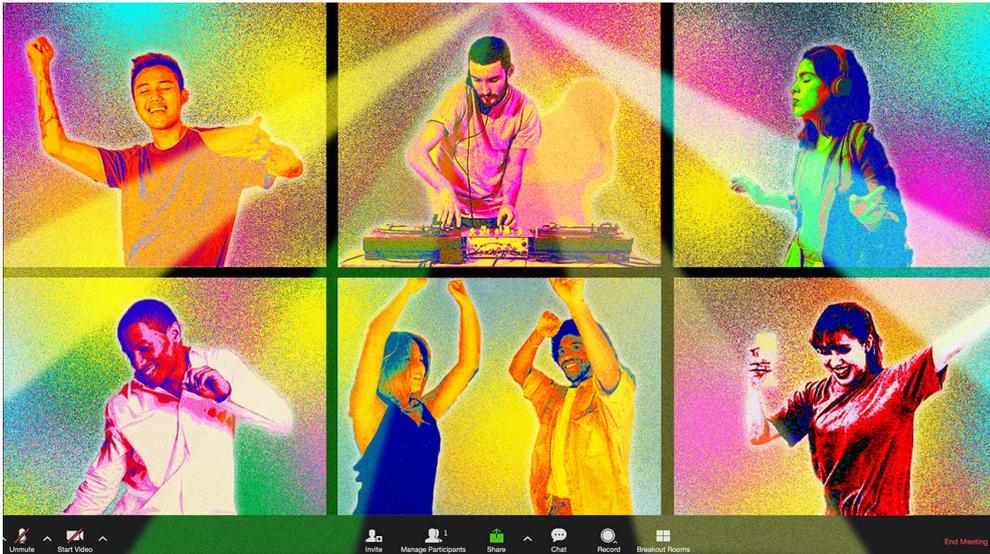


# “Real” versus Virtual Social Dance –

*Zoom in on the experience of virtual dancing parties*

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*A virtual social dancing party via Zoom. Graphic by C.J. Robinson*

*Als het allemaal weer mag  
zullen wij dan dansen  
tot de zon opkomt  
de muziek verstomt  
tot de dag onthult  
wat de nacht vermomt  
als de Merels fluiten.*

Merel Baldé/Merol – Knaldrang (November 2020)

*When it is all allowed again  
shall we dance  
until the sun rises  
the music stops  
until the day reveals  
what the night disguises  
when the Blackbirds sing*

This fragment from Knaldrang, a song by Dutch singer-songwriter Merel Baldé, demonstrates what people are missing in Covid19 times. Missing the sense of close contact, human touch; skin to skin. Missing to go out, to escape their every day lives, work and thoughts. Missing to make human connections and to meet new people. People are waiting. Waiting till their lives can start to continue. Waiting for the solution; the Coronavirus

vaccine doing its work. Waiting till that day that they can go back to pre-Covid times into the future, to go out again and dance the night away...

Until that day people are dancing together in other ways. This research arose from my own need to continue social dancing during times of social distance. While I am longing for real human contact and interactions and less for online, I discovered that, depending on its use, technology could be used as a tool to keep on dancing together. For example, during the past months, Zoom parties gained popularity. Zoom is designed for work related meetings, but it appears to be an excellent tool to organise virtual dancing parties. People are dancing together via this video platform, which connects many spaces together into one virtual space. In this paper I am investigating whether these Zoom parties can serve as a satisfying form of social dancing, seen it is very different than normal social dancing.

Because social dance is all about personal feelings and the senses I am doing this research from both an empirical and phenomenological point of view.

## **Defining social dance**

What is social dance exactly? Dance theorist and sociologist Angela McRobbie states that dance itself is “a social activity, a participative form enjoyed by people in leisure, a sexual ritual, a form of self-expression, a kind of exercise and a way of speaking through the body – a non-verbal dialogue”.<sup>1</sup> I think that this description of dance is also applicable to define *social* dance. I will be making use of her definition in combination with Julie Malling’s definition of social dancing as described in her book *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*. In this definition, social dance gives the opportunity to relate to other people, to understand other people and to connect with other people; “a sense of community is created through the energy that spheres around the space”.<sup>2</sup> The non-verbal dialogue arises through the synchronization of different moving rhythms, self-expression, eye contact, improvisation and collaboration.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, dancing, and therefore also social dancing, supports health, cheerfulness, and enjoyment: it brings you in a free-feeling state.<sup>4</sup> There are many different styles of social dance, some relying on choreographed steps –“ingredients” -, like salsa and others that are completely improvised, like “free dancing” in a club. For this paper I am mainly focusing on the latter; free social dancing without rules or choreographed steps.

## **Is the virtual real?**

Before we dive into the differences of virtual and real social dancing parties, let’s take a moment to think about the on-going discourse about the definition of the real and the virtual. Is the virtual real? I could fill an entire paper about this question only, but restrict myself to a brief overview of the thoughts of some influential

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<sup>1</sup> Angela McRobbie, “Dance Narratives and Fantasies of Achievement,” in *Meaning in Motion*, 211.

<sup>2</sup> Julie Maling, *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader* (Baltimore, MD: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> Helena Wulff, “Dance, Anthropology Of,” In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 667, Elsevier, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Lynne Hanna, 2020, “Social Dancing,” In *Encyclopedia of Recreation and Leisure in America*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/social-dancing>.

philosophers. At the end of this paper I will come back to this discourse, to discuss whether this paper contributed to one (or more) of these thoughts.

In general the virtual is not seen as real, being an imitation or simulation of reality; pretending to be real, as defined by Charles Sanders Peirce in his *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*.<sup>5</sup> In this case the virtual seems to be on the other side of a spectrum, contrasting the real. Philosopher Gilles Deleuze does not agree with this definition. Inspired by the thoughts of French philosopher Henri Bergson, who defined the virtual as a part of the whole that is real, Deleuze states that the virtual is not opposed to the real. Instead, the virtual can be very real and the opponent of the virtual is called the actual.<sup>6</sup> In *Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?* German artist and writer Hito Steyerl talks about how the Internet is moving offline, meaning that the “real” world is influenced by the virtual and that the “real” world again is traveling into the virtual.<sup>7</sup> The two are merging together, and therefore it is very hard to set a clear border between the “real” and the virtual nowadays. From this point on, I will use Deleuze’s definition, and therefore refer to actual versus virtual social dancing, instead of real versus virtual.

## **Actual versus virtual space in social dance**

*“Dance is always movement in space and time. The dancer is always in relationship to the ‘animating’ spirit, the space, other dancers and those who are observers of this phenomenon. There is a purity of expression in this essentially nonverbal relationship.” – Robert F. VerEecke*

In *Dance, Space and Subjectivity*, Valerie A. Birginshaw states that space is often taken for granted but is highly important for dance. According to her, space (and also time) is a social construction that is open to change. Birginshaw is also talking about the concept of dancing in “In-Between Spaces”, shifting from physical to metaphoric spaces. These “In-Between Spaces” are situated between or across precisely defined categories, in which souls and energies are coming together.<sup>8</sup> During the past few months, since the start of Corona, I feel that traditional physical spaces of social dance are transforming into metaphoric virtual “In-Between Spaces” in which people are coming together.

When talking about physical spaces I am referring to spaces in which social dancing normally takes place, for example club venues. Often, these spaces have a dance floor with coloured lights and music box systems that make sure you are getting “in” the music while dancing. Not even to speak about live music. When being in a space like this, I automatically feel different than being at home; the space brings me in a state of excitement and cheerfulness. At the beginning of the party the space is empty, but it slowly fills all its corners with people until you might describe the place as crowded.

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<sup>5</sup> C. S. Peirce “Virtual,” In *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, edited by James Mark Baldwin, 763–64, New York: Macmillan, 1902.

<sup>6</sup> Keith Ansell-Pearson, “The Reality of the Virtual: Bergson and Deleuze,” *MLN* 120, no. 5 (2005): 1112–27.

<sup>7</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” *E-Flux Journal*, no. 49 (2013), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/>.

<sup>8</sup> Valerie Birginshaw, *Dance, Space and Subjectivity* (London, England: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009).

This kind of place is very different from your own empty space at home, living room or bedroom, from which you are attending the virtual dancing party. Next to this actual space, metaphoric virtual space is added and serving as a means to attend the party and dance “together”. People are meeting within this virtual space, or as Andrew Murphie in conversation with Sher Doruff puts it: “peoples spaces are now their interfaces”.<sup>9</sup> In this paper I am focussing on communication platform Zoom, which Geert Lovink, director of the Institute of Network Cultures, describes as “another room in the house”.<sup>10</sup>

## Meeting “in” Dance

One of the characteristics of social dancing is to meet friends and the possibility to meet new people. What does it mean to meet someone? In *Taxidermy for Language – Animals*, artist and researcher Tine Melzer gives a striking definition. She states that we speak of a “meeting” when “two or more people are coming together, exchanging language and enact certain rule-governed behaviour in order to communicate”.<sup>11</sup> In the case of social dancing we are not talking about the exchange of verbal language, but rather about the metaphorical language of eye contact, smell, touch, body movements and rhythms.

Melzer demonstrates with her work “This is how we meet” that, in order to meet, you need a relatively close distance between the people who are meeting.<sup>12</sup> This close distance has become a metaphoric one in the case of virtual social dance. While someone can be dancing on the other side of the world, he or she is brought very close to you via the screen.

Tine Melzer adds to her definition of meeting that, in order to meet you need a certain place and date. Just like space, which we discussed earlier, time is a crucial element as well.<sup>13</sup> When entering a Zoom party via a meeting ID, often promoted via Instagram or Facebook, you can suddenly be in the middle of the dance floor, because you might be on full screen for other participants. Leaving a virtual party also happens very quickly: just press leave and you are out. With that click you are immediately back home, where (in fact) you already were, obviously. From my own experience, the duration of my attendance at a Zoom party is much shorter than of an actual party. I feel less excited to dance all night long.

As I just mentioned, interaction and connection through social dance arises through multiple sensory experiences: *eye contact, smell, touch and synchronisation of the rhythms of dancing bodies (visual) and sounds*. I will elaborate on these factors and discuss whether these experiences are also part of virtual social dancing.

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<sup>9</sup> Sher Doruff, Andrew Murphie. “FCJ-153 Multimedia Mixing and Real-Time Collaboration: Interview with Sher Doruff about the Development and Use of KeyWorx , the Translocal and Polyrhythmic Diagrams.” *The Fibreculture Journal*, 2012, 150.

<sup>10</sup> Geert Lovink, “The Anatomy of Zoom Fatigue,” Eurozine.com, November 2, 2020, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-anatomy-of-zoom-fatigue/>.

<sup>11</sup> Tine Melzer, *Taxidermy for Language - Animals* (Zürich, Switzerland: Rollo Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

### *Synchronisation of the rhythms of dancing bodies and sounds*

Music is sensed through the ears, but the appreciation of music involves the whole body, leading to dance movements.<sup>14</sup> Music binds people together and can increase cooperation. In the case of social dancing, this same musical rhythm starts people to move their bodies at the same frequency.<sup>15</sup> By repeating motions, predictability increases and therefore others can anticipate: copying, mirroring or dancing with the same rhythm or energy.<sup>16</sup> Moving together in time constitutes a kind of “social glue”.<sup>17</sup>

How strong is this glue in the case of virtual social dancing via Zoom? The people joining in a particular party will listen to the same music, but often via another platform, for example Twitch, to make sure that synchronisation of music is at its best.<sup>18</sup> Seen this sound synchronisation can be pretty accurate it is possible to synchronize dancing moves as well. Though, the quality of movement synchronisation, via visuals and sounds, is strongly dependent on the strength of the Wi-Fi connections of the participants.

Next to the music there can be other sounds involved at an actual social dancing party. Think of sounds produced by clapping and singing. These sounds could also improve interactions.<sup>19</sup> When attending a zoom party it is possible to mute or unmute the computer microphones. When unmuted, all the different voices are mixed and create a chaotic layer of sounds. Therefore the microphones are often muted. Though, I do not think that the absence of these extra sounds has a large impact on the experience of social dancing, because it is more about the produced movements than the extra produced sounds.

### *Eye contact*

It is not possible to make actual eye contact in the case of virtual social dancing, which is an important factor when it comes to the regulation of interaction.<sup>20</sup> It is a kind of non-verbal exchange that is able to evoke emotional reactions.<sup>21</sup> Eye contact is, for example, able to express intimacy and to give information about competence or attraction. Furthermore, just like the rhythm of music, eye contact leads to synchronisation in the sense of the rhythm of gaze shifts.<sup>22</sup>

It is possible to fake eye contact on Zoom by looking straight in the webcam; for the other(s) it seems as if you are looking straight into their eyes. Though, direct virtual eye contact is an illusion. The webcam might look like an eye, but it is not and from my own experience, it is impossible to look at the other’s eyes on the screen and at the webcam simultaneously.

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<sup>14</sup> Walter J. Freeman, “A Neurobiological Role of Music in Social Bonding,” In *The Origins of Music*, 9, The MIT Press, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Reddish, Ronald Fischer, and Joseph Bulbulia. “Let’s Dance Together: Synchrony, Shared Intentionality and Cooperation.” *PLoS One* 8, no. 8 (2013): e711182.

<sup>16</sup> Freeman, “A Neurobiological Role of Music in Social Bonding.”

<sup>17</sup> Piercarlo Valdesolo, Jennifer Ouyang, and David DeSteno, “The Rhythm of Joint Action: Synchrony Promotes Cooperative Ability,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46, no. 4 (2010): 693–95.

<sup>18</sup> Brian Blattner, “How to Do an Awesome Zoom Live Streaming – NomadX,” Nomadx.com, April 16, 2020, <https://blog.nomadx.com/zoom-live-streaming/>.

<sup>19</sup> Freeman, “A Neurobiological Role of Music in Social Bonding.”

<sup>20</sup> C. L. Kleinke, “Gaze and Eye Contact: A Research Review,” *Psychological Bulletin* 100, no. 1 (1986): 78–100.

<sup>21</sup> Aleks H. Syrjämäki, Poika Isokoski, Veikko Surakka, Tytti P. Pasanen, and Jari K. Hietanen, “Eye Contact in Virtual Reality – A Psychophysiological Study,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 112, no. 106454 (2020): 106454.

<sup>22</sup> Kleinke, “Gaze and Eye Contact”, 78–100.

## *Smell*

In actual social dancing, smells are part of the experience. This could be the scent of a perfume that someone is wearing or natural body scents, including the smell of sweat. Smell is a very ungraspable, subjective and mysterious sense.<sup>23</sup> Because smell responses avoid our intellect, going straight to the hypothalamus, scents have an instantaneous emotional impact quite different from most thoughts, sights and sounds.<sup>24</sup> When you smell something, your sensory organs create an experience inside the body; this can be a memory or feeling.<sup>25</sup> You do not get the same emotional experience when you are just looking at something.<sup>26</sup> Scents make you communicate with other humans in a very unconscious way.<sup>27</sup> We all possess a certain body odor, which is used as a means of chemical communication.<sup>28</sup> From a biological evolutionary perspective, it can give important information about the genetic quality of a person<sup>29</sup> and body scents play a role in defining the healthiness of a person.<sup>30</sup> Social dancing can be seen as a sexual ritual. Body odor clearly plays a key role in this context. In virtual social dance the scent of others is completely absent.

## *Touch*

Touch does not necessarily need to take place in social dancing. Though, it can be an important factor. Touching in social dance can take many different shapes, from accidental short touches to the complete entanglement of two dancing bodies; “hugged dancing”. Touch in dancing is a powerful tool to make contact and to establish a physical, but also a mental, connection.<sup>31</sup> It really contributes to the experience of being “seen”.<sup>32</sup>

Another sensational experience, related to touch, is the wetness. Clothes can become damp, wet or sometimes even soaked through transpiration. Sweat can be flying around, when the dancing includes fast movements. Whether this wetness is perceived as enjoyable or disgusting is subjective, but that counts for many of the factors discussed in this paper. I see the wetness as an outcome of heated passion, giving it all on the dance floor. Therefore, I am able to enjoy it to some extent.

Just like with smell, touch is completely absent in the case of virtual social dancing on Zoom.

## *Other factors*

There are other factors that can be part of a session of actual social dancing. I am talking about the activities happening in between dances. These could for example be, drinking alcohol, a visit to the toilet to check your

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<sup>23</sup> Charles S Sell, *Chemistry and the Sense of Smell*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Katia Johansen, “Perfumed Textiles,” *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, 2008, 104.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Sell, *Chemistry and the Sense of Smell*, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Jan Havlicek, S. Craig Roberts, and Jaroslav Flegr, “Women’s Preference for Dominant Male Odour: Effects of Menstrual Cycle and Relationship Status,” *Biology Letters* 1, no. 3 (2005): 256–59.

<sup>30</sup> Kara-Lynne Kerr, Stephanie Joyce Rosero, and Richard L. Doty, “Odors and the Perception of Hygiene,” *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 100, no. 1 (2005): 135–41.

<sup>31</sup> Norma Matherly, “Navigating the Dance of Touch: An Exploration into the Use of Touch in Dance/Movement Therapy,” *American Journal of Dance Therapy* 36, no. 1 (2014): 77–91.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

hair, talking with strangers or going outside to get some air. In the case of virtual social dancing there might be breaks too, including drinking alcohol, eating, toilet visits and going outside, but I agree with Geert Lovink that the whole experience of the virtual meeting has become less adventurous.<sup>33</sup>

To see and being seen is also part of actual social dancing parties. I am referring to the audience standing around or on the dancing floor, looking at other people, discovering new faces and moving bodies. These bodies might inspire to copy certain moves or to attract and therefore create new interactions. The audience can be your dancing partner or another person standing on or around the dancing floor.

In the case of virtual social dancing parties, performativity seems to play an even bigger role. You are alone in your room, but you might be watched... In Geert Lovink's essay about "the anatomy of Zoom fatigue", he is talking about this notion of performativity. When being on Zoom it feels as if you are constantly on stage, which that brings you in a constant state of self-consciousness.<sup>34</sup> Even if your webcam is not on full screen, you might be watched, so you feel that you have to check your image all the time, as if you are looking into a mirror.<sup>35</sup>

Before I will give my final conclusions I want to give some attention to the fact that for some people Zoom parties might actually be experienced as a preferred form of going out. As illustrated in the following article: *I've Never Been a Club Guy, But In Quarantine I've Become One*. Daniel Dumas explains that he never really enjoyed going out. He does not like the packed groups of people, sweaty bodies and expensive drinks. Therefore he is now really enjoying "virtual nightlife experiences".<sup>36</sup> This example illustrates that the experience of social dancing and going out is a subjective and personal. The conclusions I am drawing in this paper are also in part subjective.

## Conclusion

To conclude this paper, there are many different factors that construct the experience of actual social dancing. Some of these factors are the same in the case of virtual social dancing, though there are also big differences that contribute to a different experience. Touch, together with eye contact, establishes a strong feeling of connection. Therefore the experience of virtual social dancing is not able to compete with actual social dancing. It becomes a less multi sensory experience, based on mostly visual perception and sound. Furthermore, reasons to go out are to escape daily life and to meet people. When attending a zoom party from home you are still stuck in your every day environment and it is more difficult to meet new people via a virtual interspace. We are simultaneously connected and alone. Being "live" does not give the guarantee of feeling alive.

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<sup>33</sup> Geert Lovink, "The Anatomy of Zoom Fatigue," Eurozine.com, November 2, 2020, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-anatomy-of-zoom-fatigue/>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Daniel Dumas. "I've Never Been a Club Guy. But in Quarantine I've Become One." Esquire, April 24, 2020.

<https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a32256114/best-dj-live-streams-dance-parties-clubs-online-during-coronavirus-quarantine/>.

To come back to the discourse about whether the virtual is real, in my opinion, the “real” or actual and the virtual are more and more becoming one and the same thing. They are not opposed to each other, but rather moving and crossing each other on a scale, mixing things up and forming new realities. In the case of social dancing via Zoom, it feels like a virtual social dancing activity is experienced as an aspect of reality. Therefore I agree with Deleuze that the virtual is real, but I must add that virtual social dancing is certainly a different experience when compared to the physical, actual experience.

Technology is improving and in the future it might be possible to create a virtual reality social dance experience that is as close to an actual dancing experience, including touch, smell and eye contact. The virtual is becoming as real as the actual, or even becoming super real. Though, I think it will never be able to replace the actual. To say it in a spiritual way, I will always miss the closeness of the others soul.

Nevertheless, in these crazy times of social distance, technology, including Zoom parties, can fill the gap of social dancing, at least to some extent. So set up a link, invite your friends, don't forget to dress up and... let's dance!

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