

Telepresence: Invocation and Evocation

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The situation could belong to any time during the past four hundred years. People gather in a specially prepared room. They sit in quiet reverence, listening for distant voices. They occasionally mutter ritualistic incantations. A convenor manipulates some mysterious controls. Everyone gazes up at a flickering image, their senses open to the uncanny experience of telepresence, presence-at-a-distance. And it works! They all sense the closeness of something, or someone, who should not reasonably be there at all.

This scene played out in the 18th century when illusionist and physicist Etienne-Gaspard Robertson scandalised Paris by calling up 'phantasmagoria'. With an intricate gas lit lens system called the 'magic lantern', he projected an image of the King of France. After this scandalous invocation of the Royal visage, he had to flee to Bordeaux.

In the 19th century people gathered in the same way, during a craze for séances. A worldwide industry emerged for communicating with dead and distant presences. Spiritualists (supposedly) communicated with the nether world by knocking on tables, whispering through 'spirit trumpets' or double-exposing spirit photographs to create apparitions.

The situation recurs again today around the world in the technocultural form of the video teleconference. Teleconference systems work with an illusionism that can be traced historically to Robertson's projection systems. They also communicate instantly across a distance - a power pioneered by telegraphy, a development strongly associated with Spiritualism's emergence.

Today's video telepresence systems are expensive and complex, requiring dedicated floor space, high capacity telecommunications lines and specialised hardware. This expense is justified by an almost mystical belief in the power of presence. Important business meetings are held using video conferencing in the faith that decisions made in the virtual presence of all interested people will be better.

All these media forms (phantasmagoria, seances, teleconferences) can be considered as sophisticated technologies of telepresence. Telepresence actually involves two related, but distinct processes, evident in the term itself. The prefix 'tele-' denotes the first move - bringing distant things closer. The suffix adds the

second element, 'presence', reconstituting the distant phenomenon in a new location.

The first of the events, the 'tele-' is an invocation. It makes a call that brings something in from outside. The second, 'presence', is an evocation - giving the thing a recognisable form within a new space. All media work with one technique for invoking, and another for evoking.

You can even consider novels or TV shows as creating telepresence effects. Readers invoke a book by visiting a library or a bookshop, or pulling it from the shelf at home. The evocative process for a novel is activated when the reader starts to read the words on the first page. The work is considered 'great' if reading it evokes recognition, memories and emotions in a large number of readers.

Viewers invoke a television program by using a remote control, and possibly adjusting the aerial. A television program evokes through the images and sounds it offers to viewers.

Modern media have produced a multitude of non-human (or part-human) ways to invoke and evoke. Media technologies such as photography, sound recording and cinema have capacities to invoke and evoke a sense of presence-past. They allow audiences to call in phenomena that evoke a sense of connection with the past (including actors who have since passed away). Telegraphy, telephony and broadcast media call in things from far away. They create a sense of presence-distant. For example, many people have experienced the emotional power of an unexpected long distance phone call.

The Spiritualists' observations about how weird it is to hear images and voices of the dead and the distant were wrong only because they interpreted these things as 'supernatural'. All modern media forms were at first generally received as something quite disturbing, if not metaphysical. Over time and familiarity, though, this strangeness tends to disappear into the background of daily experience.

However, some recent technologies remain unfamiliar enough that users still notice the uncanny (*unheimlich*) relationships they mediate. Video teleconferences are still largely unfamiliar, and highly ritualistic. Participants sit quietly until it is their turn to speak, and then carefully introduce themselves to the camera. The space of the room is structured around what the camera makes visible. Conversations are jerky, because of signal delays. Most of all, though, there is something quite strange about seeing and talking with people who aren't really there.

In spite of technical advances making telepresence systems more reliable than seances, less has changed than many assume. The Spiritualist image of a world alive with invisible spirits has been translated into the engineering diagram of the electromagnetic spectrum. The technologies have higher resolution, and it is now much easier to call things up. The level of overt mystery and fraud involved with these shows is (hopefully) less prevalent. However, the uncanny sense of presence-at-a-distance remains hard to explain, even for more familiar technologies.

What has changed with computer-based media forms, including advanced teleconferencing, robotic telepresence, and virtual reality games, is a tighter integration between invocational and evocational components. The methods that address things and call them in from out of view (the invocations), and those that give them form (the evocations), have converged. Networked computers combine any number of network inputs to generate all manner of images, texts and sounds. They control remote cameras, generate real-time graphics, synthesize machinic voices. The same devices combine presence-past (databases) with presence-distant (networks) to produce accelerated and seamless invoked environments. There is no limit to what they might invoke and evoke.

But what is most unsettling about experiencing new systems of telepresence, at least until they are rendered natural by familiarity, is how they call into question our assumptions about supposedly natural, unmediated presence. Telepresence draws attention to the artificiality of any sense of presence, even so called 'direct' experience. Not only is there no supernatural world. There is no natural world, either.