This, Benjamin continues, is because

technological revolutions alter and even destroy our 'perceptual worlds': 'what they contain of the mythic comes more quickly and more brutally to the fore.'⁰⁶ Confronted with a new technology, the human mind falls back on an embodied mythical imaginary that is millennia-old and closely related to an animistic, magical world view. In order to explore this animistic 'symbol-world of mythology' in relation to teletechnology, I will first look at the interior of Paleolithic caves, and then consider the 'afterlife' of this animistic imagination in literature and cinematography.

Figure 02:

Shaft Scene, Lascaux (replica).

Photo by [Traumrune](#), 2017. Licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

insiderness and permeability: the bodily concepts of cave art

Our familiarity with the images of Lascaux and Chauvet, well-known from introductory courses in art history, make it easy to miss the fact that the visual was only one aspect of Paleolithic cave art. Perhaps even more important was the environment in which they were created. As philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone argues in *The Roots of Thinking* (1990), these images were closely related to an experience of interiority. Cave art was an expression of the primal, embodied experience of 'being inside.' This sense of 'insiderness' plays out at different levels, most obviously in the discovery '*that shape is created by pictorial line and that pictorial lines have the power to enclose.*'⁰⁷ For Sheets-Johnstone, this is 'conceptually akin to a very young child's discovery of, and fascination with, insiderness.'⁰⁸ She argues that the basic human concepts that interpret the environment are derived from such everyday 'sensory-kinetic experiences.'⁰⁹ The awareness of one's own body having an interior, of being able to place something in something else and of being inside a space, provided humans with the bodily concept of insiderness. This concept was also activated by the experience of entering the actual spatial environment of the cave. Being inside the cave was 'to feel one's way within an eerie interior' and 'to be surrounded by queer forms.'¹⁰ The cave itself was also experienced as a kind of body, and exploring this strange environment was associated with entering the 'bowels' of the earth.¹¹ It was in these 'eerie interiors' that the drawings and paintings of animals appeared on the cave wall, in the feeble light of primitive torches.

Animals were of course an obvious subject to depict. As prehistorian Jean Clottes remarks in *Pourquoi l'art préhistorique* (2011), animals, either as predator or prey, played a crucial role in survival. That is why the human brain is evolutionarily wired to quickly discern animal forms. No doubt it was the same evolutionary feature that made the face of a fox appear in the wooden ceiling of my bedroom. Cave paintings and engravings were often just a visual reinforcement of animal forms already suggested by the particular shapes and shadows created by the cave walls.¹² We should also not forget that these first images were not looked at with the contemplative gaze of a modern museum visitor, but were the expression of an animistic outlook on reality. They were most likely part of initiatory rituals, as prehistorian Yann-Pierre Montelle remarks in 'Paleoperformance: Investigating the Human Use of Caves in the Upper Paleolithic' (2004). But not only was the three-dimensionality of the wall surface cleverly used to enhance the effect of these images; sound as well may have played an important part in the scenography of these ritual performances. '[P]ictorial manifestations were often situated in places with noticeably good acoustics; laying out a 'sonic route,' in which, not only the human voice, but also musical instruments, created a kind of soundscape.'¹³ Bone flutes and bullroarers produce an eerie sound that must have been overwhelming within the interiors of these dark caves, considerably adding to the already uncanny atmosphere.¹⁴

The shaman-scenographers also made clever use of the atmospheric qualities of the cave.

It is no coincidence that one of the strangest images of cave art, the famous *Shaft Scene* at Lascaux (Figure 02), was situated in a part of the cave with particularly high levels of carbon dioxide. The scene depicts a shaman with the head of a bird, who seems to be falling or flying, with an erect member; next to him is a bison that seems to be gutted, his bowels pouring out.¹⁵ Carbon dioxide, known for causing hallucinations and general malaise, must have amplified the unsettling experience of both creating and perceiving this extraordinary scene.

Another example of the use of specific environmental features can be found in the *Panel of the Horses* in Chauvet Cave (Figure 01). From a vulva-like opening at the bottom of the cave wall, water would flow into the cave after a period of heavy rainfall, with a 'loud, gurgling sound.' It is precisely this feature which explains why the walls are 'crammed with animals.'¹⁶

In Paleolithic teletechnology, the image is thus only one aspect of a synesthetic, immersive, and overwhelming experience that seemed to have provided access to another realm of reality, a spirit world. The sensory deprivation caused by the darkness of the cave, the manipulation of sound, vision and atmospheric circumstances, and perhaps also the use of psychotropic plants or mushrooms, greatly influenced the neurochemical processes in the brain, triggering altered states of consciousness.

So, while Sheets-Johnstone makes convincingly clear that the corporeal concept

of 'insiderness' is necessary to understand what was happening in these caves, the spatial art created there was also a way to evoke and experience a radical 'outsiderness.' The shaman-artists were thus not so much adding an image on the wall as accentuating the shapes of the animal-spirits that were already there, coming forth out of the wall. Archaeologist Lewis-Williams argues, in *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* (2004), that in these shamanistic practices, the wall of the cave functioned as a kind of membrane, through which something from the other side could enter this side of the world. The cave shamans 'did not simply view pictures: they saw real things, real spirit animals and beings, real transformations. In short, they saw through the membrane and participated in the events of the spirit realm.'¹⁷

It is important to notice how interdependent all the bodily, environmental and technological factors in these animistic experiences were: the shamanistic imagination required an active participation of a performing body that is sensually, emotionally affected by a (psycho)technologically altered interior. And the strangeness of these trance-like states should not make us forget that they required a real and efficient engagement with the physical environment. These first shaman-scenographers already possessed some technological skills: for lighting, they utilised pine torches and grease lamps; as pigments, they used charcoal, manganese dioxide, and hematite, sometimes sprayed on the wall through a tube.¹⁸

This complex and hybrid constellation of interior space, the human body, and (psycho) technology, created a permeability between all these different human and non-human actors, between the shaman and his or her spirit helpers. According to Clottes, this 'permeability' between inner and outer worlds is indeed one of the concepts crucial to understanding humanity's Paleolithic outlook on the environment.¹⁹ It is a concept that still strongly appeals to the imagination, as we can see in the science fiction fantasies of the cyborg or of immersion in a digital world. These are in fact just a translation into a futuristic imaginary of a very ancient, animistic, embodied experience: the shaman transforming into—becoming—a spirit animal, leaving his physical body and travelling to another realm of reality. This should not come as a surprise: genetically, these shaman-scenographers were fully modern humans, and despite the massive cultural and technological changes that have occurred in the last millennia, our embodied mind still pretty much works the same way. As art historian Barbara Stafford remarks in 'Crystal and Smoke. Putting Image Back in Mind' (2011), modern forms of teletechnology like television continue to provoke the same reactions:

The long history of cave-like audio-visual media (that is, glowing images meant to be seen in the dark) reveals both the cinematic reflexivity of our brain dynamics and the attention-retraining strategies we evolved to become conscious of our altered states.²⁰

Paleolithic teletechnology was an attempt to explore this intimate and powerful connection between a sense of 'being inside' and the intrusion of exterior forces. In these shamanistic performances in the dark interior of caves, the imagination was triggered, and an unknown, ecstatic aspect of existence was revealed. It is precisely this role of imagination that is underplayed in our view of ourselves as a species. Hominid evolution is commonly considered from a pragmatic perspective, with intelligence and self-awareness as instruments that could help in the daily struggle to survive (a bias which is evident in names like *homo faber* (toolmaker) and *homo sapiens* (possessing knowledge)). That is why Clottes prefers the term *homo spiritualis artifex* to define the human species.²¹

In a way, this is what humans still are, even in the secular context of modern life: creators of technologically very sophisticated artefacts, but still susceptible to the same ecstatic experiences as our Paleolithic ancestors. Yet, as David Whitley stresses in *Cave Paintings and the Human Spirit: The Origin of Creativity and Belief* (2009), ecstasy might not be the right word to describe these shamanistic practices, at least if we understand ecstasy in a purely positive sense as a kind of blissful, mystical experience of cosmic unity. The contemporary, new age view on animism often ignores the fact that these experiences were often of a very violent, intrusive nature.²² They express a confrontation with the overwhelming, uncontrollable forces of nature, providing nourishment and fertility, but also causing suffering and death: the Shaft scene at Lascaux is indeed a good

example of this very violent imaginary of shamanistic visions.

the afterlife of cave teletechnology: the animism of audio-visual media

The unsettling experience of entering dark caves, suddenly seeing animal forms appear, hearing strange sounds, and experiencing profoundly altered states of consciousness, is obviously a far cry from the experience of making a simple phone call. And even if sex and violence are regular ingredients of films and tv-series, viewing them from a cosy sofa to relax after a busy day does not come near the intensity of the transgressive, overwhelming experience of the initiatory rituals at Chauvet or Lascaux: for Paleolithic humans, the sounds and visions were, from an animistic perspective, frighteningly real. But while being of course less explicit, the sense of violent intrusion and ecstatic permeability still lingers in modern teletechnologies like the telephone or cinematography. When teletechnological devices like the telephone first entered everyday life, this violent aspect was still very much part of the user's experience. This is illustrated by a practical joke Marshall McLuhan recounts in his *Understanding Media* (1964), where a prankster would call and say that the lines were going to be cleaned out by the engineering department, urging the correspondent to 'cover your telephone with a sheet or pillow case to prevent your room from being filled with dirt and grease.'²³ The prank worked because it resonated with this archaic bodily concept of permeability, the innate belief that something might violently come through from another side. Obviously,

the prospect of having dirty grease all over one's furniture is not the same as the animals seemingly pressing forward from the other side in Chauvet's Panel of the Horses. But what Sheets-Johnstone would call the 'bodily concept' underlying this experience is still the same: the embodied imagination that the insideness of a space can be permeated by something alien, even dangerous from the outside.

This sensation of an uncanny intrusion survived well into secular modernity, as is demonstrated by Benjamin in a short autobiographical text about the appearance of the telephone at the beginning of the 20th century, a short chapter in his *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (1932-38, unpublished during his lifetime). In his description, Benjamin focuses on the almost animistic response he had as a child to this new device, placed in a 'dark hallway in the back of the house.'²⁴ From this dark spot, it would produce 'nocturnal noises' that 'served to multiply the terrors of the Berlin household.'²⁵ The telephone felt like a magical instrument, turning ordinary communication into a spiritualist séance:

Powerless, I suffered, seeing that it obliterated my consciousness of time, my firm resolve, my sense of duty. And just as the medium obeys the voice that takes possession of him from beyond the grave, I submitted to the first proposal that came my way through the telephone.²⁶

In a similar way, Marcel Proust describes the introduction of the telephone in modern

life as an extraordinary, animistic event. In his description of a telephone conversation between Marcel, the narrator, and his grandmother in *The Guermantes Way* (1920-1), Proust, just like Benjamin, links the voice on the telephone to the realm of the dead. In 'Orpheus and the Machine: Proust as Theorist of Technological Change, and the Case of Joyce' (2004), literary theorist Sara Danius points out that Marcel explicitly compares himself to Orpheus, the shamanic figure in Greek mythology that entered the netherworld to try—in vain—to bring his beloved Eurydice back to life.²⁷

Proust keenly observed what was profoundly new about this device; namely, its ability to separate different modes of perception: 'a voice would thus return alone, and attached no longer to a body which I was never to see again.'²⁸ This separation between the auditory and the other senses had a violently defamiliarizing effect. It was 'as if he was hearing her voice for the first time,' and only now did he notice the cracks in her voice, made by a lifetime of sorrows.²⁹

In an interesting juxtaposition, Danius compares this scene with another scene from *The Guermantes Way*, when Marcel visits his grandmother. In this passage, Proust links the experience of the narrator to another technological device, the camera. When the narrator enters the interior where she is sitting, unaware of his arrival, he cannot but register her with a detached photographic eye. Just like the telephone, the camera generates a ghostly experience: 'she literally emerges as a spectral representation of herself.'³⁰ Yet, while

the defamiliarizing sound of his grandmother's voice created a deeper sense of intimacy with her being—'dwelling inside her is a figure whom he has never yet apprehended'³¹—the camera has just the opposite effect. To his own horror, Marcel merely sees a 'dejected old woman.'³² It is interesting to notice that in this passage, the device is merely imagined: it is *as if* he sees her with the detached gaze of the photo camera. Both passages demonstrate the defamiliarizing effect these teletechnological devices have on ordinary sensory and affective experiences: they offer a 'new matrix of perception.'³³ By freezing the other in a photographic image, a fundamental strangeness is revealed that normally goes unnoticed: 'We never see the people who are dear to us save in the animated system, the perceptual motion of our incessant love for them.'³⁴ But even the invention of cinematography—basically an 'animated system' generating an illusion of 'perceptual motion'—could not overcome this sense of estrangement, precisely because the defamiliarization does not reside in the technological limitations, but in the 'tele' itself, in the difference between a sense of 'hereness,' and another realm of existence that is presented.

In an interview about *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), his documentary film on the Palaeolithic art of Chauvet, Werner Herzog mentions the 'the proto-cinema in some of the paintings.'³⁵ It is indeed astonishing to see how cinematographic these very first works of art already were in their suggestion of movement. To a young initiate making his or her way in the dimly lit interior of the cave, startled by

the sudden apparition of these animals in the flickering shadows cast by the torch, it must indeed have seemed that these creatures in the rock were moving.

And just as cave art was already cinematographic, there is something very animistic about the medium of film, especially in its early days. A popular story has it that in 1896, the audience watching a screening of the *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* by the Lumière brothers were so scared by the train that some of the spectators ran to the other side of the room.³⁶ Like the animals in the panel of the Horses at Chauvet, the train must have appeared as a force from the other side, ready to violently burst into this side of reality.

In his *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man* (2005), philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin stresses the continuity between cinematography and cave art: 'the feeling of the spectator at the cinema tends towards this animism.'³⁷ The cinema was able to exploit this form of animistic thinking inherent to the human mind, this projection of interior, subjective states onto an exterior reality. It 'takes us back, in a sense, to the universe of archaic vision, or to the gaze of a child.'³⁸

Cinematography amplified this subjective, imaginative relation to the everyday, revealing its ecstatic side:

The unprecedented craze created by the Lumière tours was not only born from the discovery of the unknown world ... but from seeing the known world, not only the picturesque but the

quotidian. ... [Lumière] had understood that a primal curiosity was directed to the reflection of reality. That people above all else marvelled at seeing anew that which did not fill them with wonder: their houses, their faces, the settings of their familiar lives.³⁹

A filmmaker who has exploited this animistic side of cinematography is Maya Deren. She travelled extensively to Haiti to work on a project that tried to capture Voodoo performances on film, a project that was still unfinished at her early death in 1961. Deren was especially fascinated by the relationship between the cinematographic experience and the animistic possession by a spirit force, a *loa*.⁴⁰ But more relevant for our discussion about teletechnology and the interior is her *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). The topic of this short film was not the extraordinary practices of Haitian Voodoo, but the uncanny, animistic experiences evoked by everyday domestic life: the setting of this film was the interior of her own home. The film was made together with her then husband Alexander Hammid, and filmed in their house at Kings Road in Hollywood.⁴¹ For 'a kind of home movie' as Hammid called it, the plot is rather unsettling: a woman, played by Deren herself, enters what seems to be her home. The room is untidy: there is a knife on the table; on the stairs, we see a phone with the receiver off the hook; we follow her upstairs where there is a gramophone playing in the bedroom; the woman stops the music, goes back downstairs and falls asleep in an armchair. Then there are three different iterations of the same story. There is an encounter with a hooded woman,

who has a mirror instead of a face; there is a fight on the bed with her partner, whom she stabs with the knife we saw earlier, breaking the mirror that has become his face. Each new iteration produces another doppelgänger of the protagonist, who in the end is found dead by her partner, stabbed to death by one of her doubles. The film can be interpreted as a kind of surreal, domestic shamanistic experience, with the same themes we also find in Lascaux's shaft scene: the falling or flying upwards, the experience of a violent death, the instability and permeability of objects and persons who can transform into each other. During the different iterations, the hooded woman, her partner, the flower, the knife, the telephone and the key all switch places. In one scene, the telephone is replaced by the knife, in another it is the key she holds in her hand that turns into the same knife. This series of substitutions links teletechnology to a violent, external intrusion of both the body and the interior. But perhaps the most animistic aspect in this film is the 'camera eye' itself. Just like Proust, Deren shows and explores how teletechnology can generate other ways of perceiving the world. By using montage, Deren is able to combine an actual interior with unsettling poetic images, visualizing the strangeness of subjective experience, whereby reality is always already distorted by a passionate and sometimes fearful imagination. For film historian Sarah Keller, Deren's work is able to connect an actual interior to another, subjective realm of reality: '*Meshes* mobilises an expansive sense of the subject position, so that spectators may occupy the apparent interior landscape of the protagonist.'⁴² Deren

uses the camera as a (psycho)technical tool, visualizing not only altered states of consciousness, but also evoking them in the viewer: 'Deren is invested in the seemingly magical power of the cinema to transform time and space into a new reality.'⁴³

David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) explores the same 'animistic' undertow in the relationship between teletechnology and domesticity. Max Renn, the main character of the movie, watches a secret channel, 'Videodrome,' that broadcasts violent, sadomasochistic content. Under the spell of these disturbing images, Renn begins to hallucinate and the borders between fiction and reality are blurred. Just like *Meshes of the Afternoon*, the film ends with the violent death of the protagonist. Television, and especially video, brought cinema from the public theatre to the domestic sphere, and the film clearly addresses social fears about the impact of television on our intimate lives. In *Videodrome*, the screen not only enters the domestic sphere, it is also presented as an intrusion of the bodily interior, blurring the distinction between inside and outside. In one scene, a videocassette is put into Renn's body; in another scene, the television set comes to life, breathing, pulsating, with veins standing out. There is a close-up of gigantic lips that are coming out of the bulging screen, seducing Renn to stick his head between them, and thus enter the realm of Videodrome. These abject scenes are far more than just a visualisation of fears of getting 'hooked on' and 'sucked into' the medium of television. In fact, *Videodrome* appeals to more archaic, embodied concepts of insideness and

permeability: the screen becomes a porous membrane, just like the wall of the cave, through which Renn can travel to another realm of existence.

As said in the introduction, it is precisely the anachronism of these devices (the picture tube, the Betamax video) that defamiliarises our contemporary use of teletechnology. Videodrome seems to prefigure the kind of sensorial intimacy that is looked for in so-called 'autonomous sensory meridian response' or ASMR-videos. These videos construct an artificial intimacy by showing typically young women performing activities like nursing the viewer, combing his or her hair etc. By using specific sounds, sometimes enhanced with specific techniques, such as binaural sound, the soundscape of these movies can evoke a tingling sensation in the scalp. As the screen of a laptop or a smartphone is closer to the eyes than a traditional television, especially with earphones that seem to bring the sounds and the whispering voice right inside your head, the spectator is immersed in the sensorial environment of the video. Just like the tv-set of Max Renn, video becomes a tactile, not only a purely visual, medium. Of course, most ASMR-videos are designed to relax, but the 'automatic' response that is sought for, this both blissful and unsettling loss of control, resembles the seduction of Max Renn. The soothing voice aims to be as mesmerizing and compelling as the voice on the other side of the line in Benjamin's memory of the telephone. So, however benign the content of most ASMR-videos is in comparison

to the extreme shaft scene at Lascaux or the disturbing footage of *Videodrome*, it manipulates our domestic environment with the same kind of psychotechnics that were first discovered by the shaman-scenographers of the Paleolithic caves.

the ecstatic interior

The 'corporeal' and 'environmental' turns in the humanities of recent decades often imply a critique of teletechnology, and of the design philosophy behind it, for ignoring the crucial role of the body and the environment (see, for example, philosopher Hubert Dreyfus's critique on this 'disembodied telepresence' in *On the Internet* (2004).⁴⁴

As media theorists Marcelo Vieta and Laureano Ralon state, in their 'Being-in-the-Technologically-Mediated-World: The Existential Philosophy of Marshal McLuhan' (2013), much of this critique of teletechnology is inspired by the work of McLuhan. In line with McLuhan, philosopher of science and technology, Don Ihde, argues that teletechnology is both an amplification and a reduction of human experience. A device like the telephone 'amplifies' communication by connecting spatially separated people, yet at the same time the telepresence provided by the telephone is a "'reduced" presence' because it makes 'the interaction with the other "disembodied," lacking "the perceptual richness of face-to-face encounters."⁴⁵

Telecommunication is also limited in presenting the environment of that other place: it cannot transmit the smell of 'the food being cooked in the kitchen they are talking from, or see the snow falling outside their window.'⁴⁶

Dreyfus goes even further, arguing that this reduction is more than just a question of technological limitations.

Even if technology were able to 'telepresent' more senses than just the visual and auditory, the experience would still be flawed. A certain kind of existential engagement only occurs when I share the same physical interior space with this other with whom I communicate.⁴⁷

However, a closer look at the animistic, ecstatic experience, from its Paleolithic origins to ASMR, demonstrates that this division between the embodied and the disembodied in teletechnology is not so clear-cut; quite the contrary. What this critique seems to overlook is the fact that the amplification provided by teletechnology can sometimes reside precisely in its reductiveness. As Proust's account of the telephone conversation between Marcel and his grandmother makes clear, a disembodied voice can have a very embodied effect. The telephone conversation creates an intimacy, a shared interiority, precisely *because* of the perceptual shift and the defamiliarization produced by a reductive, imperfect 'telepresence.'

The technological limits of telecommunication thus allow for an extension of affective, embodied perception: reduced to her faint voice, Marcel's grandmother is in a way more intimately present than ever before, as he is forced to pay attention to her voice 'as if he heard it for the first time.' The 'extension' offered by teletechnology is thus not only pragmatic (being able to talk to someone who is at the moment spatially elsewhere),

but also ecstatic: it provides access to a radically unknown, different experience of reality. The same goes in a way for my own childhood memories. Of course, I had seen some images of foxes in cartoons or wildlife documentaries, but the extraordinariness of this 'telepresence' only struck me when I saw the image appear in the 'reduced' suggestion created by the structure of the ceiling. The cave shamans must have had a similar experience. The accuracy of their images shows that they were quite familiar with the animals they depicted. They shared the same physical space with them, with an obvious existential commitment, and in most cases, also a serious existential risk. Yet it was in their 'reduced' presence on a cave wall, in the eerily resounding cave, that these animals could provoke an ecstatic experience, opening up another realm of existence.

Our relation to teletechnology is therefore always embodied, however virtual and disembodied the technology itself seems to be. That our inner experience can never be separated from the body and the environment is something that the contemporary philosophy of the mind has only recently taken into full account. In 'The Embodied and Situated Nature of Moods' (2017), philosopher of cognitive science, Giovanna Colombetti, discusses how objects and environments are used as 'scaffoldings' that create and sustain a specific mental state or mood.⁴⁸ This is precisely what interior architects have known for a very long time, ever since the first shaman-scenographers at Chauvet. Their ability to create a kind of affective, synesthetic environment by combining specific tele-

and (psycho)technologies to alter the mind, depended on this fundamental, intimate relationship between the human mind and the atmosphere and the elements of a spatial interior. But the affects enabled by these interior 'scaffolds' are of course not always as extreme as those required to induce a shamanistic trance. In our daily domestic existence, we continually use materials and environments that scaffold specific affective states. We put up some music, dim the lights, open the windows to sense the smell of spring: actions that significantly change the sensory qualities of a space and thus help us to construct and support the kind of affective mood we desire.

Yet cave art, as well as the passages from Benjamin and Proust, and the films by Deren and Cronenberg, show that the notion of scaffolding not only has a constructive dimension in relation to our mind, as the building metaphor of the scaffold implies. There is also a deconstructive dimension in this interaction, an encounter with an ecstatic otherness that defines our embodied experience of the interior environment. It is this ecstatic otherness that can be found in childhood experiences and in art, where these teletechnological devices appear as scaffoldings for radically defamiliarising experiences.

Precisely because of the apparent pragmatic rationality of technology, is it easy to overlook this imaginary, ecstatic dimension of teletechnology. As Benjamin has reflected, the modern experience of high technological life re-activates an archaic, animistic imaginary.

It is therefore important that this ecstatic otherness is acknowledged in the discourse on technology and interior design.

As Gosetti-Ferencei argues, the ecstatic experience is not only epistemologically relevant because it is part and parcel of quotidian life, and thus worthy of phenomenological scrutiny; it also has an ethical importance, because the exploration in literary language of this other unknown realm, hidden in ordinary encounters and events, can be 'a recovery from crisis through creative transformation of everyday life.'⁴⁹ Childhood memories and anachronistic experiences of ancient teletechnology (from the cave walls to *Videodrome*) confront us with these ecstatic experiences as a subtle form of resistance against habit. And literature and visual art are not the only ways to stimulate 'imaginative renewal, creativity, and wonder, all of which can contribute to a revitalised experience of the world.'⁵⁰ The analysis and the creation of interiors can also help to reveal this ecstatic dimension in the everyday. The sense of insideness, the intimate experience of domesticity, is always permeated by a form of teletechnology: this creates the same kind of 'membrane' as the cave wall offered the shaman-scenographers of the Chauvet cave. This exterior realm is of course no longer regarded as the realm of the spirits, but even in a profoundly secular and familiar domestic environment, the embodied human imagination still generates ecstatic experiences: less violent, no doubt, but perhaps as effective in creating a sense of existential intensity.

It is this permeability inherent to human experience and imagination that is sometimes overlooked in the clichés—dystopian or utopian—about the potentials of teletechnology in the interiors of the communication age. The fear that the reduced visual and auditory input of telecommunication will be a (poor) substitute for holistic, multisensorial interaction with an environment is unwarranted. Our reaction to these teletechnological devices can be intensely affective and embodied, as ASMR demonstrates. And designers who eagerly anticipate further technological developments to create immersive augmented realities, increasingly blurring the line between the virtual and the actual, do not consider that this does not require sophisticated electrical devices. Very ordinary interior elements can function, inadvertently perhaps, as a form of teletechnology, possessing ecstatic potentiality and creating a permeable space. Indeed, not much scaffolding is necessary: this ecstatic otherness can appear in the most banal examples of interior design, as is made clear by my own childhood memory of the fox appearing in the texture of a wooden ceiling.

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notes

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