

WORLD AT YOUR PHONE: HOW “SNAPPERS” EMBODY THE DIGITAL WORLD

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This article is inspired by the framework of “existential media” (Lagerkvist 2016) and addresses the volume’s theme by taking issue with mainstream as well as phenomenologically (e.g. Dreyfus 2009) and psychologically (e.g. Turkle 2015) based claims about existential loss in ‘digital living’. On the basis of an analysis of the creation of a hyperembodied effect (Hougaard, Steen & Turner forthcoming) in a Snapchat selfie it is suggested that users of visual digital communication devices may achieve a hybrid embodied grip (Merleau-Ponty 1962) on mediated social encounters. Thereby the users moor and enrich mediated interpersonal communication and create the possibility of intimacy and “existential security” (Lagerkvist 2016) in digital living. The analysis draws upon a collection of sources, including phenomenologically inspired theory (Gallagher 2008), psychology (Tomasello 1999) and neuroscientific theory of aesthetics (Ramachandran & Hirstein 1999), in showing how intimate digital mediation and hyperembodiment is achieved in a gestalt where sender and receiver gear into each other and a shared medium in, with and through the affordances of their digital communicative technology.

1. Introduction:

An existentially inspired account of hyperembodiment in snaps

The phrase ‘world at your feet’ seems almost to demand an existentialist interpretation. In this article, the ‘figure’ of the world at your feet inspire a discussion and analysis of how interpersonal ‘foothold’ may be lost and regained in new ways in contemporary digital living. The dynamics of ‘loss and gain’ seems pertinent to most technological development

and has indeed been an eternal debate frame in connection with the constantly developing media ecology we have lived in for millennia.¹ These days there is a predominantly negative focus across a number of research disciplines on how we lose fundamental aspects of human life with digital connectedness. However, through a combined existentialist and phenomenological approach, this article offers an account of how use of the message application Snapchat may represent a new kind of (re)gain for interpersonal intimacy.

1.1 A combined existentialist and phenomenological perspective

The media-philosophical discussion behind the approach presented in this article goes as follows. The world directly at our feet is the world we really have. Hence the world we can achieve a full experience and sense of and which we can fully be experts or masters of (e.g. Dreyfus 2009) is our embodied, physical, social and cultural environment. But a soma-centric existence does not guarantee eternal bliss and harmony. Our being-in-the-world, however somatically embedded, remains one we are “thrown” into (Heidegger 1962). As reflective beings, we always already find ourselves in our existence somewhere, under certain conditions and in a certain mood. We are always caught up in everyday life, and it is our lifelong project to take hold of our existence by understanding and projecting possibilities for our being. Our modern digital ecology with its particular promises, challenges and realizations of being-in-the-world and grasping the world does, however, seem to intensify fundamental predicaments of existence. According to Dreyfus (2009), virtual, disembodied life (as afforded by robotics and the internet with its digital imitations of embodied social life) is a life which falls short on a number of existential parameters, including a poor sense of reality, low levels of trust, a lack of risk and vulnerability, leading to a poor sense and mastery of the tasks and challenges that real life offers, impoverished social perception, and generally problems with achieving a ‘grip’ (see section

2.3) on the daily activities at hand and proper interpersonal relationships. Dreyfus' dystopic existentialist analysis of digital life is echoed in much contemporary research in other fields. The most famous of critics of digital connectedness is probably Sherry Turkle whose most recent book, *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015), has contributed radical dystopian statements that are already classic in both academia and public debate:

This new mediated life has gotten us into trouble. Face-to-face conversation is the most human - and humanizing - thing we do. But these days we find ways around conversation. We hide from each other even as we're constantly connected to each other. For on our screens, we are tempted to present ourselves as we would like to be. Of course, performance is part of any meeting, anywhere, but online and at our leisure, it is easy to compose, edit, and improvise as we revise. (Turkle 2015: 3)

For Dreyfus, the problem with digital media is of a fundamental perceptual kind. No matter how hard we try, we cannot grasp the world in a fully human way through digital media, because our bodies are left behind. For Turkle, the problem concerns existential inauthenticity. Digital dwellers choose to be ungraspable, she asserts.

By contrast, Lagerkvist (2016), pushing media philosophy forward, refrains from taking sides. Seeing digital media as “existential media”, she insists on an approach which departs from the “habitual either/or-logic of human agency versus technological destining. Beyond conceiving of the Internet as either liberatory or controlling, deeply meaningful or trivial, it may be conceived as an existential and ambivalent terrain” (Lagerkvist 2016: 103). “Digital thrownness” is thus simply proposed as a special case of Heidegger’s existential thrownness which, she writes, “implies being faced with a world where we are precariously situated in a particular place at a particular historical moment, and among a particular crowd with the inescapable task of tackling our world around us and to make it meaningful” (Lagerkvist 2016: 97). Hence for Lagerkvist,

as opposed to Dreyfus (and perhaps Turkle), the digital world is indeed a world of real hardship, struggle, vulnerability and risk. It is thus also a world of potential for being, and where “existential security” (ibid: 98; see also below) can be achieved. With Lagerkvist, one could even extend Scannell’s (2014) Heideggerian analyses of television and go as far as to suggest that digital media (like Scannell’s existential television) can be tools that are ready-to-hand-tools, which may disclose the world to us and “reconcile us to our worldly selves” (Scannell 2014: 86). Or, still with Lagerkvist (but not necessarily optimistically), one could summarise the works of Peters (2015), of media ecologists such as McLuhan (1964) and cognitive scientists such as Clark (2003) and argue that for better or worse, technicity is an eternal existential condition and that we are even “natural-born cyborgs” (Clark 2003). The upshot and programmatic point of departure is that digital media simply constitute the human technicity of the day, not some darker historical exception. Therefore, a more value-neutral or balanced approach, which assumes that all ages have their existential issues but also their existential potential, seems more to the point.

The present article aims at bringing balance to the focus on loss by focusing on existential gain. Inspired by the framework of existential media analysis (Lagerkvist 2016) and taking primarily Dreyfus’ (2009) critique of digital media as its point of departure, this contribution proposes the following: With particular digital media, in this case the instant image message application Snapchat, “existens” - as Lagerkvist (2016:100) calls the human user that pursue existential security in digital media - may project an embodied hybrid-grip onto activities of digital connectivity, which while missing essential aspects and the familiarity and ‘security’ of physical intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty 1962), still may establish an interpersonal mooring, which even goes beyond the intensity, closeness, and thrill of physical intercorporeality. Hougaard et al. (forthcoming) refers to such media effects as “hyperembodiment”. In the following, this kind of “hyperexperiential”² effect is exemplified

in a selfie ‘snap’ (Snapchat message) which will serve as vehicle for a discussion of existential loss and gain in digital togetherness. Criticism by Dreyfus (2009) which stems from the disembodied nature of digital connection has been selected as representative of one set of “existentialist”³ phenomenological concerns with digital media; it forms a basis for a description of the possible existential role of snaps. It will be shown how selfie snaps can be seen as an exister’s response, not only to her digital existential predicament and space of possibility but as a way of realizing possibilities of being together generally. We begin with an elaboration of the issues at hand.

2. *The issues at hand: the exister, existential security, and maximum grip*

It is important to notice that this is not a philosophical paper, despite its title and the heavy philosophical referencing in the introduction. It is a paper that applies philosophy, and its goal is to elaborate our understanding of media and their effects by looking at them through philosophical optics. Hence, we have already introduced concepts which for the philosopher may open volumes of (possible and hopefully not too confusing) associations and understandings, but which may at best create a variety of more abstract and intuitive understandings in the general, academic reader. Moreover, as always, applying concepts never escapes the perils of decontextualization. So here is hoping the following will lead us on the way to an enriched understanding of the possible effects of ‘snapping’.

2.1 The exister

Our concern is with the digital “exister’s” existential possibilities as an inescapably embedded existence in a digital world; thus, we follow the general program laid out by Lagerkvist (2016). The “exister” is an existentialist notion which clearly is reminiscent of Heidegger’s “Dasein” (1962) and which Lagerkvist takes from the work of Karl Jaspers. In a

discussion of Karl Jaspers’ philosophy, Verbeek writes:

The human possibility of ‘existing as oneself’ becomes clearest, according to Jaspers, in situations that impose upon a person the realization that only he or she can give form to his or her own life. Jaspers calls these situations ‘boundary situations,’ such as experience of guilt, suffering, and mortality. Such experiences make clear in forceful and unavoidable ways that human beings are what one might call ‘existers’, individuals thrown back on themselves. Nobody can feel guilt or suffer for me; nobody can die for me. This ‘self’ of the ‘exister’ is the self that existential philosophy is concerned with, not the self in the sense of an autonomous subject that can realize itself at will in absolute freedom.

(2005: 33-34)

The quotation mentions but a few of the concerns that the exister is thrown in. Yet the exister, as understood here, is a mortal, feeling, longing, sensing, meaning-making, “struggling, suffering, and relational human being” (Lagerkvist 2016: 101) who through her conscious embodied being “navigate[s] and craft[s] the world into which she is thrown” (ibid) and “moves through the existential terrains of connectivity using tools of existence” (ibid). In the current context, the exister depicts herself in selfies for, and to be with, others and/or she embraces selfies by others as a means of navigating her thrownness in a world where the issue of being with, feeling and sensing others is a daily concern.

2.2 Existential security

Finding herself thrown, the digital exister is (as any exister) on a quest for existential security (Lagerkvist 2016: 102). Quite contrary to the implications of Dreyfus’ (2009) analysis, the digital world of today seems to introduce a whole new landscape of risk, vulnerability and uncertainty – it is indeed existential terrain. To mention but a few aspects the digital exister finds herself facing: the risks involved in digital self-presentation

and a digital activity which is subject to unpredictable scales and standards of judgement by an unpredictable scale and intensity of audiences; the vulnerability of hackable or (involuntarily) shareable personal or private data and the potentially infinite reach and possibility of reproduction of partial traces of digital appearance and behavior; and the uncertain status of personal relationships, ‘truth’, ‘fact’, intention and authority in media that may create endless viewpoints, always change the conditions of communication, and constantly develop new methods of deceit and manipulation. Central to an existential approach is thus, according to Lagerkvist (2016: 102), the question of “how or if – living with uncertainty – we may secure any sense of cohesion, meaning, direction, purpose, ethics, grounding, continuity, and community, that is, existential security in the digital age.” However, an important point that is not mentioned (explicitly) by Lagerkvist (2016) (who names only more ‘traditional’ existential issues), but which Dreyfus (2009) describes thoroughly is that no measure of bad intent or other immediate, noticeable existential drama is required for there to be a constant, fundamental challenge of coping with the digital world. In Dreyfus’ Merleau-Ponty-based critique of digital media, the fundamental challenge to be faced is disembodiment and consequently, the failure of achieving an ‘optimal’, basic, interactional and perceptual ‘grip’ (see section 2.3) on the world and others through the media. This, then, relates to another aspect of the quest for existential security which Lagerkvist (2016: 102) does stress, namely that “existential security is not only an individual quest, but also often a matter of seeking meaning communally.” No matter how individual existence and thrownness may be in their existential description, existence is always already coexistence with others. In the case of selfie snaps, we will see how existing together and for each other is at the very heart of the accomplishment of a hyperembodied grip on the other: The exister is alone in her thrownness, but one of the conditions of being thrown is to be thrown with others; the hyperembodiment analysis (see section 3) shows how others are both the goal and means of hyperembodiment in snaps.

2.3 Maximum grip and the loss of it

According to Merleau-Ponty, the culturally embedded physical body with its innate structures and general skills is our

general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 146)

As Dreyfus (1996) points out, Merleau-Ponty uses “habit” as synonymous with “skill”, so when he refers to skill acquisition he speaks of “the acquisition of a habit”. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, the ability to perceive is like an already acquired bodily skill. Characteristic of this “habit” of perception whereby the body obtains for itself a meaningful world is its permanent motivation to always have a ‘maximum grip’ on its situation. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself: at a shorter or greater distance, we have merely a perception blurred through excess or deficiency. We therefore tend towards the maximum of visibility, and seek a better focus as with a microscope. (1962: 302)

Thus, being in the world and having a world under any trivial, everyday circumstances means being absorbed by an innate motivation to cope ‘skillfully’ in a constant flow of activities that respond to the body’s sense of the situation. A central aspect of that perceptual ‘quest’ is that when the situation deviates from an optimal body-environment relationship,

the body acts to relieve the ‘tension’ of the situation and achieve some sensed requirement of equilibrium (Dreyfus 1997).

Of course, though the example given by Merleau-Ponty in the quote above concerns vision, the notion of a maximum grip is a general notion pertaining to perception where through a constant adjustment process the body gears optimally into the world. All ‘skillful’ everyday action is thus governed by this motivation to acquire a maximum grip.

Nonetheless, according to Dreyfus the motivation of optimal grasping will always be left frustrated when attempted through digital media (or at least the digital media that were available prior to 2009). For example, as Dreyfus (2009: 63-68) points out in a case analysis, the medical student cannot acquire sufficient skill through telepresence at a situation where a doctor/mentor examines a patient. The student will not get the practice of approaching, as a complete, sensing body, the full, real situation that embodied presence encounters. Hence, he cannot use his body as a controlling ‘I can’. He will not learn to respond to the overall situation by zooming in on significant detail. He is deprived of “bodily involvement in a risky real environment where he has to interpret the scene himself and learn from his mistakes” (Dreyfus 2009: 64). We may thus argue that the precariousness of the exister’s digital thrownness includes his very fundamental possibilities for entering a process of grasping the world, or even for beginning to tackle a considerable portion of further, ‘higher-level’/‘proper’ existential issues. This predicament includes the exister’s possibilities for gearing into and getting a grip on social encounters and closeness to and togetherness with others.

If we cannot achieve an optimal grip on situations through digital media, it is evident from an existentialist phenomenological perspective that we cannot achieve an optimal grip on beings with others either, and togetherness is compromised. This follows from the premise that we are in the world and have a world as conscious, embodied wholes where ‘mind’ is body and body is ‘mind’. We do not and cannot access each other through some channel beyond or behind the body. We are

not communicating and connecting minds or psyches; we connect as perceiving bodies that directly perceive each other (Gallagher 2008) as minded, sensing, feeling, intending beings. We are to use Merleau-Ponty’s jargon, “intercorporeal” (1962). It follows from the inter-bodied perceptual basis of ‘having each other’ that intersubjectivity in such real, embodied situations is inter-embodied. “Each one of us [is] pregnant with the others and confirmed by them in his body” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 181) and

[i]n perceiving the other, my body and his are coupled, resulting in a sort of action which pairs them. This conduct which I am able only to see, I live somehow from a distance. I make it mine; I recover it or comprehend it. Reciprocally I know that the gestures I make myself can be the objects of another’s intention. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 118)

On the basis of Dreyfus’s (2009) analyses, what we are considering here is what digital disembodiment and hence alleged grip-impediment mean to our connectedness with each other. We are assuming that when bodies engage with each other in some activity, they will always strive to achieve optimal perceptual grasping of each other, given the activity and situation at hand and given whatever social and cultural norms the bodies orient to. Moreover, overlapping with what we pointed out above in the discussion of existential security, we argue that even though perception may be anchored in the individual body, existers perceive in a world where they are always already coexisting and co-perceiving with others. Perceiving others in a social encounter can only always be an interactional, intersubjective, coproduced feat with coproduced maximum grips.

With Dreyfus’ (2009) critique of digital disembodiment and consequently the failure to achieve an ‘optimal’, basic, interactional and perceptual ‘grip’ on the world and others through the media, we would seem to be on a long journey into existential doom the more we relocate social life to digital media; claims such as Turkle’s (2015) are all but re-

inforced. Our quest for existential security in the form of experiencing 'skilled' embodied connectedness and intersubjectivity, of experiencing that we can have an optimal grip on each other and understand and be with each other to the fullest possible, will be lost because digital media cannot reproduce the primordial embodied encounter. However, these conclusions suffer from a flaw. While acknowledging the fundamental premises of embodied being, the present article argues that existential security of interpersonal togetherness is by no means limited to the primordial scenario of physically coupled bodies. Sometimes – taking us back to the eternal dynamics of loss and gain with technology – the loss of embodiment can lead to new ways of connecting and having each other, specifically because embodied conditions are bracketed and because the body integrates technology and the intentions of others in extending its embodied existential space. The world at our feet need not be lost because we step 'outside' of ourselves; it may simply be amplified. And that is exactly, as we shall now see, what can happen with hyperembodiment in snaps.

3. Hyperembodiment

3.1 Receiving a snap and entering the 'fourth dimension'

Here is basically what happens when the exister receives a selfie snap. Snapchat is visible on her smartphone or tablet desktop as an icon. When the exister receives a new message, a red dot appears on top of the icon and a message sound may be heard. Often, Snapchat users send many messages every day and maintain extended dialogues using various Snapchat functions including video recordings or photographs (typically of mundane stuff, such as themselves in some situation, some scene without the sender in it, some object(s), etc.); text and emojis which may be added in a text bar across a video or photograph (see Image 1); freehand drawing on the photograph; or filters making people in the Snapchat photograph appear as cartoon-like characters. In the case analyzed here, opening



Image 1: “Doe Eyes” (from Hougaard et al. forthcoming)

the Snapchat application, going to the list of incoming messages and tapping on the icon showing a new message make a selfie appear instantly. The selfie fills out the entire screen of the digital device (see Image 1).

Here, the reader may dwell at the image for a while. Imagine that it appears suddenly and is the size of (perhaps a large) smartphone surface or even an iPad surface. Depending on the circumstances, the selfie may evoke a strong response in some receivers, even an experience of being overwhelmed by the sensation of an intensive but warm ‘confrontation’. For others, it will

not have such a strong impact. But whether a strong response is elicited or not, the facilitated perception is beyond ‘embodied’ and has high potential to make the receiver pregnant with the other as a materially present, living selfie. Somebody in particular is using a digital device to compose and send a personal, close-up selfie for immediate perception to somebody who at a particular point in time will be able and is expected to receive it and behold it using a digital device. This, to be sure, is not the other/sender’s body in the flesh; it is something else. It is a representation of the other body, which however at the same time is something by itself. It is a different order of selectively embodied, hybrid appearance which through the facilitating work of the sender, and exploiting the affordances of the technology, makes itself available in a jointly facilitated, maximum grip. It is a piece of the real world, a contorted piece of reality, but one which

still elaborates and enriches embodied reality. Following Scott (2015), we may call such a media phenomenon a “fourth dimension” reality:

The fourth dimension doesn't sit neatly above or on the other side of things. It isn't an attic extension. Rather, it contorts the old dimensions. And so, it is with digitalisation, which is no longer a space in and out of which we clamber, via the phone lines [aka 1990s noisy modems]. The old world itself has taken on, in its essence, a four-dimensionality. Every moment, every object, has been imbued with the capacity for this extra aspect. Just as a geometrical net of squares can be folded into a cube, our daily lives are a series of nets, any of which could be scored and bent at the perpendicular, and thus extended into this other dimension. Increasingly, the moments of our lives audition for digitalisation. A view from the window, a meeting with friends, a thought, an instance of leisure or exasperation - they are all candidates, contestants even, for a dimensional upgrade. (Scott 2015: xv)

In other words, contrary to postmodern analyses of media as found in for instance Baudrillard's (1993) notion of a “hyperreal” world which is sheer representation with no “real” world behind it, fourth dimension digital representation enters our daily life and our daily, mundane private and interpersonal activities just as these activities are extended into the digital fourth dimension. All this is clear from the selfie itself and would be even clearer from a study of the everyday use of Snapchat and other photo message applications (see for instance Rivière 2005; Bayer et al. 2016). In fact, from the selfie text alone: “That's good [HEART] I'll call you soon!”, we can tell that the selfie is an integral part of a sequence of practical, every day, social organizing. Hence, the sum of embodied activities going into the creation and reception of the selfie constitutes a hyperembodied effect that is an inseparable part of everyday, practical life.⁴ Here we will not conduct a full-blown analysis of this perceptual feat – there are many aspects indeed – but only mention some highlights.⁵

3.2 Transcendent, direct, ‘immediate’, mutual, personal perception and joint attention

The phenomenology of perception and other anti-representationalist philosophy has deeply inspired certain branches of present day cognitive science and neuroscience. Hence for instance, Merleau-Ponty’s intercorporeality is evident in Gallagher’s notion of “direct perception” in face-to-face encounters:

[B]efore we are in a position to theorize, simulate, explain or predict mental states in others, we are already in a position to interact with and to understand others in terms of their expressions, gestures, and purposive movements, reflecting their intentions and emotions. We already have specific perception-based understandings about what others feel, whether they are attending to us or not, how they are acting toward us and others, whether their intentions are friendly or not, and so forth; and in most cases, we have this without the need for personal-level theorizing or simulating about what the other person believes or desires. Moreover, we have this without the benefit of anything that on the sub-personal level could be considered an extra cognitive step, a simulation, or inference. (Gallagher 2008: 542)

Of course, this kind of “direct experience” is exactly what Dreyfus claims we are excluded from when connecting through digital media. But we propose that a different order of personal, direct perception is facilitated in and through Snapchat. By using the digital device and Snapchat application skillfully (in Merleau-Ponty’s sense of the term as discussed above), the sender makes a hybrid-self available for a scene of direct mutual perception (see Images 2 and 3). Firstly, by zooming in on her face and hair and including no context from her own physical space, the sender makes herself available in the receiver’s embodied ‘zone’. Elements from the sender’s embodied zone that may have excluded the mediated face from the experience of being with the receiver are not included. Secondly, the Snapchat image fills out the whole screen on the digital device (see

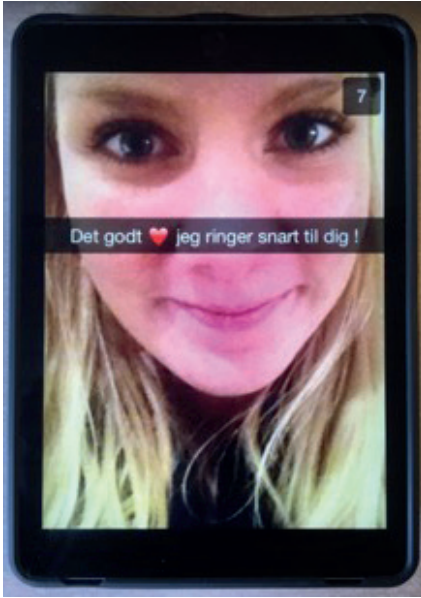


Image 2: The selfie on an iPad

Image 2) by filling out the entire surface of the digital device (except for its edges). The face occupies the device; holding the latter may easily feel like holding the face itself, which already lets itself be integrated in the receiver's embodied presence. Hence a visual-tactile sensation of embodied presence is facilitated. It is not a body of flesh and blood, but a tactile 'fourth dimension' face which opens itself for an embodied, intercorporeal, direct perception (see Image 2).

The presence of a hybrid, tactile and visual face/device facilitates an optimal grip for the receiver.

The device can be held by the receiver/exister, who can enter into perceptual equilibrium and intimate coupling with it by holding it in her hands, close to her body and adjusting angle and length between the screen and her face (see Image 3).

Importantly, this optimal grip on the selfie face is a personal (as already mentioned), situational hybrid-intercorporeal grip. The receiver knows that the selfie has been sent for her personally, and personal attention is recreated in the situation of selfie reception through various methods. First, the selfie face's eyes "gaze into" the eyes of the receiver. This effect is projected by the sender by gazing into the lens of her device whereby the gaze "transcends" into the receiver's embodied zone and reinforces the effect of the context free face (or rather, the gaze and the context freeness of the face reinforce each other's effect). Secondly, the text addresses the receiver personally ("you") as part of an ongoing sequence of interacti-



Image 3: Hybrid-intercorporeal coupling with smartphone. (Image by Fotosearch)

on. The receiver may then have an experience of an optimal grip on a recreated hybrid situation of personal “joint attention” (Tomasello 1999). In the joint attention scenario as Tomasello (1999) lays it out, co-present people understand each other as attending selectively to some things in the environment and ignoring others; they understand each other as intending each other to attend to some things in the environment and ignore others. Hence participants in such scenarios not only follow or direct attention; they understand each other’s activity as intentional. This scenario appears to be a primordial site of

human sociality, communication, society, culture, and social cognition. It is a scenario that the snappers may reconstitute through the affordances of the technology and a capacity for projecting the experience of embodied, joint attention scenarios onto the mediated communication scenes.

Moreover, besides being embodied in a hybrid, fourth dimension, the joint attention of the selfie situation unfolds in a ‘now’ which is not the now of embodied face-to-face joint attention, but which still has immediacy. The message may have been composed only a matter of seconds before it is perceived and the ‘soon’ of the text may be matter of minutes (or even seconds). Hence while both parties may attend to other things in between, the coordinated activities and joint attention between sender and receiver remain within the temporal sphere of ‘having just done’ and ‘being about to’ in the course of a limited time frame during a day’s activities.

To sum up, the total selfie-creation-and-reception-situation both relies on and transcends the medium as well as each participant's embodied zones; it recreates in a selective hybrid fashion direct, situational perception, intercorporeality, the possibility of a maximum grip, immediacy and mutual, personal and joint perception.

3.3 An other-facilitated grip

One of the main points in Dreyfus' critique of telepresence is that the viewer is a "prisoner" (2009: 63) of the operation of the camera. Hence the perceiver cannot use his body as an "I can" (ibid: 65) and his "intentional arc" – the "feedback between one's actions and the perceptual world" – becomes dysfunctional. However, again the critique presupposes that what the user of digital technology is interested in is only that which is on 'either side of the medium', so to speak. But as we have suggested in our analysis, users may be just as interested in what is in and of the medium 'itself', or more specifically what is in and of the selective, hybrid fusion of the medium and the 'real world'. Dreyfus' analysis only sees the downside of giving over perceptual control. It does not see a potential, extended intercorporeality in the way a maximum grip may be a product of a distributed, mutual effort. With Snapchat, we find such a mutual accomplishment of grip. As we have seen, the sender facilitates the grip by making herself available for perception as a medium hybrid. The digital device itself has affordances for an optimal grip which may be relied on by the sender, and the receiver may complete the mutual process by adjusting perception in accordance with the possibilities projected by the sender and the device.

This takes us back to the heart of the quest for existential security. Above, we saw how "existential security is not only an individual quest, but also often a matter of seeking meaning communally" (Lagerkvist 2016: 102), and we saw how connecting 'genuinely' or 'authentically' is one of the existential issues that is at stake with digital media. With the snap selfie, not only is a strong sense of 'genuine' connection and togetherness

possible as a ‘product’ of its creation-and-reception, this effect is a thoroughly ‘communal’ achievement. It is an existential accomplishment by existers that are always already coexisting and coperceiving with others, and who may have a strong existential driving force and urge to secure this coexistence and coperception as interpersonal ‘glue’.

3.4 Super stimuli

Above we said that the snap enriches interpersonal communication and perception. As we stated initially, hyperembodiment effects are disembodied – meaning they miss the actual coupling of people in flesh and blood – and yet they go beyond embodied experiences and intensify them in various ways. The effect of the snap selfie seems related to Ramachandran and Hirstein’s (1999) adaptation of the notions of “super stimulus” and “peak shift effect” (Tinbergen 1954) to their neurology of aesthetics. Put simply, Ramachandran and Hirstein (1999) propose as one principle of aesthetics that art may, through a category of caricature, super-stimulating “trigger features”, bring about a “peak shift effect” in the form of a stronger response in the perceiver than happens with corresponding ‘ordinary’ stimuli. Seeing art generally as a non-ridiculing, caricature trigger of aesthetic pleasure and evoking the Hindu concept of ‘rasa’ (‘essence’), Ramachandran and Hirstein (1999: 17) propose that “what the artist tries to do (either consciously or unconsciously) is to not only capture the essence of something but also to amplify it in order to activate more powerfully the same neural mechanisms that would be activated by the original object.” Hence the purpose of art is not seen as simply to represent reality “but to enhance, transcend, or indeed even to *distort* reality” (ibid).

As we have already seen aspects of, the snap selfie can also create the potential of an enhanced, transcendent and distorted experience of face-to-face contact leaving out important aspects of an embodied encounter while reinforcing others. First, we have seen how the face

appears alone; its appearance is reinforced along a visual-tactile dimension. Notice that we would never hold an embodied face the way we hold the hybrid face (see Image 3). Hence at the ‘cost’ of a full embodied encounter, certain dimensions of such an encounter acquire a radically enhanced, transcendent and distorted quality (or what Hougaard et al. (forthcoming) calls a “high-definition” representation). Secondly, being an image, the selfie in a new kind of encounter freezes and maintains the specific facial expression of a point in time for much longer. This means the receiver can appreciate a moment in time well beyond its ‘natural’ extension. Hougaard et al. (forthcoming) calls this a “frozen window effect.” The constraints of co-present social transience are lifted. The receiver is not bound to and limited by the face’s ‘original’ social moment in time, but can explore it freely and without minding her own contingent contribution to a face-to-face encounter of mutual orientation. The ‘original’ social moment is again transcended, enhanced and distorted. Finally, being an up-close selfie, which has cut the face’s original context away, the image creates a proximity effect of intimacy – the closest kind of socio-spatial configuration (see for instance Hall 1966). Such a degree of closeness goes beyond what one would entertain in an embodied encounter with most friends.⁶ Being decontextualized, the face may (even from a distance) make itself available for intimacy. This liberated intimacy (i.e. beyond the embodied periphery of intimacy) is a unique product of the media hybrid representation. The medium representation makes the face a free flowing intimate face because it is not naturally anchored anywhere in the receiver’s zone. All in all, the selfie offers not just an intensive hybrid-embodied facial encounter; it offers an encounter with the essence of ‘intimate faceliness’ a caricature or super-stimulus of intimate ‘facing of a face’.

3.5 Interpersonal existential security in hyperembodiment?

All this may be well and good, but is Snapchat still not just offering the

user the opportunity to create an ‘improved’, Baudrillardesque hyperreal version of reality, which betrays our real earthly needs and offers an inauthentic existential scheme in their place? Well, the whole point of such questions is that too often they demand confirmation based on dubious premises. At least two underlying – unnoticed or explicit – generalizing and biasing assumptions can be found to play a role here:

1) Media are separate objects that are operated by subjects. They are flat and only slightly permeable screens that stand between users. Since they are flat we cannot achieve foothold using them, and since they are only slightly permeable we can never really reach each other through them.

2) When people use media, they become absorbed by the media world of flat and only slightly permeable screens. Hence the effect of media is often analyzed taking into account only such users who are in a state of media-absorbedness. But the whole point of analyses such as the one offered in this article is that media need neither be flat, nor need they be like quicksand that drowns their user, or like a postmodern cacophony that paralyses the user’s senses. In fact, the user may, in turn, ‘inhabit’ the medium like she inhabits other parts of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962), and the medium may just as much be absorbed by human practice. Notice that analyses that support the idea of flat but absorbing media (e.g. Baudrillard 1993; Postman 1995) typically base their analyses on ‘overwhelming’ or ‘spectacular’ impersonal media, for instance fast paced television with one-way-communication in sharp colors and with noisy, talking heads, quickly shifting images and mosaics of loud sounds.

But in the case of the snapchat selfie, we are dealing with a personal mode of two-way communication which the users control and which, relative to ‘spectacle’ television is quiet and slow with a single, steady focus. Moreover, to the extent that the snap creates a ‘better version’ of the users or their togetherness, this may just as well have a disclosing, revealing and comforting effect, and be ‘just’ another context in which users experience each other as composite beings. As the users witness each other in everyday life in different situations which they have different

mastery of, with different clothes and haircuts, with or without make-up, on video, painted or drawn on paper, in a photograph, in the company of shifting kinds of people and so on, Snapchat selfies offer yet another way of appreciating each other. For centuries, we have been accustomed to appreciate each other in different ‘mediated’ ways, by celebrating these mediated forms and by acknowledging these forms as capturing ‘what we are’. The anecdote, the short story, the novel, the poem, the portrait, make-up, the dress, the car – all and many more have been celebrated as media that disclose people; there is no reason why Snapchat selfies should be any different. Hence there is also no reason why receivers of personal Snapchat selfies such as the one above should not feel that they were brought into comforting, mooring closeness with the senders.

Digital media like Snapchat can of course be exploited to create impressions that are out of sync with other aspects of our lived everyday lives, they can be used to ‘hide’ behind by choosing them over other kinds of socially committing kinds of contact. But we should not for such reasons consider digital media as introducing a historically extraordinary turn in our lives. They are ‘just’ different “provinces of meaning” (Schutz 1945),⁷ along with other embodied and mediated provinces of meaning that present both existential challenges and possibilities for existential security. Any approach that claims that we are particularly at odds with digital media technology is at best techno-deterministic.⁸

3.6 Hyperembodied enrichment of interpersonal relationships

Scholars such as Dreyfus and Turkle focus their analyses on the problems and deficiencies of digital media; in particular, they focus on how these media impoverish social life. But using the medium to create hyperembodied hybrid intercorporeality may also expand and enrich interpersonal communication and relationships. Existents may disclose themselves to each other in new intensive ways. Considering the skill that goes into producing a hyperembodied effect and considering its potential perceptual

and emotional impact, we may even talk about an aesthetic elaboration of interpersonal relationships. From the Doe Eyes selfie (Image 1) alone we can easily imagine how hyperembodiment may give rise to a number of enrichments of interpersonal relationships, including: an enhanced and focused display of care, interest, friendliness, warmth; a possibility for developing new aspects of oneself in the eyes of the other (as already mentioned) or new aspects of the relationship; a way of displaying and capturing emotion, ‘private’ sensations and ‘mental’ processes or states by zooming into and highlighting their manifestations in direct perception (Gallagher 2008); and a way of maintaining a sense of intimacy and closeness despite being physically far apart.

4. Conclusion

Inspired by Lagerkvist’s (2016) program for philosophical media analysis, we offered an existentialist interpretation of the task of addressing the metaphor of the ‘world at your feet’, and we proposed an extended understanding of existentialism by taking as our central point of departure Dreyfus’ (2009) Merleau-Ponty-based analysis of disembodiment and critique of digital media. We did not dispute Dreyfus’ analyses as such, but central to our argument was that Dreyfus had not considered the possibility of hybrid connectedness, or indeed hybrid intercorporeality, as we called it, where existers come together not by penetrating a media ‘wall’ – as was the task faced by Dreyfus’ media subjects – but by meeting in the medium, in a process where sender’s intentions come together with the medium’s affordances and the receiver’s reading of and coupling with the medium in a ‘medium space’ of existing together.

We illustrated this process by accounting for the proposed media effect of hyperembodiment (Hougaard et al. forthcoming) in the interpersonal sharing of a close-up Snapchat selfie. We did not conduct a full-blown analysis,⁹ but only discussed some highlights in a social cognitive and phenomenological account of the selfie’s potential for creating an inten-

sive coupling effect which, while missing many aspects of an embodied face-to-face encounter, took the exister beyond the latter with selected, in-focus, super-stimuli and 'high definition' aspects of the interaction.

With this, we propose that the question of the human predicament in the digital 'world at our feet' is not as simple as it is made to be in many contemporary approaches. There are more options than the (typically implicit) dominating notion of a media 'wall' gives us. There is a wide range of options, presented to us in a fourth dimension which is not an appendix to embodied life, but a new integrated part of our general thrownness. Here the exister can achieve a communally based and re-created intercorporeal maximum grip in ways which (perhaps for natural reasons) were not dreamt of in 20th century embodiment philosophy.

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Notes

1. For example, the works of Marshall McLuhan (e.g. McLuhan 1964) and the tradition of “media ecology” which he inspired, study the effect of media in terms of the eras of societies (ways of thinking, behaving, perceiving, communicating etc.) they institute. Each era is typically seen as characterized by certain losses and certain gains of a cognitive, cultural and social kind. For an overview of media ecology see <http://www.media-ecology.org/>.
2. Hougaard (2017) uses the term ”hyperexperientiality” to cover a range of different media effects where mediated perception exceeds embodied perception.
3. We suspect that Dreyfus would not (nor would Merleau-Ponty himself) call Merleau-Ponty an “existentialist”. Merleau-Ponty’s project was not an existentialist project. However, the analysis of disembodied life in digital media is clearly of existentialist concern.
4. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for the following comment: “So, it seems that hyper-embodiment is a form of ‘theatricality’, where quotidian acts are put onstage, potentially for all to see”.
5. For an extended account of hyperembodiment see Hougaard et al (forthcoming).
6. Notice, as an anonymous reviewer also observed: “Some cultures allow for intercorporeal closeness that would be very uncomfortable to denizens of other cultures. Selfies allow us to violate these codes without violating interpersonal ‘footing’”.
7. According to Schutz (1945) we experience the world in terms of various relatively distinct and independent “provinces of meaning.” These include dreams, children’s play, stage performances, religious experience, science and much more. The region of the quotidian, everyday life-world holds special status. The other regions are in different ways derived from it as more limited realities, by in some way ‘bracketing’ or ‘switching off’ the quotidian life-world while still presupposing its reality. This is exactly what happens with hyperembodiment in Snapchat.
8. All sciences are deeply suspicious of deterministic accounts. But, as announced, here we embark on a philosophically inspired approach. So, at the risk of falling prey to deep and longstanding philosophical dispute over the appropriate reading of Heidegger’s work, we will dare to point out that

from a Heideggerian existential perspective, the idea that technology somehow dooms or determines us (as opposed to technology somehow influencing us) is generally wrong. Heidegger's philosophy is also a philosophy of 'freedom' and he insists, that with regard to "Dasein" – the precursor of our (digital) exister – while being thrown into the world we are indeed capable of understanding and acting, and thus of seizing hold of our possibilities in the thrown condition, a condition which is it itself neither good nor bad.

9. Hence for instance our analysis only focused on the receiver's perspective and to some extent it betrayed its holistic foundation by adopting the short-hand terms of 'sender' and 'receiver'.

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