

# AESTHETICS OF THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM: VISUAL COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY, PARTICIPATION & HETEROCHRONOUS COMMUNAL TIME

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores how immediate communication of synchronous education via virtual classrooms poses questions on implementing visual communication technologies of social surveillance. The striking global transformation of education to synchronous and asynchronous forms of online and hybrid education during the COVID-19 pandemic has reformed the usual teaching and learning methods. Hence, the immediate experience of virtuality also affected the public sphere notion of classrooms, where students socialize and encounter political culture. Building on the content analysis of qualitative research on student experiences of remote education in Turkey, we conducted an online survey with 325 university students with the purpose of understanding their experiences and attitudes toward online education. We theoretically explore how virtual classroom participants construct their social world of education through the aesthetic affordances of digital platforms. Grounded in critical theories of aesthetics that have previously been elaborated on an abstract level, we investigate how time and space compression, enabled by immediate communication technologies, translates into students' experiences of participation, use of visual communication, and their everyday resistance to surveillance. The research revealed that online education design as implemented today is far from encouraging a public space, and the university students generally underestimate their role in creating a public space through their active participation in discussions. This loss of social spaces should be elaborated and problematized in the future for a better transition to hybrid and online education modules.

**Keywords:** Visual Communication Technology, Surveillance, Digital Socialization, Higher Education.

## SANAL SINIF ESTETİĞİ: GÖRSEL İLETİŞİM TEKNOLOJİSİ, KATILIM VE HETEROKRON ORTAK ZAMAN

### ÖZ

Bu makalede sanal sınıflar yoluyla eşzamanlı eğitimin sağladığı anında iletişimin, sosyal gözetimin görsel iletişim teknolojilerinin uygulanmasına ilişkin soruları nasıl ortaya çıkardığı incelenmektedir. Covid19 Pandemisi sırasında eğitimin eşzamanlı ve eşzamansız çevrimiçi ve hibrit yöntemlerle küresel ölçekte dönüşümü, olağan öğretme ve öğrenme yöntemlerini yeniden biçimlendirdi. Bu nedenle, anlık sanallık deneyimi, öğrencilerin sosyalleştiği ve politik kültürle karşılaştığı sınıflara ilişkin kamusal alan kavramını da etkiledi. Türkiye'deki uzaktan eğitim sürecindeki öğrenci deneyimleri üzerine yürüttüğümüz bu araştırmada nitel içerik analizine dayanarak, online eğitime dair deneyimlerini ve tutumlarını anlamak için 325 üniversite öğrencisi ile çevrimiçi anket yapılmıştır. Sanal sınıf katılımcılarının sosyal eğitim dünyalarını dijital platformların estetik olanakları aracılığıyla nasıl inşa ettikleri teorik olarak incelenmiştir. Daha önce kuramsal düzeyde ele alınmış olan eleştirel estetik teorilerine dayanarak, iletişim teknolojilerinin sağladığı zaman ve mekân sıkıştırmasının öğrencilerin derse katılım deneyimlerine, görsel iletişim kullanımına ve gözetime karşı günlük direnişlerine nasıl dönüştüğünü ortaya koymaktayız. Araştırma, günümüzde uygulanan çevrimiçi eğitim tasarımının kamusal alanı teşvik etmekten uzak olduğunu ve tartışmalara aktif katılım yoluyla kamusal alan yaratmadaki rollerini azımsadıklarını ortaya çıkarmıştır. Gelecekte hibrit ve çevrimiçi eğitim modüllerine daha iyi bir geçiş için sosyal alanların kaybının ele alınması ve sorunsallaştırılması gerekmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Görsel İletişim Teknolojisi, Gözetim, Dijital Sosyalizasyon, Yüksek Öğretim.

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## INTRODUCTION

Similar to the buildings that compose discourse and public experience to be converted into social habits, virtual aesthetics motivate, alter, and create relationships that affect participants' actions. Thereby, it conditions the ways in which societal self-observation and opinion formation can proceed. Communication technology mediates modes and ways of societal expression and interaction through designing experiences of time and space. Thus, the aesthetic that defines the “partition of the sensible” (Rancière 2010) regulates the relations through the societal perceptual regime (Shapiro 2003). Digital architecture and technical persuasion enable, constrain and shape behavior in a virtual space (Bossetta 2017). The aesthetics of communication technology limits and extends the imagination of subjectivity's relation to the public and societal impact. The temporality of digital space can be considered to maximize “disciplinary partitioning” (Foucault 1975) through continuous surveillance and the societal demand for ever-present visibility. Ubiquitous new media “pervade our bodies, cultures and societies” (Featherstone 2009) because its temporal aesthetics has become an integral part of contemporary culture and society.

Critical technology studies suggest that technology often threatens civil liberties, personal autonomy, and rights<sup>1</sup> (Shrader- Frechette 2010). Heidegger, later Marcuse, put the emphasis on how technology is not value-free in its own revealing power of both human beings and nature and hence restructures the world by dominating how we experience things (Feenberg 2005). Thus, *potentia* as the second type of power in the post-hegemonic era pervades non-humans and inorganic matter and transversal of all material beings, including humans (Lash 2007). As such, virtual classrooms are by no means value-neutral because they change the experience of making sense of classroom socialization. Visual communication technologies do not dictate values but influence subjective perceptions of the public sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> In Turkey the recent legal regulation called the “Regulation of Internet Broadcasting and Struggle Against Crimes Committed through these Broadcasting” is an excellent example of this. Promoted as a struggle against disinformation, this regulation will make spreading fake news (i.e. sharing a fake piece of news on social media) a punishable act.

## **Aesthetics Of The Virtual Classroom: Visual Communication Technology, Participation & Heterochronous Communal Time**

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This research originally discusses the temporality of digital aesthetics in the production of immediateness of synchronous education in conjunction with technologies for making sense. The starting point of our research is our personal experiences and challenges with online education and the anecdotal evidence we gathered from other academics and university students about the effectiveness of online (and hybrid) forms of higher education. While the academics' main problems emerge as the loss of sense of connection with the students and burnout, the main problems on the part of students were boredom, lack of sociality, and a sense of missing out on 'a real university experience'. Despite students' desire for a more real social experience, it was also interesting to observe how they refrained from actively participating in online classrooms with their cameras on. Consequently, we aimed to explore the students' point of view on visual participation in virtual classrooms and analyze the links between the tools of visual communication and student experience.

The study follows a cross-disciplinary theoretical and practical approach that draws on communication and education studies, exploring the students' everyday experience of social digitalization. Theoretical approaches drawing upon aesthetics have already emphasized that the study of technology and communication should extend beyond analyzing state sovereignty and class origins of power. We aim to identify the bases on which new digital authority has been formed through the hypothesis of the dissolution of public and private realms under the forces of immediate communication, namely simulation, surveillance, and speed. In the *Ecstasy of Communication*, Jean Baudrillard (1983 [2002]) inserted the loss of the public sphere parallel to the loss of the private sphere due to immediate visibility and transparency that cancel out distance. In this Baudrillardian equation, there is no reflective surface that delivers "the theater of the social and political" (Baudrillard 1983 [2002]: 129) to the subject and permits both alienation and a follow-up agency in return. According to Paul Virilio (1995), the loss of orientation under the dictatorship of speed changed citizens' relations among themselves and emptied the procedure of representative democracy. In Virilio's account, the erosion of spatially located times superseded real space under the tyranny of instantaneity. Thus, the changing spatio-temporal aesthetic regimes that form our online education spaces constitute the user student at the juncture of self and others. Thereby, "communication interfaces" (Galloway 2012; Verstraete 2016) affect the public sphere of education through design.

This research project aims to critically analyze the politics of the digital turn of socialization in education and theoretically explain the power structure inherent in the digitalizing high-speed public sphere of the classroom. We observe how students consent to camera use and they interpret their experiences of immediate virtual communication and the related reasons and consequences. The globalization of telecommunication technologies resulted in the global experience of virtual classrooms during the pandemic. Several live-streaming meeting applications such as Zoom, Teams, Discord, and Google Meet dominated the local time frame of the physical experience of our homes and cities. Our survey of students in Turkey offers an example of glocalization through moving our societal experiences to cyberspace.

How can we conceptualize today's education and think of socialization possibilities in the virtual education design? The grand question is, how have the new communication technologies of speed, surveillance, and simulation and their (non)practices changed the ideal and actual ways of being for the public sphere of education? The prominent contribution of this paper is that we apply to a contemporary social problem the work of theoreticians, who have previously elaborated their theories on a very abstract level. We seek to answer the question of how to incorporate socialization in education and community-building in communication technology while questioning the dilemma between students' demand for a 'real student experience' during a global pandemic while refusing the technological tools at hand that may facilitate this. Thereby, we take the opportunity to question the connection of high-speed communication technology with subjective agency in an increasingly digitalized society through virtual classrooms.

### **Aesthetics of Visual Communication**

The virtual classroom and its communication technology came to education's rescue when the pandemic prohibited physical proximity for social reunions. The aesthetics of such digital social space involve various determinants of its perceptual traits, aka the *partition of sensible* (Rancière 2010), including vision, sound, touch, and taste. This partition of sensible affects the way in which sociality is understood, regulated, generated, and contested thus, partition already suggests lists of order, a table of proportions, variance, tempo, stops that adjust lines, borders, categories and thereby some conveniences versus already assumed exclusions for perception and making of sense. The virtual classroom is not an exception in this regard.

## **Aesthetics Of The Virtual Classroom: Visual Communication Technology, Participation & Heterochronous Communal Time**

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The importance of classroom design has already been the focus of numerous studies (Ryan 1991; Bowdridge & Blenkinsop 2011). We consider education as one of the primary institutions of socialization for the engagement of subsequent generations in the public sphere. In that regard, the public sphere is not just for political discussions and participation in public affairs. The public sphere is also a social capital generator for practicing various skills and learning. Thereby, the public sphere exists in a codependent cultural and social sphere which is not certainly part of a public life. Thus the “forms and apparitions of public space are produced by our imagination of public space” (Gabrielsson 2012: 30). As the classroom architecture and the organization of the physical space, aka its aesthetic measures, is not-value free, these factors lead to a hierarchy between the teacher and the students, enforcing asymmetrical power relations. Thus the famous circular re-arrangement of the participants in a seminar course was used to remedy the hierarchical structure of the instructor’s leading position on the classroom stage. In the virtual classroom of immediate communication this significance of space shifts to time and visibility as the control of time becomes a disciplinary tool. This new design of classrooms is not neutral as interaction includes participation in the communication, hence, accords with the conventional sense of speech to the action as well as power. Even if it is an online space, active participation means having priority in public visibility. Not yet benefiting from the 3-dimensional virtual space of the prospective social media world of *Metaverse*, several broadly used virtual meeting interface providers such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and alike, the participants are listed on the interface in ranking order according to the range of active engagement such as camera or microphone use. However, taking a higher share in communal visibility does not just constitute the power network in a class setting. Indeed such share is also proportional to the longitude of the visibility, its rhythm, in other words, time governance of the visibility.

The virtual classroom derives its originality from enabling synchronous time conception and immediate visual communication to remedy the space that separates its participants. The communication gap (Peters 1994) between the time of transmission and reception is ideally minimized in a virtual class that allows individualization hence interpersonal interaction. Such virtual interaction enables one “to respond or carry on a two-way affair of talk” (Peters 1994: 125) without stabilizing “the event of speech” (Ricoeur 1981). Thus, the virtual classroom, if live-streamed, is not a record that happens in the past but involves “nowness”. Here, although vision is

mediated, it is conceived to be immediate thanks to the shared time interval that class meeting is assumed to be experienced. Although “nowness” is also connected to the infamous “drama of simultaneity” (Kern 1983 as cited in Menzies 2000: 75), the advantage of presentness for interaction is known to be decreasing such gaps of communication.

In this study, we explore how student participants engage with visual communication affordances for virtual classroom interaction and how they make sense of their preferences and connect them to societal experiences and conditions of sociality. The global experience of virtual classrooms during the pandemic provoked a revival in the interrogation of what signifies “meaningful participation in online and offline environments” (Harker et al. 2022) as well as the question of technology “design for connection in the online classroom to alleviate the sense of isolation and powerlessness” (Webb 2022). By exploring student participation in the Zoom platform of class meetings, we aim to define the parameters of temporal aesthetics that rule the public sphere of synchronous remote education.

## **Methodology**

### **Case Study**

In this study, we are using a case study as our research design. Virtual classrooms constitute a new space for students’ public experiences of learning. In this study, we focus on the effect of societal techno-surveillance and consider the theoretical implications of time and space compression assisted by media technologies. We aim to understand university students’ experiences with online distance education and their visual participation in classes to explore terms of their public interaction. For this purpose, we take Turkish university students as a case. A case study is a method that can include many different data collection techniques, deals with social phenomena in their natural contexts, and aims to examine them in depth by focusing on a single research unit (Blaikie 2011). The case analysis method provides in-depth information on a social phenomenon. Despite the criticism of its being insufficient in generalization, the results that are drawn from the research are handled in detail in its own context and this can provide a thick description of a specific case, and the findings can be adapted to different social contexts in future studies.

We collected empirical data in order to grasp the critical phenomenological conceptualizations of digital communication technologies. By examining the virtual classroom experience, we refine the critical studies of communication technologies while offering a more

## **Aesthetics Of The Virtual Classroom: Visual Communication Technology, Participation & Heterochronous Communal Time**

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empirically observable object of analysis. We analyze how underlying mechanisms of virtual space technology empirically underpin its affordances for agents. The following sections investigate the impact of immediate communication and the virtual public sphere by providing: 1) discourse analysis drawn from student surveys; 2) cross-examination of survey findings with authors of aesthetics with a particular focus on Baudrillard, Foucault, and Virilio.

### **Empirical Data Collection**

We distributed an online questionnaire in order to be able to make a general assessment as well as grasp students' personal opinions. The online survey was answered by 325 university students between January 31 and May 2, 2021, and consists of questions about general demographic information, the experience of students and their attitudes toward online distance education, and the factors affecting the behavior of visual participation in classes. The answers to the close-ended questions present frequencies and percentages to understand the overall picture, while the core of the data comes from the answers to the open-ended questions.

The questionnaire included open-ended questions where students could elaborate on their answers and explain their personal experiences and opinions in depth. We conducted discourse analysis on the open-ended sections of the survey to see the prevalent discourses that students use in interpreting their experiences. The critical discourse analysis method is based on analyzing the discourses that are the way of defining and disseminating beliefs and behaviors (Van Dijk 1996, 2003). Discourse allows us to examine how knowledge is produced and to make sense of social actions while helping us understand how individuals see the world through their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and mental structures (Spencer et al. 2003; Fairclough 2003). In this respect, the university students' common utterances and ways of conceptualizing online education will give us a guideline of how they perceive the social world.

The sample was composed of a broad group of students attending different universities. In order to generate a more diverse sample, we asked for the support of colleagues from different universities and faculties. 14% of the respondents are studying at a state university and 80% at a foundation university (private enterprises where students have to pay fees). Since 96% of the students who answered the questions are undergraduate students, the vast majority (87%) are between the ages of 18-23. 72% of the sample defined themselves as female, 26% as male, 1% as

other, and 1% stated that they did not want to answer this question. The majors of the participants are social sciences (44%), economics and administrative sciences (30%), and medicine and health sciences (10%).

### **Online Remote Education and Visual (Non) Participation**

The findings indicate that students are generally satisfied with online distance education that allows them to follow the lectures in their own time and place while they are following the precautions led by the pandemic outbreak. The majority of the participants are either satisfied or neutral about their experience. However, as we look more closely at the answers of open-ended questions, there is a concern about the inadequacy of online distance education, arguing that digitally-mediated education does not replace the ‘real’ aspects of classroom experience. Their satisfaction stems from the instructors’ effort and the fact that online distance education is the only available option to carry on during a global pandemic.

320 of the participants rated their experience of online education; 18.44% were very pleased, 22.81% were somewhat pleased, 26.25% were neither pleased nor displeased, 19.06% were somewhat displeased and 13.44% were very displeased (Akdemir & Arda 2022). The participants with negative views argue that online education can never be the same as face-to-face education in terms of quality and creating a sense of classroom. The students acknowledge the efforts of their institutions and their professors to continue with education despite the pandemic; nevertheless, they express that they prefer face-to-face education. They also mention technical problems and slow Internet connections as factors that disrupt the quality and natural flow of communication and make it difficult to concentrate on the lectures.

A further challenge to the students’ overall evaluation of online distance education pertains to their mental well-being. Depression and lack of sociality are the biggest challenges they reported. It has been mentioned 13 times in their answers to the open-ended questions that remote education is inefficient. These participants argue that genuine communication is deficient. Some students have also mentioned difficulty concentrating on online lectures, and 4 participants mentioned experiencing mental problems such as depression<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> We cannot claim there is a direct relationship between distance online learning and mental problems. Several factors such as the pandemic in general, curfews in Turkey for people under 20 years of age and the

## **Aesthetics Of The Virtual Classroom: Visual Communication Technology, Participation & Heterochronous Communal Time**

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The shortcomings of online learning seem to be compensated by the comfort of learning from home. Twenty-three participants claimed to have a positive, even better, learning environment during the distance online education period compared to the previous face-to-face education. Some of these participants are either graduate students or majoring in social sciences, and they argue that physical space does not matter in their areas of study. They reported feeling more relaxed at home and being able to participate in the lectures with more ease. The online system also helps shy students who state that they can participate and ask questions with the microphone and not feel any peer pressure that exists in face-to-face communication.

The majority of the participants indicate that they feel more comfortable participating in the lectures with their cameras off. Only 16% report participating with both camera and microphone, 7% with the camera on and microphone off, 40% with both camera and microphone off, and 37% with the camera off and microphone on. From the open-ended questions, it can be seen that students prefer communicating by writing in the chat box rather than speaking to a microphone.

In addition to their reluctance in visual and audio participation, the students also fail to acknowledge their own contribution to the classroom discussions. Of the 318 participants who answered the above question, the majority had either negative or neutral attitudes. The most frequent answer is 'it does not matter' (34%), which shows that the students do not regard interactivity as a vital component of the quality of education. Participants explain the reasons for their opinions in the open-ended question that follows. They express that their visual participation with their cameras has no contribution to the quality of the classes, and it may even be a distraction because of excessive mobility on the screen. Along with a reluctance for visual participation, the students also display a genuine belief in the needlessness of their visual participation.

Despite their reluctance to visual participation, research participants express their sympathy for the teachers' need to see their students in order to have a real classroom-like experience, feel motivated, and assess if the students are following the lectures. Thirty participants said that visual participation of the students motivates the teacher and makes them feel like they are speaking to actual people rather than to an empty screen. However, other possible constructive effects of visual

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disappointment with not having a 'real' university experience also contribute to the hardship that students experienced in this time period.

participation have largely been overlooked. Only seven participants argued that visual participation could enhance the classroom experience not only for the teachers but also for the students. The majority of the participants express that since online distance education cannot replace genuine face-to-face education, their visual participation in the classes is pointless.

Such a discourse of needlessness of student input can be traced back to the way sociality is constructed in the classic face-to-face educational communication design, whereby the teacher is placed at the center and lectures for a group of students. The same expectation of teacher-led communication obstructs the affordances of virtual classrooms, where student participation could potentially have been facilitated. Instead, students conceptualize their refusal to turn on their cameras as a form of ‘comfort’ of not being seen in opposition to surveillance that is inherent in the classic design of several institutions (Foucault 1995).

In addition to the argument of distraction due to excessive mobility on screen, the research participants have concerns about their own appearance and their physical environment. As mediated teaching allowed by communication technologies provides a ground for the surveillance of individuals, the students hesitate to share images of themselves and their surroundings on an online platform. It has been repeatedly mentioned that some students do not wish to turn on their cameras because they may not be comfortable appearing on camera in their casual clothing or because of family members or flatmates who do not give them enough space during the lectures.

We have also added an open-ended question for those students who never turn on their cameras in order to understand their motivations. The answers are listed below:

**Table 1.** Why do you never turn your camera on during lectures? (for those who chose the option ‘I never turn on my camera’ option in the previous question)

	Frequency
I want to feel comfortable	7
Teachers do not request it	5
Technical reasons	3
I do not want to/I find it unnecessary	4
The discomfort of being watched and recorded	3

## Aesthetics Of The Virtual Classroom: Visual Communication Technology, Participation & Heterochronous Communal Time

Other	6
TOTAL	28

The above answers reveal that students do not feel an immediate requirement to turn their cameras on and they express being more comfortable without visual participation. A similar emphasis on the notion of comfort is also visible when expressing opinions on other students who do not turn on their cameras in lectures.

**Table 2.** How do the participants regard other students who do not turn their cameras on? (The participants could pick more than one answer)

	Percentage	Frequency
They do not care about the course	4.24%	25
They want to be relaxed during the lectures	31.02%	183
They comply with others who do not turn on their cameras	15.08%	89
Their physical surrounding is not suitable	32.37%	191
They do not follow the lecture	14.92%	88
Other	2.37%	14

The research participants argue that students' interest in the course or their academic performance cannot be measured with their visual participation in the online classes. They do not view visual participation as an indicator of how much a student cares or works for a course. They mostly explain the lack of visual participation with the notion of comfort; being at home in their casual clothing, and multi-tasking (such as eating and drinking something while listening to the lecture). The leading explanations for not turning on the cameras are the lack of a convenient physical environment (32%) and wanting to be comfortable during the lectures (31%). Only 15% of the participants expressed that the students who refuse to turn on their cameras are not following the lecture.

### **Lack of Shared Time Conception**

Live-streamed virtual education aims to provide interactive communication rather than the passive spectacle of mass communication thanks to synchronous temporality. However, as Papacharissi

(2002) asserted, connectivity does not guarantee a more representative or egalitarian public sphere. Although anonymity and the absence of face-to-face interaction can surpass boundaries of social identities and thereby allow easy expression of opinions online, it does not assess the impact and social value of discourse articulation due to the limited role of the public in a political system (Papacharissi 2002). The majority of participants perceive online distance education as a form of mass communication in which the teacher sends a message, and the students are simply receivers who can control the time and means of ‘receiving’ this message. They can watch the lecture videos in their own time as classes are recorded, contributing to this ‘mass media’ perception of online education. One participant explains this situation:

“In face-to-face education in a classroom of 40 students, there is one 40 in front of the teacher, but in online education, the teacher faces 40 times one. As someone who normally cannot focus on the lectures, you can be camouflaged in the crowd (in face-to-face lectures) while you play with your phone but when you turn your webcam on, this is not the case”.

The above quotation reveals students’ view on online education's limited sociality and community-building possibilities. When the teacher is facing a one-40 (one group of 40 students) this is a community; however, when the teacher is facing 40-ones (40 students), this is a collection of separate individuals. In the individualistic nature of online education, the students regard themselves as mere recipients of the teacher’s content and not having a role in the making of this content. The survey shows that the instructor is considered to be in charge and to exert control by leading the class meeting. In the teaching platforms mentioned in this study, the presenter rights are given only to the instructor, and the instructor may only temporarily give such rights to students, for instance, during presentations, while at all other times, the instructor holds the right to manage the online classroom.

Indeed, the virtual classroom’s disrupted interaction is also connected to the conception of ever-present surveillance. Foucault’s (1995) discussion of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon suggests that the architectural layout enables surreptitious surveillance performed by guards and prisoners. The physical classroom space design prioritizes the teacher’s platform to see all of the classroom and the students. Power in face-to-face education seemed to ally with the teacher’s status while students were being educated. As such, “anyone subjected to the panopticon’s field of visibility or its gaze learns to regulate their own behavior” (White 1999: 501). In our study of distance online education, the student participants can see their instructor, but the instructor does not see the class audience unless participants voluntarily use their cameras. This causes a great deal of tension and

## **Aesthetics Of The Virtual Classroom: Visual Communication Technology, Participation & Heterochronous Communal Time**

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reverses the traditional relations of surveillance that used to give more power of the gaze to the instructor. Online education platforms also provide surveillance technologies to monitor students' behavior and track their performance and involvement in online and offline class activities. However, due to the fluidity of power in relation to surveillance, the students also have the agency to perform resistance towards these novel forms of surveillance (Dawson, Burnett & McArdle 2005).

The possibilities of communication and interaction that are enabled in online distance education are not utilized fully when students resist visual participation or when only a few students participate visually and interact with the instructor and the other students. We can interpret such expressions as students' desire to remain anonymous rather than public visibility of the self or self-promotion in the virtual classroom. Such conduct is especially the opposite of the "nowness" of exhibitionism and voyeurism drive that new generations practice in social media. Hence, anonymity also cancels out the exchange of instant communal experience and provokes fragmentation and heterochrony in communication.

According to this schema, participants in virtual classrooms do not possess a perception of shared time. Instead, they own a heterochronous experience of time for class meetings that constitute their public space of the university. Because of this, remote education has become mass communication rather than a simulation of face-to-face communication. Temporal aesthetics of virtual classrooms generate multi-layered time perception for digital interaction. Such conception does not involve a sense of classroom while communication gaps become much more complicated. Hence, the immediateness of communication leads to isolation in the digitally enabled public sphere.

Critical scholars studied the hierarchical structure of education and its ideological role in class reproduction (Bourdieu 1973 [2018]). For Rancière (1991), education makes the distribution of the social makeup groups visible to maintain consensus. However, the camera used in virtual classes does not constitute a new habit for socialization due to a lack of a communal system of exchange. Thus, the symbolic is enabled by the reciprocal space of a speech and a response. Baudrillard (2008) informed that the media's very essence could be "non-communication" because media operations mean the abolition of exchange that proceeds the symbolic base of human

relationships. Merrin (1999) connected Baudrillard's mistrust of media to his Durkheimian tradition, also followed by Marcel Mauss' analysis of the gift system. Gift-giving brings communication and confrontation while reinforcing the prestige of the giver and challenging the other for the return of the gift (Merrin 1999: 123). Thus, the gift is a medium of relation and distance. Communication derives from such kinds of relation asymmetries and exchange enabled by distance among the participants. Yet, the virtual classroom is immediate, deprived of relation and distance.

Distance, in that sense, is a generator of dialectics between the imaginary and the real in Baudrillard's (1993: 69) conceptualization of the screen and its obscenity. The screen's hyperreal is immediate, deprived of distance in space and time. This epistemological dichotomy (Jin, 2008) between the represented and representation follows that distance inherent in the image provokes the necessary alienation from reality only to connect through human sense-making capacities of the aesthetic. Baudrillard (1993) asserts that television lacks granting the representability of the image. The screen does not refer to the real. Thus the dialectics between the imaginary and the real dissolve in the hyperreal that the screen engenders (Baudrillard 1993; Jin 2008). Lack of distance in this immediateness collapses the critical potentiality of the agent. In that regard, dialectical drives of the social that provokes alienation do not affect the viewer of the screen. Thus, the immediateness is obscene, and thereby, it does not construct a relationality for communication and confrontation. In Baudrillard's perspective, the dynamics of the social have probably broken again when the real frozen in the empty black screen left behind from the Zoom virtual conferences appears: "as a large useless body as soon as the behavior is crystallized on certain screens and operational terminals" (Baudrillard 1983).

The requirement of distance for the social exchange inserted here by Baudrillard in the *Ecstasy of Communication* (1983) also follows antagonisms of subject/object and public/private to be still meaningful for reflecting on the social. Baudrillard argued on the subject matter of TV spectatorship that "each person sees himself at the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect and remote sovereignty, at an infinite distance from the universe of origin" (1983: 128). In fact, the high-speed media technologies of contemporary communication produced a better example of what Baudrillard once described for TV screening. Zoom meeting participant retains "the exact position of an astronaut in his capsule in a state of weightlessness". In that sense, the dissolution of private and public split in today's digital communication networks perfected the

## **Aesthetics Of The Virtual Classroom: Visual Communication Technology, Participation & Heterochronous Communal Time**

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obscurity of screen visibility. Obscurity does not offer a spectacle but transparency and immediate visibility: “Not a public scene or true public space but gigantic spaces of circulation, ventilation and ephemeral connections” (Baudrillard 1983: 130).

It is also possible to see the temporal implications of public/private distinction in the definition of private time as a non-spatial territory of the self and as one’s right to inaccessibility (Zerubavel 1979). In our rigidly scheduled modern lives, the class time that is traditionally dedicated to public accessibility of the self is now in a private space, complicating the categories of public and private.

Indeed, the absolute proximity that a virtual classroom enables through immediacy does not create intimacy. Students frequently mention the importance of comfort for them. The comfort of nonvisual participation is juxtaposed with anonymity, and non-participation, which permits avoiding the stress of being watched and recorded, as the tools that allow self-monitoring in online classes make self-forgetting and immersion impossible and objectify the self (Aagaard 2022). One participant answered the question of why they never turn their camera with the following words:

“To be able to move more freely and sit freely. Sometimes when my webcam is on, I have a desire to watch myself”.

The discomfort of being watched and recorded combines with the existing problem of lack of focus, so students usually multi-task (do other things such as playing video games or texting their friends as they listen to the lecture), and their minds wander off. One participant answered the question about their feelings about (not) turning on their cameras during the lectures:

“Because it is very comfortable and there is almost zero chance that we can be surveilled. I play games and stuff while I’m in class”.

Another student argues that the online classroom is not ‘real’ anyway, so their actions do not matter:

“Because the environment we are in is not a classroom, the teaching staff, the students, and the materials used remain only as a virtual reality. We experience an immense lack of focus because of this”.

There is a great dilemma at this point: on the one hand, the students miss the sociality of face-to-face communication, do not consider distance online education as a ‘real’ public gathering,

and are dissatisfied. On the other hand, they resist visual participation and disregard their potential role in the making of public spaces for remote education.

Social media platforms are regarded as spaces for the online branding of the self (Marwick 2012). Selfie-posting behaviors are the perfect example of people's daily online self-presentation in society hence part of socially constructed identity formation. In fact, users of the social media ecosystem experience daily basis lateral, mutual, or participatory surveillance (Albrechtlund 2008; Boyd and Ellison 2007; Wescott and Owen 2013). Marwick states that online surveillance differentiates from the traditional top-down form of panoptic surveillance due to its decentralized structure. One of the essential features of online surveillance is reciprocity which Marwick (2012) defines as “positive and empowering” (Wescott and Owen 2013: 213) when both users send and receive information (Marwick 2012: 382-384). The contemporary social media sphere is known to be crowded with digital personal creative texts of visual, narrative, or audio content that expose personal lives (Munar 2010). The impossibility of distinguishing the private and public spheres has been tied up with the exchange of media culture of entertainment and lifestyle with social, economic, and political aspects (Radosinska and Visnovsky 2016).

Scholars indicated that the effect of social influence on digital citizenship may vary between types of social media scenarios and participants (Xu et al. 2019: 747). Nevertheless, beyond the lack of socialization for the youth, the temporal aesthetics of the virtual classroom omit the pathos of distance and cancel out the social. We argue that the students have a “distorted” idea of ‘public’ and “private” due to the blurring of public/private division and time/space compression. Therefore they do not see themselves as fit to be actors in creating such public spaces themselves. Although virtual communities have already evolved the private sphere into the social hemisphere of the public, such self-branding as a means of expression does not motivate students in visual communication and participation in virtual classrooms.

### **The Speed of Mediation**

The virtual image of education is more credible than the fact of education at a time when values, abilities, and the immediate urge for a global chain of supply-demand do not wait for long to settle know-how. Der Derian (1999) argued that Virilio (1989; 1994; 1995) extended Foucault's panopticon model to media dominance of human relationships, where control of pace replaced

## **Aesthetics Of The Virtual Classroom: Visual Communication Technology, Participation & Heterochronous Communal Time**

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control of space. This tyranny of speed has also consequences in mediated education that translate into favoring multitasking, anonymity, and non-participation.

The time afforded for education does not correspond to the immediateness of contemporary society. From the start, both occupational training and academic education follow the line of modern temporality, which is based on progress because the underlying archaic rationale of formal education predicates that a pupil's future resides in the present time of the professional. Once, Jacques Rancière (1991) proposed that the emancipatory mission of education translates equality as an indefinite process of progress. The student hopes to catch up with the master and learn everything needed for a distinguished profession (Ranciere 1991: 127). The graduation ideally once promised the actualization of knowledge transmission and perfection.

The availability of a high volume of information, the possibility of reaching multiple spaces in every direction, and the prevalence of iTime (Hand 2016) with a focus on the “nowness” dominate the subject's regulation of everyday's participation in public life. In addition, today's students who work part-time during their education face many distractions. Although the research participants did not mention paid work, we know from personal communication that there are working students who find it hard to prioritize their education. The blurry boundaries between the public and private spheres and the increasing workload during online education (since many exams had to be replaced by assignments) challenge the students further:

“Due to the increasing assignment load, I could not attend almost any lectures after the midterm because I had to do my assignments even during the lecture times. In addition to this ineffective time, due to studying and attending lectures in my room all the time, I think that the concept of private space has entirely lost its meaning. And this was a challenge mentally”.

The neoliberal discourses of ‘flexibility of learning time’ and of ‘independent learner’, which became prevalent with online higher education systems, has affected our perception of time. In the virtual classroom systems that our research participants use, they can both follow the coursework in synchronous time but they also have an option of watching the lecture recordings any time they wish. The shift from communal clock-time towards heterochronous time has rendered class and gender-specific nature of time use, as it overlooked social actors' differing commitments and ignored unpaid work (such as domestic labor which is a highly gendered

phenomenon) (Bunn et. al. 2019). Assuming that everyone can equally access and enjoy the benefits of virtual education is problematic since heterochronous time is not shared in the same manner as structured time.

Furthermore, as a consequence of Zoom fatigue, caused by awkward turn-taking, inhibited spontaneity, limited mobility, lack of eye contact, and increased self-awareness (Aagaard 2022), the students are left with neither the energy nor the willingness to reclaim the university culture and create a sense of public. The pressing regulation of speed in everyday media use conditions a “concomitant decrease in human response time (Der Derian 1990: 306)” that does not accommodate the old ideal of interactive communication.

Needless to say, education had already lost connection with the human perception endangered by ubiquitous media. As such, the once-progressive education loses out to the “inertial mobility of real-time telepresence” (Der Derian 1999). Ubiquitous media increased the ‘multitasking’ capacity of the people who attend to their small screens while moving, being watched, checked out, and recorded by CCTV cameras (Featherstone 2009). Multitasking has become the norm rather than the exception in contemporary individuals’ lives. While these new forms and vehicles of media can be beneficial for self-directed learning, the distraction they cause and overconfidence in multitasking abilities hide the fact that students’ increased use of mobile phones reduces their academic performance (Dontre 2021). The intensive use of social media challenges not only public and private, day and night, work and leisure, space and time, but also provokes an “instantaneous time” (Urry 2012) that encourages “fragmented everydayness” (Hand 2016). Thus, the student does not have a chance but needs to possess a stereoscopic vision (Virilio 1994) to maintain many worlds and tasks altogether.

Indeed, the virtual classroom experience illustrates “the contemporary culture’s ‘speeding up’ of the visual experience” (Bartram 2004). The disappearance of the physical classroom during the pandemic conditions perfectly accommodated the requirements of the culture in hyper-technological capitalism when there is no possibility of bodily movement and when technology creates instantaneous realities beyond both the human field of vision. As such, Baudrillard (2005) exclaimed, “the hyperreal resolves the real and imaginary into a unilateral form” and does not demand human exchange, value, and equivalence but the capability of regulating everything now in an instant.

## **Aesthetics Of The Virtual Classroom: Visual Communication Technology, Participation & Heterochronous Communal Time**

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Though it is still a critical phase in the lifespan of young adults, the meaning of university is changing rapidly. Now that we have returned worldwide to physical buildings of education in the post-pandemic time, we represent the virtual in the real setting because aesthetics of virtuality construct our imagination of the social. Thus the research findings' contribution to academia is twofold: understanding a new phenomenon through the lens of well-established theories of visual communication and surveillance, and raising awareness to integrate virtual education to university culture as a public space. Although we have left the Pandemic behind, online education is becoming prevalent either as the primary method of instruction or being integrated into face-to-face education through hybrid programs. So we need to grasp this shift in our students' imagination of the social and grasp this novel experience through their point of view. By presenting first-hand data this study aims to fill this gap. Moreover, it helps to identify the shortcomings of the system, and the research findings will hopefully entice the public to reflect on the possible solutions to make virtual education more effective in the academic sense and also push the limits of recreating universities as public spheres with a strong sense of community with the help of these novel digital tools.

While this study has a limited sample and scope, it aims to illuminate the patterns of this shift that is taking place. The students' experiences of online education and communication might vary as a result of their majors (theory-based vs. application-based areas) or geographical location, so future research should take such factors into account. Future studies that are based on different social contexts would reveal a much fuller outlook so that all parties involved can better understand and work to improve the needs of higher education and facilitate discussions on how to defend our public spaces, means of social solidarity, and community-making capabilities.

### **A Virtual Requiem for Education?**

The virtual classroom has altered the aesthetics of education, aka the sense of space, time, and the body. The disappearance of both space and time intervals between the participants in the classroom's public sphere constitutes the immediacy of communication in virtuality. Such change in the media technologies of communication has updated power networks engendered in the institutional apparatus. Driving on our theoretical analysis of the empirical study on virtual classrooms in Turkey, we argue that we should not only deconstruct the power of simulation, surveillance, and speed but also critically investigate the prevalence of once-in-a-lifetime strategies

for resistance, such as counter-surveillance and anonymity. Thus, the counter-surveillance exercised by students via anonymity does not bear witness to collaborative action but an isolated position for achieving a *total vision* (Virilio 2005) as part of the immediacy and multi-tasking urge of speed society and heterochrony. Education, the mighty old institution of primary socialization and social reproduction, which used to be available for criticism and deconstruction based on dialectical thinking, is no longer part of the *drama of alienation* (Baudrillard 1983 [2002]) but obscene communication. The public appearance that supposedly enables self-expression, confrontation, and communication seemed to be missed out even as an idea in the case of virtual classrooms, especially now that online education has become a quick fix in cases of emergency in Turkey. Surely, the sample of this study is limited to the virtual classroom experience of Turkish youth. Nevertheless, it is crucial to question how the university can be incorporated into the new modes of temporality in higher education to build a sense of community, space for discussion, and expression of dissent. Education has indeed changed due to the endless sight and overexposure enabled by high-speed media technologies. Still, the social needs to be defended.

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## Aesthetics Of The Virtual Classroom: Visual Communication Technology, Participation & Heterochronous Communal Time

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## Aesthetics Of The Virtual Classroom: Visual Communication Technology, Participation & Heterochronous Communal Time

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