

THE CONFERENCE AS ZOO(M)
(EXAGIUM IN MEMORIAM EILEEN ROSITZKA)

William Brown (Independent scholar)

As anyone who reads this will almost certainly know, conferences went for the most part online between the second half of 2020 and for nearly the entirety of 2021, with organisers of the various regular film studies conferences still deciding at the time of writing how much or if any of their future iterations will also be online.

The aim here is not to rehearse any for-or-against arguments for going permanently online, offsetting the unquantifiable pleasures of in-person conferences with the carbon footprint that it creates to go to and from conference locations. Nor really is it, *contra* what this conference round-up is supposed to be, a review of, or a report on, any particular conference from the past year.

Indeed, at the conferences that I managed to attend at least in part online during 2021—namely SCMS (17-21 March), BAFTSS (7-9 April), NECS (7-13 June) and Film-Philosophy (7-9 July)—I saw plenty of strong papers, entire panels, plenary sessions and keynotes, and could spend this brief essay writing about how the decolonisation of film studies slowly continues to take place, perhaps especially as iterated through an embrace of contemporary critical race theory and in relation to ideas of extraction, while there seems to be an intensification of interest in practice (as) theory, not least as scholars try to work out how to say something through film form as opposed to just offering a ‘cinematic’ version of a regular paper.

Perhaps both—decolonisation and practice (as) theory—are in some senses linked to the growth of what we might call the Zoom conference (acknowledging both that Zoom is *not* the software that most conferences use for their online platform, and that Zoom, nonetheless, is the brand-name that metonymically now stands in for ‘online conferences’ and other meetings—much like how in the UK Hoover stands in for all vacuum cleaners). For, given that any and all Zoom presentations involve video, there is a shift from the conference paper as theatrical performance to the conference paper as cinematic performance (a shift that is a continuation of the PowerPoint aesthetic that had of course begun to dominate so many conference papers over the last 25 years or so). Furthermore, given that the Zoom conference arises because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and given that any perceived loss of control by a white supremacist world (be that at the hands of a virus or anything else) leads to an attempt to reassert control in the form of re-subjugating bodies long since bent and/or broken under hegemonic power (on the one side George Floyd, Adam Toledo, Iremamber Sykap, and the

rise of Black Lives Matter; on the other side, Kyle Rittenhouse, the McCloskeys, and Jake Angeli), then it also stands to reason that the academy might warily question its colonial legacy.

Having experienced the by-now typical presentation that involves an audience member forgetting to turn off their microphone as they start a discussion with their partner about matters both domestic and pertaining to the conference, and having also experienced the equivalent of the conference butt-dial when an audience member listened in to a paper while cycling around their hometown, one observation to make about the Zoom conference would also be that the performance now extends beyond the presenter into the audience.

Arguably, for an audience to be performing is not ‘cinematic,’ in that the cinematic audience traditionally is unobserved in a darkened room. All the same, since the camera can be on when one is listening to a paper—as anyone who has looked on Zoom at a sea of primarily white faces will know—we are to all intents and purposes under surveillance when we are before our Zoom cameras.

As Michael Chanan observes, the performance for the Zoom camera therefore involves a ‘cinematicisation’ of domestic space, with examples including the arrangement of a warm lighting set-up (try not be back-lit!), an ‘intellectual’ *mise-en-scène* (the rise of the ‘shelfie’), and conveniently timed entrances from domestic animals. Even more than this, though, is how the performance of listening is precisely that—a performance.¹

For, from my own experiences as both an audience member and presenter, it often feels on Zoom (as Chanan also attests) that one is talking into a void, as with cameras on, audience members check other windows on their screens, and/or they simply turn off their cameras and carry out chores, digital or otherwise, while supposedly ‘listening.’ Just remember to turn off your microphone as well...

With regard to the old-fangled in-person event, it is not as if collectively we are ignorant of the sense that talking to three audience members on a Sunday morning at 9am (or even earlier!) is a waste of time (our self-consolation: ‘but I came here to socialise with my peers’ and/or ‘if I can get good feedback from just one person, then it will have been worth it’). That is, we know from traditional conferences that when push comes to shove, most people do not care about our research, and do not even pretend to do so (audience members on their phones, tablets and/or laptops during presentations—with the live Tweet functioning also as a performance of listening). Nevertheless, with the Zoom conference, there is an accompanying paranoia: are these people actually listening to me or not? Are they even there? Or did they just sign in to listen to their friend speaking before me, and now are back to sleep hoping to dream a smart question for their friend to demonstrate their loyalty at a later point in time, perhaps even during the Q&A...?

The Zoom conference, then, can at times feel even more than its fleshworld counterpart like an exercise in twinned performance and surveillance on the part of all concerned, lending to proceedings a touch of the fake, or at least the superficial, which, when combined with the afore-mentioned trends towards the ‘cinematic’ and the ‘decolonial’ can make the former (we must all be cinematic) undermine the real-world need for the latter (the revolution will not be Zoomed). That is, decolonial academic work becomes a performance made as cinematic as possible, but watched really by next to no one, and with no basic real-world effects. Not only with no decolonial effects, then, but also using the decolonial in a bid to further colonial interests—namely the feel-worthy affects of all those afore-mentioned white faces performatively listening in their domestically dressed Zoom sets, while also shopping online in a bid to fund Jeff Bezos’ quest into space.

In what is intended as a playful sleight of terminology, one nonetheless wonders whether the rise of Zoom is somehow linked to the zoom as it is used in other arenas, including of course cinema. According to online etymology sites (Etymology Online and Wiktionary), the term has its origin in aviation, being used onomatopoeically from around the time of the First World War (to zoom does indeed involve launching people up into space *à la* Bezos; as the child’s song goes, zoom zoom zoom, we’re going to the moon). The idea of the term originally, then, was to convey fast movement, although it has also been used since the mid-1930s to describe the work of telescopic lenses, as Bruno Latour also reminds us.² Indeed, for Latour the notion of the zoom—as made clear in a film like the Eames brothers’ *Powers of Ten: A Film Dealing with the Relative Size of Things in the Universe and the Effect of Adding Another Zero* (USA, 1977)—suggests a universe in which we can move easily (we can ‘zoom’) from one scale to another, as if the microscopic were contained within the macroscopic—and with the notion of ascent/descent, i.e. the vertical axis of domination, always present, even if in an understated manner). This notion of zooming between scales is, however, incorrect, suggests Latour, since the microscopic is not contained within the macroscopic; they are in fact different and/or involve different sets of data. For this reason, Latour calls his brief essay ‘anti-zoom,’ arguing that no good artist believes in the effects of zooms, since the zoom confuses projection with connectivity, in that we mistake how the connections between data are represented/projected (via the zoom) for the data themselves and the connections between them.³ While the zoom regularly therefore involves mistaking the map for the territory (consider that galaxies are connected to cells, but the way in which the zoom represents this is just a projection, obliterating as it does the vast differences between astrophysics and cellular biology; these scales may well be connected, but they are not the same thing), the point at present to take home is this: to zoom in/to zoom from one scale to another plays into the hands of conquest, acceleration, capital, surveillance and war. The cinematic zoom, then, as well as its aerial counterpart (zooming as tied to war-time

aviation), do in some senses map on to the software Zoom, which similarly comes to negate difference, to surveil, and to accelerate.

We might note that Latour's analysis stands in contrast to various scholarly considerations of the zoom as a technique, and which generally see it as a disruptive effect, self-conscious (indeed, 'performative') in its deployment, and one that thus, we might suggest, is about demonstrating the map-ness of the map, rather than a confusion of map with terrain.⁴ None of these studies looks at the Eames film, however, and taking Nick Hall's book-length work on the zoom as the most recent and substantial engagement with the technique, while he notes that the zoom was developed as a tool for aerial military surveillance, he does not link the technique to social surveillance, colonialism, or issues of power within film (for Hall, the metaphor of how 'powerful' a zoom is, is 'scientific,' but not political).⁵

To take an equally recent but specifically cinematic example of the technique, though, Gonçalo Lamas' *Granary Squares* (Portugal, 2021) evokes the surveillance camera aesthetic, meaning that however self-conscious it is or might be, the zoom is absolutely bound up now with issues of control and power (as it was even in the 1970s when it was used famously in the opening moments of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*, USA, 1974). Indeed, while Lamas' film involves a 64-minute high-angle observation, including various pans and zooms, of and around London's Granary Square, shot seemingly from within Granary Building (home to Central St Martins, just north of Kings Cross station), the use of the plural in the film's title (*Granary Squares*) might evoke the grainy squares that are the digital image, especially when a zoom-in goes so far as to reveal, or make the viewer conscious of, pixels. By this token, the image is indeed self-conscious and/or 'performative' (this term is Willemen's), but it also ties the digital to an intensification of surveillance and control or a world where pixels, performances and maps replace/become the real.

To return to *Powers of Ten*, the film was itself inspired by the 1957 Dutch text, *Cosmic View: The Universe in 40 Jumps*, by Kees Boeke. Not only might we note that in Dutch the word *zoom* also means a hem or a border, thus conveying again the ambivalent relationship that the zoom has with borders, but we might also say that the 'cosmic' is linked, as Anne Anlin Cheng has argued, to the cosmetic and the decorative (like a hem?), with the cosmic/cosmetic thus being a concept that for Cheng helps to explain the 'ornamental' and racialised function that Asian women often play in western texts/the western imagination.⁶ And when we therefore combine the cosmic/cosmetic with the zoom to reach what in cinema is referred to as the 'cosmic zoom' (as theorised by Jennifer M. Barker, *inter alia*; *Cosmic Zoom* is the name of a Canadian short film from 1968 by Eva Szasz and Robert Verrall, also inspired by the Boeke book⁷), then we might once again see that both the zoom and the cosmic are working in conjunction to offer up cosmetic images (Garrett Stewart refers to the

cosmic zoom as involving ‘sheer rhetoric’⁸), which through their very superficiality (fakeness?) obliterate difference, here understood as raced—a superficiality that is intensified in the digital age.

Indeed, if I argued in 2013 that the ‘cosmic zoom’ (regardless of whether, in its most common iterations, it is actually a tracking shot) helps us to understand the interconnected nature of the macro and the micro, I nonetheless failed fully to understand the problematic nature of what I then termed the *conquest* of space (or what we might understand as the creation of a cosmos out of chaos).⁹ It is not that the cosmic zoom does not function as a form of *conquest*; indeed, it does—but in conquering as opposed to, say, understanding space (in rendering cosmic, as opposed to engaging with chaos), the cosmic zoom does indeed involve the mistaking of a map for the territory (map-making as conquest), and this gesture is deeply raced, as Sylvia Wynter’s map-for-the-territory analysis of the conquest of the ‘new world’ would make clear.¹⁰

In this sense, as we all have begun to use Zoom to conduct our professional and personal lives, it seems unsurprising that the likes of Bezos, Richard Branson and Elon Musk have themselves commenced putting into action the conquest of (outer) space, an abandonment of the planet that expresses a total disillusionment with the possibility of reversing or bringing an end to climate change, and which abandonment of course is raced, since the planet-killing effects of the Anthropocene are the work not so much of man as specifically the white man and his colonial/*conquistador* logics.¹¹ As to zoom at great speed is to race, then so might the renewed (and now privatised) space race have as its underlying goal the acceleration/zooming into space primarily of the white race (Bezos, Branson and Musk as, of course, white men, if not also famous divorcees/singletons/virgins), as opposed to any others. Indeed, as they all leave our atmosphere, so are those left on Earth struggling to breathe, as Eric Garner and George Floyd so clearly demonstrate—and this long before we think about the classed and raced nature of which peoples tend most to die from COVID-19.

Eric Yuan, the Chinese-American founder of the company Zoom, says that he got the name from Thacher Hurd’s children’s book, *Zoom City* (1998), in which we see animals (mainly dogs) driving around in cars. A mixture of the anthropomorphic and the zoomorphic (is it that the book considers animals in human terms, or vice versa?), we might nonetheless focus on the latter (Zoom as short for zoomorphism) in order not just to help explain the afore-mentioned domestic animals who are coerced into performing for the Zoom cameras, but also to help convey how Zoom in its conquest involves the creation of a virtual human zoo, in which we gawp and are gawped at in equal measure—waiting, perhaps demanding for something to happen.

One of cinema’s most famous zooms is of course Michael Snow’s celebrated *Wavelength* (Canada, 1967), in which we close in slowly across a room before honing in on

an image of some waves. During its 45-minute duration, which elides various different points in time (that is, the film is set over a week, even though we see events on screen unfold in what seems meant to appear as a single, continuous shot), we also discover that someone in the room is dead/has died (Hollis Frampton). Meanwhile, Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* (UK/Netherlands/France/USA, 2017) presents three different temporal scales (one week, one day, one hour), making it a kind of temporal equivalent to *Powers of Ten*. Involving a temporal rather than a spatial 'zoom,' then, *Dunkirk* is of course also a celebration of aviation and war. For Latour, the zoom destroys the interconnections between time and space, by making huge swathes and microscopic reaches of space collapse into the size of the cinema screen, and shown next to each other over a matter of seconds rather than lightyears—a primary (and colonial) destruction of spacetime (divide spacetime into space and time in order to conquer them both).¹² That is, as Snow's film intimates, the zoom and Zoom are indeed expressions of power that have built into their fabric not the Death of the Human (what is that?), but the death of some humans for the purposes of empowering others. It is such a death that we await onscreen; it is such a death that zooms and Zoom both demand, just as we go to the zoo to see dying animals come ever closer to extinction. Zoo(m) as a kind of 'squid game,' if you will—as per *Squid Game* (Hwang Dong-hyuk, South Korea, 2021), the most popular Netflix show of all time, and in which rich westerners pay to see those ornamental and 'animalised' Asians die on a (zoo[m]) screen.

It is only as I write this, then, that I realise that the death of the young and formidable scholar of film and war, Eileen Rositzka, during a Zoom meeting with members of the Berlin-based Cinepoetics on 26 May 2021, is both a loss that I and my fellow film scholars need collectively to grieve, and also the kind of event that makes clear the brute logics of our Zoom-dominated time(s). Our lives on Zoom were not worth her life, or the life of any of those subjugated to power in our contemporary age. May we all slow down, seek a more terrestrial life, and collectively embrace the death that faces us, rather than try endlessly to sacrifice, or hope screen-bound for the sacrifice of, others in a bid to prolong our own, pointless existences.

¹ See Michael Chanan, "What is Zoom good for? Notes of an observant participant," unpublished manuscript, 29 November 2020.

² Bruno Latour, "anti-zoom," in *Olafur Eliasson: Contact*, eds. Suzanne Pagé, Laurence Bossé, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Claire Staebler (Paris: Flammarion, 2014), 121–124.

³ Latour, "anti-zoom," 121.

⁴ See, for example, John Belton, "The Bionic Eye: Zoom Aesthetics," *Cinéaste* 11, no. 1 (Winter 1980-1981): 20-27; Adam O'Brien, "When a film remembers its filming: The new Hollywood zoom," *Journal of Media Practice* 13, no. 3 (2012): 227-237; Paul Willemen, "The zoom in popular cinema: a question of performance," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (2013): 104-109; Nick Hall, *The Zoom: Drama at the Touch of a Lever* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

⁵ Hall, *The Zoom*, 39.

⁶ Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 79.

⁷ See Jennifer M. Barker, “Neither Here Nor There: Synaesthesia and the Cosmic Zoom,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7, no. 3 (2009): 311–324.

⁸ Garrett Stewart, *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 134.

⁹ See William Brown, *Supercinema: Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2013), 21-50.

¹⁰ See Sylvia Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Désêtre*: Black Studies Toward the Human Project,” in *Not Only the Master’s Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, eds. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Boulder: Paradigm, 2006), 107-169. For a further consideration of how the ultra-mobile camera is a tool for surveillance as well as gendered and raced conquest, see Andrés Bartolomé Leal, *The Spaces of the Transnational in the Cinema of Roman Polanski* (PhD diss., Universidad de Zaragoza, January 2021), 156-185.

¹¹ See Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

¹² Latour, “anti-zoom,” 123. One might contend that what Albert Einstein referred to as ‘spooky action at a distance,’ namely the capacity for polarised particles to exchange information at speeds faster than the speed of light, in fact suggests that one can ‘zoom,’ in the sense of getting across space at speeds faster than the speed of light (getting across space in no time, thereby divorcing space from time). Perhaps this is so, but the way of doing this—via a wormhole, which itself is typically thought to be inside a black hole—involves stepping outside of spacetime, outside of maps, and outside of cinema. To zoom as understood here, meanwhile, is to attempt to control and to render visible, or perhaps even to control by rendering visible (to divide spacetime into space and time in order to conquer them both). In other words, to zoom is part of the process of cinema as control. Or, put differently, if there is a ‘black’ and invisible spacetime that is utterly interconnected, the zoom is the creation of a visible and divided (‘white’) space and time, an appropriation of ‘blackness’ (making it thus ‘antiblack’); it is the creation of a controlled space and time (cosmos) at the expense of spacetime (chaos). White men zoom, thus, at the expense of non-white/blackened and other others.