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Archaeological Perspectives

# CONNECTED BODIES

The First-Person  
Perspective  
and  
Empathy

Markéta Hrehorová

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Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

# **CONNECTED BODIES**

## **The First-Person Perspective and Empathy**

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21 June 2020

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Cover image was created by the author herself.

I hereby declare that this dissertation is an original piece of work, written by myself alone. Any information and ideas from other sources are acknowledged fully in the text and notes.

Amsterdam, 21 June 2020

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Hrehorová', written in a cursive style.

Markéta Hrehorová

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# 1. Introduction

*Movies are the most powerful empathy machine in all the arts. When I go to a great movie I can live somebody else's life for a while. I can walk in somebody else's shoes. I can see what it feels like to be a member of a different gender, a different race, a different economic class, to live in a different time, to have a different belief.*

*This is a liberalizing influence on me. It gives me a broader mind. It helps me to *join my family of men and women on this planet*. It helps me to identify with them, so I'm not just stuck being myself, day after day.*

—Robert Ebert, film critic, 2005<sup>1</sup>

We achieve our very subtle understanding of other people thanks to certain collections of special cells in the brain called mirror neurons. These are the tiny miracles that get us through the day. They are at the heart of how we navigate through our lives. *They bind us with each other, mentally and emotionally.*

Why do we give ourselves over to emotion during the carefully crafted, heartrending scenes in certain movies? Because mirror neurons in our brains re-create for us the distress we see on the screen. *We have empathy for the fictional characters—we know how they're feeling—because we literally experience the same feelings ourselves.*

—Marco Iacoboni, neuroscientist, in *Mirroring People: The New Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others* (2008)<sup>2</sup>

Although the two authors of the quotes above come from vastly different backgrounds — film and neuroscience — they nonetheless agree on three points. First and foremost, they both believe that humans are bonded to each other empathetically. Second, empathy lets people experience life as another person experiences it. And third, audiences empathise with fictional characters in a similar manner as they do with real people. What emerges from this comparison is that *empathy seems to connect bodies of people, as well as bodies of knowledge.*

Although empathy has been defined differently across texts, fields, and time, the term generally stands for the ability to imagine oneself in another person's situation and consequently share their feelings. As Ebert's quote suggests, culture often helps with this imaginative process. This leads Ebert to label movies as an "empathy machine," meaning that media products can change people's minds and gradually also the society as a whole. For the same reason, virtual reality has been dubbed "the ultimate empathy machine" by Chris Milk, a leading creative figure in the field of virtual reality.<sup>3</sup> According

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<sup>1</sup> Ebert 2005, §3-4, my emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Iacoboni 2008, pg. 4, my emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Milk 2015, in the title of his talk.

to Milk, virtual reality makes you feel “present” in the represented world and most importantly, “present with the people you are inside of it with.”<sup>4</sup> This ‘first-hand’ witnessing supposedly makes people more compassionate, empathetic, connected and ultimately ‘more human.’<sup>5</sup> Historian Lynn Hunt also claims that the widespread popularity of epistolary novels (a type of first-person novel) had contributed significantly in making the society more empathetic, which has then led to the establishment of individual human rights in the second half of the eighteenth century. According to these claims, culture has the capacity to improve our society by simulating empathy and thereby making us more human than human. But what discourse about empathy has made this kind of thinking — shared by Ebert, Hunt, and Milk — possible? And in turn, how this empathy machine rhetoric influences those constructing theories and studies about empathy?

What patterns could we further trace between culture and conceptualisations of empathy? I am especially intrigued by Hunt’s claims about the social impact of first-person novels in the eighteenth century, as that period also produced crucial conceptualisations of sympathy, a term closely related to the definition and history of empathy. The ‘first-person’ form of narration or presentation of the world is especially interesting for its close ties to the platitudinous explanations of empathy as ‘seeing the world through someone else’s eyes’ or ‘walking a mile in their shoes.’ This is especially true for virtual reality, which transports the user’s first-person perspective into a new environment. Cinema along with other media also have their methods for putting their audience into the body of another person. The fact that the first-person perspective in media and empathy are both understood as ways of perceiving the world from the perspective of another person makes one wonder what exchange might have occurred between the two phenomena since the eighteenth century all the way to the contemporary notion of the ‘empathy machine.’ This thesis will, therefore, investigate the propinquities, parallels, and overlaps between the way empathy has been conceptualised throughout history and the way various creators used media to simulate bodies and minds.

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## 1.1 Central Question and Terminology

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This thesis studies the exchange between first-person media products and the study of empathy. The guiding question is: *what is the historical interrelationship between the development of the first-person perspective in media and empathy studies?* In other words, how have different conceptualisations of empathy influenced the progression of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 5:18.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 9:58.

the first-person perspective across media and how have different variations of the first-person perspective affected the theoretical evolution of empathy?

The two key terms — first-person perspective and empathy — used in the central question and throughout the rest of this thesis are based on the following definitions:

**Empathy:**

*Empathy is the state of contracting the same or equivalent feelings of another being. I use the word contract intentionally, to emphasise the ambiguous role of agency in the process, as one may “catch” the emotions of another unintentionally or unconsciously, as much as one can incur the affect by consciously imagining the experience of the other being.*

**The first-person perspective:**

*The first-person perspective (FPP) is a media simulation or representation of a person’s real-life experience of the world that positions the consumer spatially and mentally in the body and/or the mind of the subject. The FPP may mediate the content of the subject’s vision, hearing, thinking, as well as internal and external bodily sensations. The representation is usually tied to an action, situation, and/or feeling.*

To further streamline my research, I choose to qualify the defined terms. In regards to the FPP, I will not address non-human beings or entities as the subjects. I will also ignore the difference between representing the perspective of and empathising with a fictional and real-life subject. I will, therefore, not differentiate between autobiography and fiction, when analysing an FPP or when discussing the subject of the audience’s empathy. This is because the difference has very little significance in regards to the historical development of empathy studies and the FPP, although I realise this could not be swept under the table if I were to discuss the relationship of the two within phenomenology and ontology. Additionally, based on the definition of empathy given above, I will also analyse discourse that does not employ the term ‘empathy’ specifically. I will thus also look at theories that use other words, like sympathy, compassion, Mitleid, or Einfühlung, to talk about the same or essentially similar phenomenon. I hope this will produce a more extensive and nuanced historical overview and discourse analysis.

Due to the historical breadth and comparative media depth, my understanding of the first-person perspective will have to include similar or overlapping terminology employed in various fields. It is thus necessary to align my chosen and defined term — the ‘first-person perspective’ — with established terminology within the theory of

respective media. The following table provides an overview of the terms equivalent to the first-person perspective:

<b>THE FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE ACROSS MEDIA</b>					
<b>MEDIUM</b>	<b>FPP TERM</b>	<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>PERCEPTION</b>	<b>AGENCY</b>	<b>SPATIALITY</b>
Painting	Linear perspective	-	Vision	Position in relation to the canvas	Dependent on the viewer's position and the vanishing point
Literature	First-person point of view, homodiegetic narration	Character as a narrator	Imagination	-	Dependent on description
Photography	Subjective shot, first-person anti-selfie	Author	Vision	-	Dependent on the space represented
Cinema	Point of view shot (veridical, subjectively inflected and subjectively saturated)	(POV) Character	Vision and hearing	-	Dependent on POV shot and objective (third-person) shot
Comics	Internal point of view or spatial point of view	Character/narrator	Vision	-	Limited to frames
Computer Games	First-person	Avatar, playable character	vision, hearing, touch	Control of camera direction and the subject's movement in space	Dependent on the player
Virtual Reality	first-person point of view	User or character	vision, hearing, touch	Control of camera direction and the subject's movement in space	Dependent on the user
Live Action Role-Playing Game	First-person perspective	character/spect-actor	Real and fictional perception is identical	Full agency	That of the spect-actor

## **1.2 Theoretical Framework**

As Michel Foucault exposes in *The Order of Things* (1970)<sup>6</sup>, production of knowledge is influenced and to some extent even predetermined by the culture it is produced in. Foucault calls this unconscious structure (order) and frame of produced knowledge the “episteme” of a period.<sup>7</sup> Understanding how scientific and theoretical discourse is shaped by culture when these texts do not explicitly refer to cultural products is, of course, tricky and requires tracing patterns rather than direct links. That is the primary framework and methodology that propels this thesis. Lynn Hunt has shown, for example, how epistolary novels have facilitated the individual rights of man to become self-evident. In her book *Inventing Human Rights* (2007), Hunt explains how this massively disseminated and

<sup>6</sup> First published in French as *Les mots et les choses* in 1966.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault 2005, pg. xvi-xxvi.

popular format of first-person literature has fostered a sense of understanding and compassion for others. Although first-person novels are still being written today, they no longer have that pop culture status. Today, audiences more frequently encounter internal monologue of film protagonists, first-person computer games, status updates on *FACEBOOK*, vlogs on *YOUTUBE*, and hand-held videos on *TIKTOK*. But this ubiquity of the first-person in media seems to have engendered very few progressive policies and ethics. Instead, we now have rising xenophobia, mass shootings, and what seems like a general decadence of empathy.

The sociologist and psychologist Sherry Turkle calls this “the crisis of empathy” in her most recent book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (2015).<sup>8</sup> Based on empirical research and interviews, Turkle claims that “technology is implicated in the assault on empathy” and advocates for face-to-face conversations.<sup>9</sup> For several decades now, Turkle has investigated the evolving relationship of humans and digital technology. Already in her seminal book *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (1984) Turkle argued that human-computer interaction cannot substitute human-to-human real-life interactions as technology does not let us fully exercise empathy. Turkle illustrates this on the difference between role-playing in computer games and in real-life play of children; while computer games or any systematic game structure imposes rules which predefines the possible performances, actions and even fantasy, the classic ‘you be the daddy and I’ll be the mommy’ game has no rules and relies solely on the child’s ability to imagine the world from the perspective of another person — to empathise.<sup>10</sup>

In *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1997) Turkle argues that the self in the digital age is no longer the singular ‘second-self’ but rather fragmented and multiple as users explore a great variety of identities. In other words, role-playing in computer games presumably fosters an exploration of the hidden aspects and fantasies of the depths of our mind rather than that of another.<sup>11</sup> Alan Kirby expands on this notion through his concept of ‘super-subjectivity’ in *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (2009). According to Kirby, computer games facilitate super-subjectivity by allowing the player to play as multiple characters and thus as multiple selves (who may often die without consequences), a state which essentially manifests characteristics of schizophrenia and psychopathy. Kirby ultimately contends that the inflated ‘I’ of the first-person perspective in computer games prohibits players to feel compassion, generating, instead, an indifference towards the

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<sup>8</sup> Turkle 2015, pg. 8, and The Aspen Institute 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Turkle 2015, pg. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Turkle 1984, pg. 81.

<sup>11</sup> Turkle 1997, pg. 49.

Other.<sup>12</sup> More recently, the first-person perspective specifically has been attacked as a reinstatement of the Western gaze with all its implications of masculinity, control, colonialism, and objectification, as Adam Lauder and Lee Rodney assert in their discussion of GoPro drone videos in 'The Tremendous Image' (2018).<sup>13</sup> So the effect and reception of the first-person in digital media seems to be dramatically different from that of the first-person in literature.

And yet, virtual reality — which employs the FPP in a very similar way to computer games — is promoted as an “empathy machine” by the artists Chris Milk. In his 2017 article 'Empathy Machines,' Grant Bollmer investigates Milk's claim that virtual reality or any other immersive digital media foster empathy by enabling the audience to inhabit another body and sense its emotions. Bollmer contends that this is not what actually happens, as the audience “absorbs” the other's experience into one's own.<sup>14</sup> Hence, the Other not only becomes an object of consumption, but is additionally annihilated and subsumed by the user. Bollmer therefore denounces first-person immersive media and empathy as such. In his chapter 'From Immersion to Empathy: The Legacy of *Einfühlung* in Digital Art and Videogames' (2020), Bollmer also refuses the existence of a 'crisis of empathy.' Nevertheless, he does not leave the concept behind altogether. Bollmer also wrote on 'The Automation of Empathy' (2019); what hides behind that equivocal title is an analysis of the ability of artificial intelligence (AI) software to identify emotions based on facial expressions. Bollmer also connects the facial recognition *qua* emotion recognition to German aesthetic theory of empathy. Bollmer compares empathy to immediacy (the illusion of non-mediation, which often involves the first-person perspective)<sup>15</sup>, essentially conflating the two as they both put the user in the shoes of another subject. This is because Bollmer focuses mainly on the aesthetic theory of empathy and its roots in *Einfühlung*, while overlooking interpersonal empathy and the history of sympathy that lies beyond that. In fact, Bollmer refers to German aesthetic theory almost exclusively in all his writings on empathy, ignoring other historical roots of empathy like sympathy and *Mitleid*, as well as more recent philosophical and psychological theories. This leads Bollmer to believe that immediacy and media employing the first-person perspective especially make the users 'lose themselves' or take over the body of the Other.<sup>16</sup> While this may be true in some cases, Bollmer ignores the fact many empathy theoreticians insert an important condition into their definitions and

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<sup>12</sup> Kirby 2009, pg. 169-172.

<sup>13</sup> Lauder and Rodney 2018, pg. 80-81.

<sup>14</sup> Bollmer 2017, pg. 64.

<sup>15</sup> Bollmer specifically uses the word immersion, but this term has become rather ambiguous. For that reason, I use the term immediacy to accurately describe what Bollmer actually means.

<sup>16</sup> Bollmer 2017, pg. 71-72.

explanations of empathy: the empathiser must clearly distinguish between her Self and the Other. Bollmer's discussion of empathy and immediacy comes at the entanglement of empathy studies and the first-person perspective from a different angle, which this thesis hopefully supplements.

In order to consider and include a great variety of different conceptualisations of empathy as I have defined it earlier, I will take advantage of existing historical overviews of the concept of empathy — be it under that exact term 'empathy' or hiding under different names like 'sympathy,' 'Mitleid,' or 'hineinfühlen.' Although many theorists like Bollmer avoid looking past empathy and *Einführung*, the psychologist Gustav Jahoda in his article 'Theodor Lipps and the shift from "sympathy" to "empathy"' (2005) exposes how empathy is not an original concept born in the late nineteenth century, but rather a continuation of the term sympathy. This is why I choose to draw from *Sympathy: A History* (2015), a collection edited by the political scientist Eric Schliesser, which tracks sympathy as far as ancient Greece and across a multitude of fields (including classics, medicine, psychology, philosophy, art, political theory, and economics). Schliesser acknowledges the proximity of sympathy and empathy and provides a rich selection of theories and concepts that are often left out in historical overviews focused solely on empathy. The philosopher of psychology, Karsten R. Stueber, points out that since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century there has been a lull in the study of empathy and advocates for a 'rehabilitation' of empathy. In his book *Rediscovering Empathy Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences* (2006), Stueber looks at recent explanations of how we 'read' the minds of others proposed by folk-psychologists and simulation theorists and how these extend the earlier discourse on empathy. Furthermore, Stueber's appeal for a resurrection of empathy is heard loud and clear by the philosophers Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, editors of *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (2011). Although the volume focuses on empathy in terms of the mind, aesthetics, and ethics, the introduction also glances into clinical psychology and ethology. The biggest issue with tracing the history of the concept is that it is defined and used in different ways across history, disciplines, and languages. This "heterogeneity of empathy" is addressed in *Empathy: Epistemic Problems and Cultural-Historical Perspectives of a Cross-Disciplinary Concept* (2017) edited by the genetic psychologist Vanessa Lux and the literary scholar Sigrid Weigel. Rather than studying empathy within the constraints of specific fields, this volume focuses on the interdisciplinarity of the concept — i.e. what lies in-between the fields and the losses resulting from various translation processes. These broad overviews will serve as my guides through the extended history of empathy, as well as data inventories for my discourse analysis.

While there are enough historical overviews of the concept of empathy, equivalent coverage of the first-person perspective is missing in media studies. Some scholars have,

nonetheless, put together small independent pieces of the whole puzzle, which I have collected, connected, and complemented. The 'first-person' is originally a term coming from literary theory. The evolution of the first-person novel has been delineated by the literary scholar Bertil Romberg in his monograph *Studies in the Narrative Technique of the First-Person Novel* (1962). Romberg identifies the various types of the first-person novel and also includes an overview of how they gained prominence throughout history. Film creators also wanted to remediate the literary first-person narration in their works, which has been nonetheless problematic as the film-critic Julio L. Moreno highlights in 'Subjective Cinema: And the Problem of Film in the First Person' (1953). Moreno reproaches the aim of recreating the literary technique of conflating the narrator and the protagonist in film as a "first-person visual," since cinema does not *narrate* but rather *presents*.<sup>17</sup> The so-called 'point of view shot' has nonetheless established itself as a commonplace cinematic technique; film's own model of the first-person. An important translation of the literary point of view and narratology into cinema has been created by Bruce Kavin in *Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard, and First-Person Film* (1978), which includes under the cinematic 'first-person' what a character is seeing, hearing, and thinking. The aesthetic of the cinematic audio-visual first-person eventually found its way into computer games, as the philosopher and media studies scholar Alexander Galloway exposes in his essay 'The Origins of the First-Person Shooter' (2006). Galloway, however, maintains that computer games fulfil the promise of the audiovisual first-person through interaction. The cinematic first-person also seems to have influenced recent practices in photography on social media, as Alise Tifentale and Lev Manovich acknowledge in their discussion of the 'anti-selfie' in 'Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self' (2018). Clearly, the first-person has travelled through different media, mutating each time as it adjusted to each medium. Yet the question remains how the studies of empathy might have influenced this progression and transformation, as well as how different version of the first-person might have affected how the conceptualisation of empathy changed throughout the years.

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### **1.3 Approach**

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The relationship between the FPP and empathy could be explored in a multitude of ways, most obviously from the perspective of ontology and phenomenology. But as this thesis will show, each of the two phenomena can be explained differently according to the context and period. This is why it is necessary to first establish a historical overview of the ways the FPP and empathy have interacted and the various forms the FPP takes across

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<sup>17</sup> Moreno 1953, pg. 354-355.

media. Only then can we pick a point and fully unpack the relationship between the two, but that must be left for another project due to the limited length of this thesis.

Based on the previous qualifications and central questions, the only logical step forward is to lay the histories of the two discussed phenomena side by side. The history of empathy as a concept has been thoroughly mapped by several scholars, although each covers a different focus and traces the roots into different depths. I will thus use the existing overviews for the history of empathy theory as a guide and choose relevant theories and primary source authors relevant to my discourse analysis and answering my central question. By relevant theories and authors I mean those, who deal with empathy in terms what it is, how it works, and how do we recognise it with regards to interpersonal relations, while ignoring hermeneutics, aesthetics, and ethics. I will, however, cite from primary literature (original or translated) directly, where possible. Although I will primarily employ the term empathy, the way I have defined it above overlaps with other terms used by various scholars. This is true most notably for sympathy, which is often used interchangeably with empathy. I will specify these instances and identify which exact term the thinkers employ, yet I will keep on using empathy in my own analyses.

To complement the existing timeline of empathy as a concept, I will need to establish an overview of the uses of the FPP across visual media and media history. Since such a historical survey has not yet been made in the scope and breadth this thesis requires, I have created a preliminary historical overview of the FPP myself. Furthermore, I looked at media history itself and searched for manifestations of the first-person perspective, as defined above, within each media-specific theory. Although this history could perhaps be traced all the way down to cave paintings, the central question limits me to go as far as the sixteenth century, where the prominent roots of empathy as a concept begin. I will ground the resulting overview of the FPP development in examples, which will be very briefly examined to illustrate the manifestation of the FPP in the discussed medium.

I will then lay the two histories side by side and examine points of overlap or similitude. However, my intention is not to prove that A led to B and B led to C, but rather to trace the parallels, intersections, and continuities between the two histories. Neither am I trying to say that the first-person perspective is necessary for the audience to empathise with the subject of the narrative or the visual perspective. This thesis will thereby present the results of my mapping of the historical entanglement between the two phenomena. Considering the historical breadth covered by the thesis, I will include the years of birth and death of each deceased scholar that is addressed, to provide an anchor and an overall supportive structure throughout the text.

Lastly, I find it only proper to write in the first-person singular instead of the traditional academic first-person plural. Like the 'I' of a first-person novel, the 'I' in this

thesis presents *my* research findings, thoughts, and arguments, with which you may or also may not agree with, but have the chance to see the topic at hand from *my* perspective. The 'I' of this thesis is thus here for you to *empathise with*.

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## 1.4 Overview

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Due to the historical essence of my investigation, the thesis uncovers the entanglement of empathy and the first-person perspective chronologically. The three main chapters are therefore dedicated to specific 'epistemes' of empathy and the first-person perspective, which capture the dominant approach to both phenomena in specific periods. The episteme of concord takes place from the late sixteenth century until the end of the eighteenth century, when empathy and the first-person perspective were implicated in making different people more akin and equal to one another. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries are marked by embodiment, since the two discussed phenomena were understood in terms of the body and its relation to the perceived environment. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century there is an emerging trend of similarity within empathy studies and applications of the first-person perspective, which makes the phenomena involved in social group building as well as mechanics of exclusion.

To begin uncovering the exchange between culture and explanations of how and why we can "catch" someone else's feelings, it is necessary to return to the sixteenth century. At that time, Platonic ideas about sympathy reemerged, influencing the way scholars thought about magnetism, contagious diseases, as well as the state of being affected by the feelings of another person. Empathy was therefore perceived as a form of contagion that spreads during conversation — the purest form of receiving information in the linguistic form of the first-person. Dialogue and annunciations in the first-person were remediated in the period's popular medium: theatre. Concurrently, these scholarly and medical beliefs about contagion were strongly reflected in William Shakespeare's plays. Theories surrounding fellow-feeling — at that time called sympathy — grew on popularity not only among scholars, but also in theatre and literature. This popular interest reached its peak in the eighteenth century, which is often dubbed at the 'age of sympathy.' In that era, the theatre was conceptualised by G.E. Lessing as a place where people collectively learned to empathise with the suffering of others as acted out on stage by the performers. This seemed to have affected the most cited early explanations of empathy created by David Hume and Adam Smith, who conceptualised the process as a kind of theatrical performance. During the age of sympathy, first-person novels were becoming increasingly popular and their content often dealt with the theme of feeling-with another. Sentimental epistolary novels, a sub-genre of the first-person novel, actually became pop

culture in the first half of the eighteenth century, as it began to be accepted for women to write letters and romantic letter exchange began to flourish. The rise of the epistolary novel has even been linked to the sudden 'self-evident' nature of 'the rights of man' in the second half of the eighteenth century, since the novels showed the struggles of other people and thereby supposedly prompted readers to become more empathetic. The age of sympathy thus seems to have produced the first 'empathy machine' in the form of the first-person novel.

However, the first half of the nineteenth century has been a witness to a new form of the first-person perspective, which included the audience in a completely new way. The stereoscope required the viewer's body for a completion of its spectacle. The recent advances in optics and properties of vision led to the invention of the stereoscope and helped create the illusion of a three-dimensional image. But for the first time, the resulting spectacle required the audience's body for completion; the stereoscope provided an embodied experience. Amidst this new mode of subjective vision, a novel concept emerged — "Einfühlung" — in Robert Vischer's *On the Optical Sense of Form* (1873). *Einfühlung*, which was later translated into English as empathy, describes the mental process of imaginatively displacing one's body into a new body or environment and referred to the active bodily participation of the viewer in the perception of a visual artwork. While this new, embodied, conceptualisation of empathy lay forgotten for a larger part of the nineteenth century, creators worked hard on making their works more subjective, embodied, and interactive. The first-person perspective of the novel and the stereoscope served as important models for photography, cinema, and ultimately also computer games and virtual reality. The first-person mode of perception especially anchored itself in the first-person shooter genre of computer games, which became extremely popular in the 1980s and the 1990s. Computer games and VR finally provided the embodied and interactive experience set out by the stereoscope and were therefore kinds of *Einfühlung machines*. Following this development of the first-person in media, new studies on empathy reemerged, which focused on a simulation of someone else's spatial perspective within an environment. This so-called simulation theory was backed up by the discovery of mirror neurons in the early 1990s. Mirror neurones activate both when a person executes a motor action and when the person simply sees someone else perform that movement. The brain thus simulates the perceived movements without actually acting them out. Mirror neurons are therefore interpreted as neuroscientific evidence of empathy, since they help us understand the behaviour of others from within our bodies. The resonance of this conceptualisation of empathy and what it means to see through someone else's eyes and walk in their shoes is still present in theory and design practice today.

Nonetheless, a new direction for the first-person perspective and empathy studies is slowly beginning to emerge since the 2000s. The massive availability of smartphones and lightweight cameras has allowed people to take photographs and videos of their lives on a daily basis. This has generated new patterns of audiovisual auto-mediation of one's experiences and activities as they are experienced from the subject's first-person perspective. An emerging trend in first-person perspective videos is that they are aimed to present the world to an audience similar to that of the creator. In other words, the first-person perspective is becoming implicated in social belonging, rather than offering the perspective of the Other. The first-person is thus shifting away from its singular form towards the plural — from 'I' towards 'we.' Meanwhile, empirical studies on empathy are showing that people are able to empathise more easily with subjects, who are similar to them. Other empathy theories are also putting more emphasis on the significance of empathy for establishing and sustaining a social group and how a strong hatred towards non-members can lead to exclusionary practices. However, it remains unclear whether the society's ability to empathise is getting worse, or whether empathy has always been egocentric, to begin with.

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## **1.5 Relevance and Contribution**

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In order to act conscientiously, it is extremely important to recognise the aesthetics we consume, replicate, and produce, and understand how they affect our perception of the world and our interpersonal relationships. As any computer game player or virtual reality user would attest to, our personal perception of the world is not the same as the first-person perspective provided by media. From Instagram photos and advertising, over computer games and films, all the way to police body-cam recordings, the aesthetic of the first-person perspective is almost everywhere. Even the perpetrators of the recent shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand and Halle, Germany have recorded their terrorist attacks using cameras strapped to their helmets and shared them live on social media. First-person shooter games are often blamed for such shootings; as Dan Patrick, the Lieutenant Governor of Texas, put it: "We've always had guns, always had evil, but I see a video game industry that teaches young people to kill."<sup>18</sup> But if we criticise and censure computer games for a certain social issue, why do we not go beyond reductionist psychological surveys of reproduced violence and semiotic analysis of content? Why do we ignore the modes of perceiving? Why do we take the ways we view others and understand our position in the world for granted? I believe that the role of the first-person perspective in media and its relationship with the process of empathy is unrightfully

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<sup>18</sup> Timm 2019, §4.

overlooked. The FPP not only simulates how each of us perceives the world, but also how we imagine a person would understand the perspective of another — i.e. what the mental product of our empathy is. Probing into the FPP would help us know how we understand our point of view and that of another person.

While computer games constantly have to defend themselves against statements like that of Dan Patrick, the prosocial effect of other media employing the FPP seems to be *self-evident*, as is the case for virtual reality for example. So why is one medium that uses the FPP frequently attacked for being antipathetic and another using that very same technique praised as an empathy machine? Can we distinguish between an ethical and a non-ethical mediation of the first-person perspective? Finding the answers to such questions would not only enrich the ongoing debate around the relationship of represented and real-life violence, but especially help identify ethical and socially non-threatening modes of perceiving through media. Although some attempts to scrutinise the FPP in relation to empathy have been made within the limits of specific media, a broader historical or comparative media analysis is still missing. Filling this gap would provide a structural understanding of the FPP beyond the bias towards certain media. The resulting study would also propel ongoing academic debates about the self in virtual worlds (and the digital age in general), the relationship between represented violence and real-life violence, or the affective capacity of media (e.g. Sontag 2004, Turkle 2005, Kirby 2009, Hadj-Moussa and Nijhawan 2014). My project should also prompt and inform empirical studies of the FPP in relation to empathy.

Although I reproach reductive statements that try to blame computer games for making players aggressive, violent, or antisocial, I do believe the medium has helped the first-person perspective become so prevalent across media. But how did we get to this point exactly? Looking even beyond computer games, how has the first-person perspective come to occupy such a prominent position in our visual language? What we need then is a comprehensive mapping of the first-person perspective in media and its historical development. Another lacuna persisting in media studies consists of a lack of levelling definitions of the FPP; i.e. a comprehensive overview of what the first-person means across media and media-specific theories. By establishing my own media-non-specific definition of the FPP, I wish to surpass the borders of media-specific theory. This definition will be further linked to existing conceptualisations of and terms for the first-person across media. This differentiation and levelling is important for understanding the specifics of the FPP in each medium and how media remediate the FPP from other media. This should help future research on the aesthetic and social impact of the FPP, as well as analyses of intermedial cultural products (works that employ design characteristics from two or more media, like game-comics or video-poetry). While some authors have written about the first-person within their respective media and some have discussed the

evolution of the perspective from cinema to computer games, this thesis will begin to build a foundation of a historical and a cross-media understanding of the first-person perspective.

So on one hand, my project opens up a debate about the entanglement of empathy and the mediated first-person perspective, in order to enrich academic debates about the self and its virtual simulation, effects of represented violence, and media ethics. On the other hand, the practical outcome of this thesis is a solid foundation for future studies on the first-person perspective across media and in relation to empathy.

## 2. Concord

### 2.1 Contagious Dialogue

We know diseases of stoppings, and suffocations, are the most dangerous in the body; and it is not much otherwise in the mind; you may take sarza to open the liver, steel to open the spleen, flowers of sulphur for the lungs, castoreum for the brain; but no receipt openeth the heart, but a true friend; to whom you may impart griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the heart to oppress it, in a kind of civil shrift or confession.<sup>19</sup>

This excerpt from one of the Essays (1597-1625), 'On Friendship,' written by the philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626) thereby observed that confiding in a friend is most effective in healing the diseased mind; Bacon thereby prescribed talking (essentially psychotherapy). Through conversation, we get to know the other person's thoughts, opinions, and struggles. Conversation then becomes a medium through which we access knowledge about someone else's life and their view of the world. When people speak about themselves, they generally do so in the first-person singular — the 'I.' Conversation is thus the most basic and ephemeral type of the first-person perspective. At the same time, it is exactly this *sharing* that instructs the way we come to imagine what it is like to be in the other person's shoes and see the world through their eyes. Therefore, it could be said that conversation is the earliest and purest empathy machine there is, as the more we talk to other people, the better we can empathise with them. This is exactly why Sherry Turkle wants us to reclaim conversation in order to alleviate the crisis of empathy she believes we are facing, instead of creating techno-fixes that only further disembody and disentangle communication. Empathy is thus fundamentally connected to the most basic and socially natural form of the first-person perspective.

However, conversation not only helps alleviate the speaker's pain, but it can also transfer the pain onto the listener. Bacon in the quote above actually describes friendly conversation in the context of ailment, and that only confiding in a friend is able to cure the mind. In fact, Renaissance medicine and natural philosophy conceived of sympathy and compassion as similar to disease contagion, since both spread invisibly during conversation.<sup>20</sup> These ideas and the use of the term sympathy emerged in the late fifteenth century based on the re-emergence of ancient Greek texts and Plato's *sympatheia*. Sympathy was understood as a force of nature that attracts two entities "based on similitude, analogy or favourable predisposition (*conveniens aptitudo*)

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<sup>19</sup> Bacon 1908, pg. 119.

<sup>20</sup> See Pantin 2005, Santer 2014, Langley 2018.

between the agent and the recipient subject.”<sup>21</sup> In his 1546 medical text *Contagion, Contagious Diseases, and their Treatment*, Girolamo Fracastoro (1478-1553) considers sympathy as a cosmic force that connects bodies in the whole universe. Fracastoro finds proof of sympathy in magnetism: the compass that always points to the Earth’s poles and the way iron moves towards a lodestone. Magnetic attraction exists independent of the two objects touching, the same way as one can get infected without actually touching the diseased; magnetism and contagion are thus both examples of what Fracastoro called “action-at-a-distance.”<sup>22</sup> Fracasotero further explains that the sympathetic connection is enabled by air, through which seeds of disease (*semina*), for example, may travel from one person to the other.<sup>23</sup> This is why proximity and conversation is considered dangerous amidst frequent plagues, since talking involved sharing the same air and thereby being vulnerable to affliction and affection.

Saturated with numerous plagues and contagious diseases, the sixteenth and seventeenth century helped create the idea of a subject that is very much vulnerable to its environment, since the subject’s body and mind can be affected from the outside. Since *conversing* included the possibility of *conversion* to the other’s physiological and/or psychological state, empathy (at that time sympathy) was regarded as a form of contagion that spreads during conversation. Philosopher and physician Annibale Magnocavalli in *The Civile Conversation of M. Steeven Guazzo* (1581) said: “as some diseases of the body are infectious, so the vices of the minde take from one to another, [...] so much force hath continual conversation, that oft time against our wils, we imitate the vice of others.”<sup>24</sup> So if one was speaking to a good hearted person, one had a chance of becoming a better person themselves. And contrarily, one’s morality could be corrupted by a wicked person. The morality of the society as a whole could then be regulated through conversation. The first-person ‘I’ and its thoughts, opinions, and values could rub off on its recipients as invisibly as a disease. Hence, the cross-section between empathy and conversation as a form of the first-person perspective lies at the very beginning of modern empathy discourse.

Although we now perceive empathy as a very favourable and even sought after state (perhaps even a *skill*), during the sixteenth and seventeenth century it was treated with great scepticism. Conversation was perceived as a potential threat to personal integrity, a sentiment strongly reflected in the period plays. The early philosophical and medical beliefs about sympathy are engraved in Shakespeare’s work, as numerous authors have shown, most extensively by Eric Langley in his book *Shakespeare's Contagious*

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<sup>21</sup> Pantin 2005, pg. 4, original italicisation.

<sup>22</sup> Santer 2014, pg. 82.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pg. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Guazzo and Pettie 1925, pg. 44.

*Sympathies: Ill Communications* (2018). Shakespeare's father-in-law John Hall was a physician, meaning that the playwright had access to the medical knowledge and practice of the time.<sup>25</sup> Characters in Shakespeare's plays often have to navigate through conversations with others, as they could become threats to their identity, integrity, privacy, safety, and health. For example in William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (first played in 1609), Menenius tells Brutus: "more of your conversation would infect my brain, being the herdsmen of the beastly plebeians: I will be bold to take my leave of you."<sup>26</sup> Friendship becomes especially dangerous as that makes one extremely vulnerable, as Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (first played in 1607) suggests: "Breath infect breath, at their society, as their friendship, may merely poison! Nothing I'll bear from thee, But nakedness, thou detestable town!"<sup>27</sup> In both cases, conversation and friendship are rendered as "infectious" or "poisonous," implying they are potentially harmful to the recipient. Additionally, both given examples are written in the first-person singular, as dialogue is an essential part of traditional theatre, a medium filled with first-person annunciations and exchanges. Conversation in the forms of an exchange of first-person annunciations was thus closely linked to the way empathy as a kind of contagion was imagined in the seventeenth century.

While the philosophical and medical discourse on empathy clearly imprinted itself onto the content of theatre plays, the act of conversation and its consequences amidst plagues informed the theoretical foundations of empathy. Theatre remained an important arena for empathy in the eighteenth century, as the phenomenon moved away from the context of contagious diseases towards a theatrical performance. The following section will, therefore, look more closely at certain eighteenth-century scholars and the way they used theatre to explain how one imagines the perspective of another person and is influenced by their feelings.

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## **2.2 Theatrical Sympathy**

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In the eighteenth century, the contagious effects of conversation were no longer limited to the speakers themselves, but began to be recognised as having an impact on other listeners as well. In the theatre house, this included the audience. The German philosopher and dramatist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) conceptualised theatre as a place where people collectively learned to empathise with the suffering of others, as it was acted out by the performers on the stage. Lessing opted for the term *Mitleid*

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<sup>25</sup> Skwire 2015, pg. 140.

<sup>26</sup> Shakespeare 1993b, *Coriolanus*, Act 2, scene 1, lines 92-94.

<sup>27</sup> Shakespeare 1993c, *Timon of Athens*, Act 4, scene 1, lines 30-32.

(translated from German as pity, compassion or sympathy, but literally meaning 'suffering with') in his writing to discuss these effects theatre has on spectators. Lessing's *Mitleid* comes about through "co-vibration" (*Mitbeben*) of the actor and the viewer.<sup>28</sup> In one of his *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel* [Letters on Tragedy] (1756), Lessing expressed his conviction that: "The most compassionate person is the best person, one who is most inclined to all social virtues and all kinds of generosity."<sup>29</sup> *Mitleid* was thus considered by Lessing as the best or most admirable human characteristic. Later, in his 1767 collection of essays titled *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, Lessing explicitly claimed that "theater should be the school of the moral world;" he believed theatre is supposed to help the audience train their ability to feel compassion, pity, and empathy in order to make them better humans in the social sphere.<sup>30</sup> The strength of theatre lies in the fact that it allows multiple people, not just an individual, to witness the same affective spectacle. *Mitleid* is thus experienced not by one person alone, but by a community observing the same play. Theatre thereby unites "the spectators, metaphorically speaking, in a "vibrating body" [Schwingungskörper], in which the particular qualities of the individuals are absorbed within a higher totality."<sup>31</sup> This quality of theatre to bind people in one place and time, while subjecting them to a wide variety of emotions simulated by the actors on the stage, allows the space to have a strong imperative to create a socially aware collective. What, in effect, emerges from Lessing's theory is theatre as an "empathy machine," which instructs individuals and communities on how to be receptive to the feelings of others.

Lessing's thesis about theatre was generally accepted by other scholars and artists, especially those working with the concept of sympathy. Theatre is believed to have influenced conceptualisations of sympathy greatly, supplying metaphors, illustrations, and mechanics for the theoretical discourse.<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Lamb in *The Evolution of Sympathy in the Long Eighteenth Century* (2009) specifically describes four kinds of conceptualisations of sympathy, one of which he calls *theatrical*. In *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy* (1988), David Marshall also traces "the interplay of theatre and sympathy" in the theoretical and fictional writing of eighteenth-century authors.<sup>33</sup> The most tangible impact of theatre's influence is that the transfer of emotions is placed primarily in the hands of the observer.

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<sup>28</sup> Lessing, G. E., *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel* (1756), quoted in Schneider 2017, pg. 212, 217.

<sup>29</sup> From the original: "Der mitleidigste Mensch ist der beste Mensch, zu allen gesellschaftlichen Tugenden, zu allen Arten der Großmut der aufgelegtste." Original quote and its translation taken from Zelle 1993, pg. 111-121.

<sup>30</sup> Translation of the original: "das Theater die Schule der moralischen Welt sein soll." Lessing 2003, volume I, piece II, §1.

<sup>31</sup> Lessing, G. E., *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel* (1756), quoted in Schneider 2017, pg. 211.

<sup>32</sup> Lamb 2009, pg. 64, and Marshall 1988, pg. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Marshall 1988, pg. 2.

In other words, empathy was conceived less as an uncontrollable consequence of conversation, but more as an active and conscious endeavour of the empathiser. Empathy was a state to be sought out especially for moral reasons, not an effect that one simply catches like a disease. Empathy was then no longer solely a consequence of another's first-person speech or narration, but rather of the empathiser's own first-person perception and imagination. This form of theatrical sympathy can be traced in the two most cited theoretical foundations of sympathy/empathy created by David Hume (1711–1776) and Adam Smith (1723–1790).

In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), David Hume maintains that “the minds of men are mirrors to one another,” as “they reflect each others emotions, [...] passions, sentiments and opinions.”<sup>34</sup> But for Hume emotions between people are not transmitted through the air, but rather the signs of the emotions form an idea in the mind of the companion.<sup>35</sup> For Hume, empathy (although using the term sympathy) is thus a product of our own imagination. Furthermore, Hume considers the mind as “a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.”<sup>36</sup> Hume likens the mind to theatre partly because he believes “the identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one.”<sup>37</sup> Hume maintains that a person's mind, identity, as well as empathy are mysterious processes and the way we conceptualise them is therefore based on our fantasy. Hume even describes empathy in aesthetic terms, calling the one, who empathises, as the “beholder”<sup>38</sup> and the subject of the original affect as the “spectacle.”<sup>39</sup> The beholder then consumes the spectacle from the first-person perspective of their mind and responds to the idea that presents itself from the situation. During empathy, the person-as-spectacle and their feelings becomes a character in the theatre of the mind of the beholder. Hume's theory of empathy and personal identity is crucial for opening up the possibility that people empathise with other people and minds regardless of whether they are fictional or real. Hume's conception of empathy will be especially important when talking about first-person novels, where the protagonist becomes a character in ‘the theatre of the reader's mind’ as the ‘I’ of the narrative unites with the ‘I’ of the reader.

Another contemporary of Hume and Lessing, Adam Smith, also conceptualises the term ‘sympathy’ as a dynamic between spectator and spectacle in his *The Theory of*

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<sup>34</sup> Hume 2007, pg. 236.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, pg. 206.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, pg. 165.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, pg. 169.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, pg. 234, 236, 242, 392.

<sup>39</sup> Hume 1983, pg. 61-62.

*Moral Sentiments* (1759). Notably, Smith also introduces the idea that through sympathy we come to see through the eyes of another person.<sup>40</sup> This is because Smith believes we enter the body of the other during sympathy: "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations."<sup>41</sup> David Marshall maintains that Smith's book "represents a world that is structured and governed by theatrical relations; it posits a necessary theatricality that is to be both sought after and avoided."<sup>42</sup> This is because Smith believes we are always actors and spectators in any given situation. On one level, we are always spectators of the actions of others and concurrently, we are also always the actors being watched by others. On a second level, we imagine being in the position of the actor via empathy, and thereby become a part of the spectacle externally as spectators and internally as the actors. According to Smith, this constant spectator-actor dynamic informs our behaviour and we make decisions based on how our actions might be perceived by others. So then we get the reversal or sharing of points of view, as empathy produces a liminal state between the self and the other, as well as between the spectator and the spectacle. Smith's theatre of social life emphasises that empathy enables us to live on the stage and in the auditorium *at once*, as we switch between our own first-person perspective and that of the other.

Hume's and Smith's theory of empathy could be best summarised using Shakespeare's words: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts."<sup>43</sup> Clearly, empathy was no longer only a theme of dramatic plays in the eighteenth century, but theatre also became a model for the theorisation of sympathy. Lessing's idea of the theatre as an arena for sharing feelings between the stage and the auditorium has clearly stuck with scholars like Hume and Smith. Furthermore, proximity as a characteristic of friendship or conversation is still regarded as a key component for empathy. What is new about these theories and what seems to have less to do with theatre *per se*, is the idea of the 'point of view' and one's ability to imagine the world from a different viewpoint. The contagion of the earlier centuries is no longer implicated in an invisible transfer of particles, but rather a migration of or addition to the mind. I am especially intrigued about what made empathy become the switcher between various first-person perspectives or characters. Hume's character in the theatre of the mind or Smith's becoming the other person resonate with the form of the first-person novel, which makes

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<sup>40</sup> Smith 2005, pg. 17.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 4-5.

<sup>42</sup> Marshall 1984, pg. 608

<sup>43</sup> Shakespeare 1993a, *As You Like It*, act 1, scene 7, lines 139-142.

your inner/external monologue congrue with another, fictional, person. Interestingly, first-person novels became very popular during the lifetime of these thinkers; a coincidence, which will be expanded upon in the following section.

The preoccupation of these thinkers with sympathy as a concept and feelings in general goes against the popular notion of the Enlightenment period to be 'the age of reason.' Political scientist Ryan Patrick Hanley actually calls the eighteenth century instead "the age of sympathy," due to the perceived ubiquity of the concept in theatre, literature, political theory and even economic theory.<sup>44</sup> It is true that the seeds that were sown in the sixteenth and continued to grow throughout the seventeenth century blossomed in the eighteenth century. This partly had to do with the emergence of 'sentimentalism' in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, which influenced people's ideas about the self, affectivity, and interpersonal relations. According to William Reddy, a historian of emotions, sentimentalism helped pave the way for Romanticism, the rise of the novel, as well as antislavery and the French Revolution.<sup>45</sup> The following section therefore addresses the entanglement of novels and the emergence of the rights of man, as well as the relationship between the literary first-person perspective and the eighteenth-century conceptualisations of empathy.

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## 2.3 Correspondence

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In 1737, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) experimented with making his own invisible ink, which was at that time called "sympathetic ink."<sup>46</sup> David Marshall suggests that sympathetic ink could help explain Rousseau's autobiography *Confessions* (1768), in which Rousseau aims to "render [his] soul transparent to the eyes of the reader, and for this purpose endeavour to show it in every possible point of view."<sup>47</sup> Rousseau is clearly trying to present his first-person perspective as a composite of a multitude of perspectives on his identity. This is highly reminiscent of Smith's theory, as Rousseau realises he is a spectacle and therefore tries to see himself from the point of view of the reader. The ink that is laid on the paper by the author and that is then read by the audience links the performer and the spectator sympathetically; the author imagines the potential reader of the lines and the reader imagines the author inscribing those letters. The reader of the first-person singular of the autobiography becomes at once a spectator and spectacle, as the 'I' of the author coincides with the 'I' of the reader. Jonathan Lamb contends that the ink of sympathy is

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<sup>44</sup> Hanley 2015, pg. 171-172.

<sup>45</sup> Reddy 2001, pg. x.

<sup>46</sup> Damrosch 2005, pg. 133, and Rousseau 2020, pg. 138.

<sup>47</sup> Rousseau 2020, pg. 110.

nowhere [...] more assiduously used in the enterprise of a full exchange of hearts than in epistolary novels. The reader says, 'The heart is what I want ... the knowledge of the inmost recesses of your heart'. And the writer affirms, 'I wrote my heart'. The medium of this agreement is the ink in the pen, leaving every trace of the motions of the mind on paper, even the most trivial and momentary: 'I will lay down my pen – But can – Yet, positively, I will lay down my pen.'<sup>48</sup>

Lamb is citing from Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady* (1748), one of the most well known English epistolary novels from the eighteenth century. The sharing of feelings and the exchange of perspectives between the writer and the reader are essentially engraved in first-person texts like autobiographies, letters, and novels.

Although the first-person perspective has been criticised for its ambiguity to the point that some narratologists have renounced the term in favour of 'focalisation,' 'voice,' and 'point of view,'<sup>49</sup> for the purpose of this encompassing cross-media take on the first-person perspective in accordance to the definition I have made above. First-person perspective in literature manifests itself as an account written in the first-person singular as if it was told by one of the characters in the story. Autobiographical first-person narratives (i.e. actual memoirs and diaries) are also a very interesting case, as their author and narrator are one and the same. Meanwhile, the author of the first-person novel pretends to be a character in the story, usually the protagonist, who is seemingly writing her own story. These first-person narratives usually take form of fictitious memoirs, diaries or letters. The fictional memoir further adds to the complexity of the author and the narrator, as we get the insight of the wise older narrator as well as the percepts of the younger unknowing version of the narrator. The Swedish literary scholar Bertil Romberg (1925-2005), author of the comprehensive historical and narratological survey *Studies in the Narrative Technique of the First-Person Novel* (1962), stresses the key characteristic of the first-person novel is that "the author makes the novel narrate itself through the mouth of one of the figures taking part in it," while the "real author withdraws from the scene, and instead brings forward the fictitious narrator."<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, Romberg points out that the first-person novel moves away from the 'I' of the author, as the 'I' comes to belong to the narrating character.

Furthermore, Romberg reveals that the first-person perspective has a long and varied literary history. Although one of the oldest surviving first-person narratives might be the Ancient Egyptian *Tale of Sinuhe* (1875 B.C.), Romberg traces the roots of the form in the European and Western context. The first-person perspective in literature has been

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<sup>48</sup> Lamb 2009, pg. 50.

<sup>49</sup> See Genette 1983 and Bal 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Romberg 1962, pg. 4.

most prominently developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spanish picaresque novels. Picaresque novels are most often narrated by a character “of dubious conduct, viewing the society from below” and depict the “hero’s” adventures, travels and crimes.<sup>51</sup> This Spanish tradition inspired Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen’s *Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1669), a first-person picaresque novel that is considered one of the most significant works of German literature. The biggest development in the first-person novel was contributed by the epistolary novel form developed by the English writer Samuel Richardson in his *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748); two books Hume and Smith must have been at least peripherally aware of. The epistolary novel is a collection of fictional letters written by one or more characters one directionally (without a response) or as an exchange (characters respond to each others letters). During the first half of the nineteenth century, the first-person form in its traditional and epistolary form held a prominent place in the Romanticist literature produced in England and Germany especially.<sup>52</sup> It should also be stressed that these first-person narratives were not exceptions nor known only to a few: they were an intrinsic part of popular culture. What emerges from this short timeline of the first-person novel is the fact that the literary method had been gaining popularity and prominence since the sixteenth century, the same period when sympathy was resurrected as a concept. The first-person perspective in literature and sympathy continued to develop side by side, both reaching their peak in the eighteenth century.

The emergence of epistolary novels during the mid-eighteenth century is considered crucial for the establishment of natural human rights by the American historian Lynn Hunt in her insightful work *Inventing Human Rights* (2007). Hunt is specifically interested in autonomy and empathy, since she tries to explain how during the 1760s to 1780s the notion of natural human rights became all of a sudden ‘self-evident,’ as Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) wrote in the *Declaration of Independence* (1776). Hunt asserts that “[n]either autonomy nor empathy were fixed; they were skills that could be learned.”<sup>53</sup> And as our emotions and convictions shift, so do our limits of acceptable human rights. Hunt’s main argument is that “new kinds of experiences,” generated by epistolary novels especially, “helped spread the practices of autonomy and empathy.”<sup>54</sup> For the first time, epistolary novels allowed people to take on the perspective of completely different people, including servants, women, children and other subordinate subjects, and thereby help “empathic individuals” “relate beyond their immediate families, religious affiliations,

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, pg. 312-313.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pg. 312-316.

<sup>53</sup> Hunt 2007, pg. 28-29.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, pg. 32.

or even nations to greater universal values.”<sup>55</sup> Hunt therefore conceives of epistolary novels as morally instructive of the eighteenth-century society:

epistolary novels taught their readers nothing less than a new psychology and in the process laid the foundations for a new social and political order. [...] Novels made the point that all people are fundamentally similar because of their inner feelings, and many novels showcased in particular the desire for autonomy. In this way, reading novels created a sense of equality and empathy through passionate involvement in the narrative.<sup>56</sup>

Hunt asserts that it is no coincidence that the publication of such popular epistolary novels like Richardson's *Pamela* and Rousseau's *Julie* (1761), which provided such intense psychological identification, closely preceded the emergence of the rights of man. Hunt's belief in the power of the epistolary novel to teach people to empathise with others and thereby become better social beings is highly reminiscent of Lessing's conception of theatre as a 'school of the moral world' due to its capacity to train audiences to have *Mitleid*. Ultimately, Hunt argued that the perspective-shifting that the narrative technique (the first-person perspective) of the epistolary novel mediates has helped the eighteenth-century individual to extend the variety of subjects they could empathise with.

It is also possible that the method inspired Hume, Smith, and other theorists of sympathy. Building on Hunt's cultural history approach, my main argument here is that it was no coincidence that the theoretical discussions of sympathy blossomed during the upsurge of the first-person perspective in literature. What links first-person novels to empathy on a fundamental and conspicuous level, is the process of perspective-shifting. The novel allows readers to peer into the consciousness of another person for a prolonged period of time. The 'I' of the narrative produces a liminal state, where the reader is still herself, but she is at once also the narrator-protagonist. Another format of the epistolary novel, the so-called '*Briefwechsel-Roman*' that includes an exchange of letters between two or more characters, actually provides multiple moments of perspective-shifting. In the traditional one-protagonist first-person narrative, the perspective-shifting occurs only when the reader enters the story. Yet the *Briefwechsel-Roman* forces readers to switch between perspectives multiple times. This highly resonates with Smith's continual shifting of perspectives and seeing through the eyes and the minds of other people. It is also possible to imagine the *Briefwechsel-Roman* provides characters for Hume's theatre of the mind, as the novel makes the reader's mind traverse through the first-person perspectives of multiple personas. Clearly, the various forms of the first-person novel provided new models for understanding how we relate to others

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, pg. 32.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, pg. 39.

and how people can imagine the world from someone else's perspective. Concurrently, these first-person novels reflected the understanding of interpersonal relationships and sharing of sentiment and emotions in the eighteenth century.

The historical interrelationship between the development of the first-person perspective in media and empathy studies seems to have begun in the sixteenth century. During this period, Plato's *sympatheia* was resurrected as a power of the cosmos, but it was also used to explain contagious diseases and how the physiological and psychological suffering of one person can affect another person. Amidst a number of plagues, conversations between people began to be considered as dangerous, since one could catch a disease or their personal integrity could be corrupted. Dialogue — the most basic method of sharing one's feelings, thoughts, and opinions in the first-person singular — was understood as a primary way of spreading infection and affect. This belief was then reflected in the theatre plays of that time, most prominently in William Shakespeare's work, as the medium used to be primarily propelled via performed conversations. Theatre continued to instruct the way sympathy was explained by various scholars, including David Hume and Adam Smith, the most frequently quoted authors in historical overviews of sympathy and empathy. Hume believed the product of sympathy, the way we imagine the perspective of another person, is projected as a character in the theatre of our mind. Meanwhile, Smith maintained that during sympathy we become the other person and see through their eyes, as we continually switch between the perspective of the spectator and performer. The way sympathy was conceptualised by Smith and Hume also highly resonates with the construction of first-person novels, which became popular in that period. First-person novels transport their readers into the minds of the protagonist, allowing the audience to observe the character's experiences and feelings as if they were their own. The *Briefwechsel-Roman* especially highlights the sympathetic perspective-shifting, as the reader views the situation from the perspective of multiple characters. It is no coincidence that the first-person novels, which simulated the process of sympathy, became a part of popular culture in the same period as the concept of sympathy received much theoretical attention. From these patterns, it is clear that the first-person perspective and sympathy as empathy developed in parallel since the sixteenth century and well into the eighteenth century.

## 3. Embodiment

### 3.1 Subjective Vision and Einfühlung

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, there is a subtle rupture between the concept of sympathy as it developed in Western thought since the sixteenth century and the new concept of 'Einfühlung' that supplanted it to a great extent. Concurrently, the first half of the nineteenth century has witnessed a new form of the first-person perspective, which engaged the audience in a novel way. In his book *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1990), the art historian and critic Jonathan Crary (1951) argues that the observer and her subjective position has radically changed during the nineteenth century (particularly in the 1820s and 1830s) due to the progress in optics and inventions that introduced optical illusions such as the stereoscope, the thaumatrope, the phenakistiscope or the zoetrope. To prove his thesis, Crary juxtaposes the camera obscura to the stereoscope. I will argue that the new subjective vision Crary describes contributed to the move towards a new — embodied — conceptualisation of empathy and a new objective for the first-person perspective.

The camera obscura is a method of using a pinhole in a dark room to project the image of the outside onto a wall inside. Later, lenses were used to sharpen the projected image and portable versions were developed, which served as predecessors to the photographic camera. Due to the 'natural' character of the pinhole technique, the interior representation is fixed to its exterior referent and thereby 'veracious.' The observer's physical and sensory experience is "supplanted by the relations between a mechanical apparatus and a pregiven world of objective truth" as the pinhole projects the image regardless of the observer's presence.<sup>57</sup> This is because the camera obscura's projection of the exterior through a pinhole onto the interior, where the viewer was positioned, had the effect of "[sundering] the act of seeing from the physical body of the observer, to decorporealize vision."<sup>58</sup> Instead of looking through a device i.e. being included in the process of viewing as the telescope user would be, for example, the observer — her body and sense perception — is excluded from the process. The monocular vision of the pinhole is also in contrast to the binocular vision of humans. The camera obscura offers representation truthful to and dependent on its referent, yet its vision is singular and disembodied.

The camera obscura's strong referentiality and veracity led historians of visual culture to ascribe the technique to the project of realism, whose main objective is to take

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<sup>57</sup> Crary 1990, pg. 39-40.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, pg. 39.

on “increasingly accurate investigation and representation of the physical world.”<sup>59</sup> The project of realism includes the fifteenth-century invention of linear perspective; similarly to the monocular vision of the pinhole, the single vanishing point linear perspective establishes a centralised image. Linear perspective thus holds an important place in the history of the first-person perspective in visual culture. For example, in Parmigianino’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1524) the painter copied his convex mirror reflection — including all the distortions produced by the curved surface — onto a circular, convex wooden panel; the resulting piece is thereby a close reconstruction of the image the artist himself saw in the mirror (figure 1). The painting’s circular, convex shape and realism clearly demonstrates the monocular, centred, highly referential, mode of representation and vision in the sixteenth century. Additionally, the viewer is denied the embodied experience the author had while watching his reflection change and distort differently by changing his position towards the mirror; the viewer is ‘stuck’ with a reflection fixed to a pre-given viewpoint, to which she must adjust to achieve the same first-person perspective Parmigianino captured.

Another example of the camera obscura-like vision combined with a first-person perspective is Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656). When describing the painting (figure 2), Foucault remarks that “[the painter represented on the canvas] is staring at a point to which, even though it is invisible, we, the spectators, can easily assign an object, since it is we, ourselves, who are that point: our bodies, our faces, our eyes.”<sup>60</sup> The audience assumes the position of the model and thereby comes to see the Spanish royal court from the first-person perspective of the royal couple. Foucault’s observation further suggests that the painting actually becomes an extension of the viewer’s reality; the size of the painting (318 × 276 cm) certainly helps with creating a visually immersive spectacle. And yet, the realism of the first-person perspective works only when the viewer is in a specific range in front of the canvas; the centred, mono-planar, linear perspective does not adjust to the movement of the viewer’s body and thereby prescribes a fixed point of viewing — and viewing only, as the audience has no impact on the resulting spectacle — similarly to Parmigianino’s self-portrait.

This prescriptive realism, referentiality, and disembodiment of the camera obscura and the first-person perspective in painting is also manifested in the first-person novel. The seventeenth and eighteenth-century first-person novels were usually written as fictional diaries or letters; these novels thus mimicked a clearly identifiable referent. With the exception of the *Briefwechsel-Roman*, which includes multiple viewpoints from the characters involved in the letter exchange, the typical first-person novel narrated from the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, pg. 26.

<sup>60</sup> Foucault 2005, pg. 4.



**Figure 1** Parmigianino, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1523/1524), oil on poplar wood, 32.5 × 6 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Vienna, (<<https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/1407/>> [10 March 2020]).



**Figure 2** Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas* (1656), oil on canvas, 318 × 276 cm, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, (<<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/las-meninas/9fdc7800-9ade-48b0-ab8b-edee94ea877f>> [10 March 2020]).

perspective of one character only portrays a centred and uniplanar presentation of the world and the events, comparably to the design of the paintings discussed above. Limited by the constraints of the medium itself, the novel additionally offers a disembodied mode of consumption, where the narrator's descriptions supplant the reader's vision and often prescribe impressions and sensations. However, in the nineteenth-century psychological first-person novels emerge, which are rather fragmented, equivocal, and highly subjective. Eminent examples of such works are, of course, Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818) and E.T.A. Hoffman's *Der Sandmann* [The Sandman] (1816).

Crary explains this diversion by asserting that the unified, singular/monocular, decorporalized, and fixed mode of representation and vision was no longer viable in the nineteenth century, when capitalism and industrialisation began to pervade all spheres of life and cause an "increasingly dynamic disorder of the world."<sup>61</sup> Fundamentally, Romanticism largely refrained from the rationality and disembodiment of the camera obscura and instead explored the "subjective vision" of the observer herself.<sup>62</sup> This entailed the use of imagination as well as examining one's own body (sense organs especially), mind, sense perception and their interrelatedness. This subjective vision is connected to the "separation of the senses," whereby the observer herself is subject to and object of different systems of perception. Crary traces the roots of the separation of the senses in studies of anatomy.<sup>63</sup> The division of the body led to the study of organs and anatomic systems on their own basis, including the study of sight. Consequently, "new empirical knowledge of the physiological status of the observer and of vision" that brought about new forms of mass entertainment: visual devices that isolated vision and provided an embodied, binocular viewing experience such as the thaumatrope (first described in 1827), the phenakistoscope (invented in 1832), and most importantly the stereoscope (first constructed in 1832).<sup>64</sup>

The stereoscope, a predecessor of virtual reality oculi, mimicked binocular human vision by taking advantage of the parallax to create an illusion of three-dimensionality. The stereoscope simultaneously presents two images of the same object from slightly different angles (this difference is called parallax), one to each eye as that specific eye

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, pg. 53. This does not mean the camera obscura vision was absolutely eradicated, since its dependents — most eminently the photographic camera — has managed to stay in vogue to this day. Nevertheless, the objectives and position of the observer is typified by the subjective and binocular vision.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, pg. 9.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, pg. 78-79. The separation of the senses was most profoundly influenced by the French pathologist Xavier Bichat (1771-1802): Bichat exposed "death as a fragmented process, consisting of the extinction of different organs and processes" and he applied his conception of death as multiple and dispersed onto life. Bichat thereby "decentralised" life and "parcelized" the body into separate systems and functions, that is ultimately the manner according to which we have come to learn about the body in our biology classes.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, pg. 14.

would see it if the observer was actually standing in front of the perceived object. The two fragments — each presented to one eye — are united in the mind into a three-dimensional image, effectively playing with the optical functioning of the binocular human vision. The stereoscope thereby refused the organised and unified space of the linear perspective and instead presented depth (realism) as a 3D image composed of two flat (2D) planes:

The stereoscope signals an eradication of “the point of view” around which, for several centuries, meanings had been assigned reciprocally to an observer and the object of his or her vision. There is no longer the possibility of perspective under such a technique of beholding. The relation of observer to image is no longer to an object quantified in relation to a position in space, but rather to two dissimilar images whose position simulates the anatomical structure of the observer's body.<sup>65</sup>

Stereoscopy simulates human binocular vision as much as it requires the human eyes for its readability. The resulting three-dimensional exists only in the mind of the observer, as the two nonidentical flat images do not create the 3D image by themselves. The body is thus a crucial component of the spectacle, which depends on the properties of human vision as much as it exposes them to the observer. Although Crary asserts that perspective no longer has anything to do with the stereoscope, in the framework of this thesis the stereoscope certainly materialises the first-person perspective exactly because the technology mediates how a human normally sees. Yet the resulting embodied first-person perspective image lacks referentiality exactly due to the fact it does not technically exist.

CAMERA OBSCURA	STEREOSCOPE
uniplanar	multiplanar
disembodied	embodied
centred	decentered
unified	fragmented
referential	simulacrum
supplants human vision	extends human vision
fixed/prescriptive	subjective/interactive

In stark contrast to the camera obscura, these nineteenth-century inventions/toys like the stereoscope produced *illusions* of motion or three-dimensionality. They were thus

<sup>65</sup> Crary also points out that the features of stereoscopic imagery like flatness, multiplanarity, and fragmentation became commonplace in Modernist paintings. Ibid, pg. 126-8.

no longer fixed or true to their referent, since they had the power to create a realistic-looking simulacrum independent of any “real” referent. Optical experience was thus “produced by and within the subject.”<sup>66</sup> The nineteenth-century observer is no longer “a unitary subject but a composite structure on which a wide range of techniques and forces could produce or simulate manifold experiences that are all equally ‘reality.’”<sup>67</sup> While the eighteenth-century observer could clearly distinguish where her reality ends and the represented image begins, the border of interiority and exteriority is blurred for the nineteenth-century observer, who coproduces the visual experience; i.e. the observer’s internal sensation is intertwined with the external signs of the cultural product.<sup>68</sup> The observer is then at one the subject of viewing as well as a component of the consumed object. The Romanticist subjective vision thus makes perception and interpretation dependent on the observer and her inner processes (affects especially); this mode requires the observer’s input or *interaction* of some kind or another — optical, mental, physiological, etc. The embodied, subjective mode of viewing put out by the stereoscope as an illusion of the first-person perspective is very much reflected in the way empathy began to be theorised in the late nineteenth century.

The term “empathy” emerged in English at the beginning of the twentieth century as a translation of the German “Einfühlung” — literally meaning “feeling into.”<sup>69</sup> *Einfühlung* was coined by the German philosopher Robert Vischer (1847–1933) in his 1873 aesthetic theory *Über das Optische Formgefühl: Ein Beitrag zur Aesthetik* [On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics]. Vischer’s *Einfühlung* brings empathy somewhat away from the sphere of the mind as previously conceptualised by Hume, Smith and Lessing, into the sphere of the body. Vischer explains *Einfühlung* as a state, when “the body, in responding to certain stimuli [...] unconsciously projects its own bodily form—and with this also the soul— into the form of the object.”<sup>70</sup> Vischer maintains that we feel the emotions of other beings and objects by mentally projecting ourselves onto them.<sup>71</sup> Based on this notion, Vischer further claims we have “the wonderful ability to project and incorporate our own physical form into an objective form [...] I can think my way into [a stationary object], mediate its size with my own, stretch and expand, bend and

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, pg. 98.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, pg. 92.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, pg. 24.

<sup>69</sup> Based on Theodor Lipps’ use of *Einfühlung*, the American psychologist Edward Titchener introduced the term “empathy” in his 1909 *Elementary Psychology of Thought Processes*. Titchener’s translation is often derived from the Greek *empathia*, which can be dissected into “en,” meaning in or at, and “pathos,” translated as passion, suffering or experience. However, Titchener himself explains his thought process and definition more simply: “Empathy (a word formed on the analogy of sympathy) is the name given to the process of humanising objects, of reading or feeling ourselves into them.” Titchener 1910, pg. 417

<sup>70</sup> Vischer 1994, pg. 92.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, pg. 103. “natural love for my species is the only thing that makes it possible for me to project myself mentally; with it, I feel not only myself but at the same time the feeling of another being.”

confine my way into it.”<sup>72</sup> Most importantly, Vischer emphasises that mental activity—imagination— “essentially involves the central nervous system [as] evident from the unity of body and mind.”<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, Vischer asserts “kinesthetic stimulus does not always and necessarily lead to actual movement, but always to the idea of it.”<sup>74</sup> What emerges from Vischer’s writing is empathy rooted in a tight interaction between external stimuli and the mind and the body. Vischer is effectively creating an aesthetic theory grounded in optics:

The horizontal line is pleasing because our eyes are positioned horizontally, although without any other contrasting forms it may verge on monotony. The vertical line, on the contrary, can be disturbing when perceived in isolation, for in a certain sense it contradicts the binocular structure of the perceiving eyes and forces them to function in a more complicated way. [...] The circle—a plate, a loop, or a sphere—by contrast has an immediately pleasing effect because it conforms to the rounded shape of the eye. [...] The eye is pained to find no trace of the laws that govern its organisation and movement.<sup>75</sup>

Vischer is thereby explaining that our body interacts with its environment and the more the stimulus is similar to the body, the stronger and pleasurable the connections becomes. When reading Vischer, it is impossible not to recall the stereoscope that caters to the exact functioning of the binocular vision of the eyes and the interaction of the observer with the spectacle. But prior to diving into the parallels of subjective vision and *Einfühlung*, I still wish to briefly look at one of Vischer’s followers.

Vischer’s embodied empathy is taken up by other scholars, but most prominently by the German psychologist and philosopher Theodor Lipps (1851–1913), who popularised the term *Einfühlung*. Lipps conceptualised *Einfühlung* in the following way: “I am now with my feeling of activity totally in the moving figure. I am also spatially, insofar as there can be question of a spatial extension of the ego, *in the place of that figure*. I am transported into it.”<sup>76</sup> Lipps is clearly moving towards empathy based on spatial relations; the empathiser no longer occupies the mind and the point of view of the other, but also their place in space. This is reminiscent of the difference between camera obscura and the stereoscope, where the former presented an image regardless of the presence or spatial position of the viewer, while the stereoscope locked its observer in space and represented a very specific, embodied point of view. Lipps further explains how it is that the emotions of there can affect our mental state:

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, pg. 104.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, pg. 99.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, pg. 99.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, pg. 97.

<sup>76</sup> Lipps, Theodor, *Einfühlung, innere Nachahmung, und Organempfindungen*. *Archiv für die gesammte Psychologie* (1903), translation from Jahoda 2005, pg. 157, my emphasis.

When I see a gesture, there exists within me a tendency to experience in myself the affect that naturally arises from that gesture. And when there is no obstacle, the tendency is realized. Then the idea of the affect in the other's gesture, or the thinking of the affect into the gesture, has then become the experience of the affect, has become fellow-feeling [*Mitfühlen*] or sympathy.<sup>77</sup>

In other words, the shared emotion is not engendered from sensing a feeling but rather from perceiving an idea of the feeling. Additionally, empathy was being perceived increasingly in bodily terms and as a fragmented, multilayered process pervaded by translations of percepts and affects.

The transition from sympathy towards *Einfühlung* and empathy as conceptualised by Vischer and Lipps seems to reflect the transformation of the observer's position brought about by the new mediation of the first-person perspective in the form of the stereoscope. Similarly at the stereoscope was produced based on novel discoveries in the field of optics, both authors were also to a certain extent familiar with the field; vision is of great significance to Vischer, and he did not fail to admit to that already in the title of this thesis, while Lipps also wrote on *Raumästhetik und geometrisch-optische Täuschungen* [Spatial Aesthetics and Optical-Geometrical Illusions] (1897). Eighteenth-century sympathy primarily referred to the "spectator's" mind and its ability to imagine itself being another person. Sympathy was believed to be clearly referential, as it was tied to a person (a spectacle) in the presence of the spectator. This why the first-person novel fit the needs of sympathy theory so well, as it presented the consciousness of the character on paper, to be read be consumed by the literate mind. The novels were also generally written as fictional diaries or letters, meaning they were a clear representation of given real-world referents. Meanwhile, late nineteenth-century empathy is much more embodied and involves interaction between the empathiser's body and the perceived object. While eighteenth-century sympathy was primarily a product of the mind, nineteenth-century empathy is understood as a result of various stimuli registered primarily through vision, but translated into affect in various parts of the whole body. Empathy thereby extend the vision as it translates and disperses the stimuli through the nervous system. Empathy also does not need a referent, as the mind and body imitates sensory or kinaesthetic stimuli without having proof of those feelings; a gesture is enough for the transfer of emotions to occur, the observed subject does not need to confirm those emotions, nor does the empathises need to imagine why the subject made that gesture. The mind simply projects its body onto the form or the movement as the two conflate. But since the result of the projection can never exist in real life, it is a pure simulacrum existing only in the mind of the empathiser, very much like the stereoscope's

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<sup>77</sup> Lipps, Theodor, 'Das Wissen from fremden Ich' (1907), translation from Jahoda 2005, pg. 157.

illusion of three-dimensionality exists only in the mind of the beholder. Vischer's empathy is then a form—or perhaps a consequence—of subjective vision as the empathiser's mental and bodily affect is coproduced by empathiser and the external properties of the subject.

Clearly, subjective vision along with the embodied conception of empathy creating a new impetus for media and the way they allowed audiences to look through the eyes of another person. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the first-person perspective is increasingly centred around and catering for the body, as the main objective becomes making the cultural product an extension of the body and mind consuming it. The fictional letters and diaries are no longer enough, which is exactly why first-person novels lose their popularity at the end of the nineteenth century. They are too referential of objects existing in the world of the reader, who is instead seeking for an illusion, for a simulacrum, especially an experience the user could be an active part of. This project of creating a more embodied, subjective, and interactive first-person perspective is manifested in the journey of the design method through different media, and which seems to have reached its potential in computer games and virtual reality. The following section will, therefore, examine how the concept of *Einfühlung* — and by extension also subjective vision — might have influenced how the first-person perspective migrated and developed across media.

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### **3.2 Mirrors, Shadows, Guns, and Clouds**

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According to Crary, “photography preserved an ambivalent (and superficial) relation to the codes of monocular space and geometrical perspective.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, photography continued with the visual mode of the camera obscura — disembodied, referent dependent, “veracious” representation. This is not so surprising given that the photographic camera evolved from the camera obscura. The author of the photographic image is usually rendered invisible by the technological apparatus. For this reason, photography is often considered as an ‘objective’ medium, precisely because of the seemingly missing authorial presence and the referent dependent representation. This is why photography is rarely conceptualised as a first-person perspective, although photographers frequently look into the viewfinder to capture *what they see*. In that way, we could also argue that photography is subjective precisely because the photographers *frame* what they see and make visible only what they want others to see.

Nonetheless, some photographers deliberately make their work more embodied by making themselves visible in their own photographs. This imprints the author onto the

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<sup>78</sup> Crary 1990, pg. 127.

resulting object and makes their shots visibly subjective. The most typical method of self-presentation is probably using the mirror; i.e. what we would now call the 'mirror selfie.' This was, however, rather difficult when cameras used to be large and intrusive. To make her face actually visible, the anonymous Victorian photographer had to take her mirror self-portrait by putting the whole plate camera in front of her torso (figure 3). This meant that the resulting image is taken from a much lower angle than are the eyes of the photographer herself. She is thus neither looking through the machine nor aligning the camera's view with her own; the author becomes an object in the composition, rather than the subject of a represented first-person perspective. As camera's became smaller and allowed users to use the viewfinder to make images, photographers began to make mirror self-portraits from their point of view. For example, in Germaine Krull's famous *Self-Portrait with a Cigarette* (1925), the Modernist photographer uses her folding camera to capture herself as an artist by aiming her shot into the mirror (figure 4). Yet the camera hides most of Krull's face and the framing of the image excludes a large part of her body. Although the viewers take on the position of the mirror, they are, nonetheless, unable to 'read' Krull's facial and bodily expressions. The mirror of the self-portrait also renders the space depicted in the photograph somewhat illegible, meaning that we might have a hard time imagining Krull's spatial perspective. These early subjective, quasi first-person perspective, mirror self-portraits did very little to mediate or even facilitate subjective vision for their authors, since they, to a great degree, concealed the subject's face and body and obscured her spatial and temporal position; they were still a remnant of the camera obscura mode of vision.



**Figure 3 (left)** Anonymous photograph (ca. 1880), (<<https://monovisions.com/10-vintage-self-portraits-in-mirrors-bw/>> [10 March 2020]).

**Figure 4 (right)** Germaine Krull, *Self-Portrait with a Cigarette* (1925), gelatin silver print, Stiftung Ann and Jürgen Wilde/Pinakothek der Moderne München, (<<https://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/artists/3268.html>> [10 March 2020]).

Nevertheless, there are other ways the photographer can make herself visible in her work. For example, André Kertész created his *Self Portrait, Paris* (1926) by aiming the camera at the wall, onto which shadows of his profile and his camera were thrown (figure 5).<sup>79</sup> In his essay 'Surrealist Precipitates: Shadows Don't Cast Shadows' (1994), Denis Hollier by comparing the Surrealists' visual artworks and their autobiographical literature claims that the shadow in images is an equivalent to the first-person in literature. A shadow in a pictorial space is "an index that makes the work lose all virtuality, that forever disturbs the calm of the image, the solidity of the object. This equivalent is the first person. The cast shadow of the subject of enunciation onto its utterance, the I opens up language to its performative circumstances."<sup>80</sup> For example, Lewis Hine's 1908 portrait of John Howell, an Indianapolis newsboy, includes the shadow of the photographer and his apparatus in the foreground of the image (figure 6). It is then not just a portrait of a newsboy, but Hine's portrait of a newsboy; it is a subjective photograph. Furthermore, Hollier maintains that a real shadow "opens the internal space of the work to the context of its reception, mixing it with that of its beholder."<sup>81</sup> In other words, the shadow exposes the subjectivity of the image and invites the viewer to share the photographer's perspective. The image ceases to be an 'objective' product of machine vision and becomes a representation of *the photographer's perspective*. Unlike the stereoscope, however, the image is not so prominently coproduced by the viewer, since the representation is laid in front of her as materially and visually finished. Nevertheless, the shadow functions as an index of the author's body; to some extent, it thus makes the image *embodied*. But the facial and motor expressions of the photographer is still not legible to the viewer, since the body's shadow is flattened and immobilised by the static nature of the medium. We are also able to understand the subject's spatial perspective much better than we did in the case of mirror self-portraits, but the view is only presented in one direction, obscuring the full visual range the photographer truly has. The shadow thus creates an image closer to the subjective vision than the mirror does, although it is still unable to fully mediate the author's spatiotemporal experience that would express her kinaesthetic expression and perception.

Early attempts at subjective vision in photography were nonetheless rather scarce during the twentieth century; instead, cinema readily accepted the mediation of the first-person perspective and was able to do so more successfully. What is interesting about video is that it introduces the illusion of movement into the photograph; it thereby combines the monocular, disembodied gaze of the camera obscura with the optical illusion of movement pioneered by the thaumatrope and the phenakistoscope. Our vision

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<sup>79</sup> For a closer analysis of "shadow (anti)selfies" see chapter 4.

<sup>80</sup> Holier 1994, pg. 124.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 5 (left)** André Kertész, *Self Portrait, Paris* (1926), gelatin silver print, 28.3 x 26.7 cm, Private Collection, Chicago, (<<https://www.phillips.com/detail/andre-kertesz/NY040218/96>> [10 March 200]).

**Figure 6 (right)** Lewis Hine, *John Howell, an Indianapolis newsboy, makes \$.75 some days. Begins at 6 a.m., Sundays. (Lives at 215 W. Michigan St.) Location: Indianapolis, Indiana* (1908), photographic print, National Child Labor Committee collection, Washington, (<<https://www.loc.gov/resource/nlc.03225/>> [10 March 2020]).

is also perceived in movement, so the action of the video is able to communicate embodiment much more than the photograph, although it still lacks the full interactivity that subjective vision requires. The first-person perspective in cinema is called a point-of-view (POV) shot within the context of film studies; the POV shot allows the viewer to see through the eyes of a specific subject. The technique has a long history in cinema, as one of the first moving images were produced by mounting the camera onto the front of locomotives. These 'phantom rides' thus presented what a train 'sees' when riding through the city or an open field.<sup>82</sup> But as the film medium developed, point-of-view shots generally presented the perspective of a character within the narrative.

George Wilson, an eminent theoretician of the cinematic POV shot, has written on the subject numerous times and has built a foundation for discussing the POV shot in a nuanced and comprehensive way. Wilson distinguishes between three kinds of POV shots: veridical, subjectively inflected and subjectively saturated. The veridical point-of-view shot simulates the visual perspective, anchored and framed around the assumed vantage point, of a specific character.<sup>83</sup> Veridical POV shots may help empathise with the character, whom we for most of the film see from the third-person point of view, since the

<sup>82</sup> See Schonig 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Wilson 2011, pg. 149.

frame exposes the character's position in space and thereby helps the viewer understand the character's spatial perspective. Veridical POV shots also help viewers identify and inspect the 'object' or cause of the character's behaviour and emotions. Veridical POV shots thus mediate the 'spatial perspective' of a character, usually to explain the character's inner state by exposing the object of their interest. Veridical POV shots are, however, purely spatial in a way that they are not supposed to signify the character's thought processes or otherwise subjective qualities of her perception. For example, if a character could not see the colour red, the veridical POV shot would still render the colour red normally. On the other hand, the subjectively inflected POV shot is filmed or edited in such a way to represent the visual or cognitive distortions of the character's vision, for example, when that character is drunk or feeling dizzy.<sup>84</sup> Such scenes then depict how the character's visual experience is affected by her psychological state. The subjectively inflected POV shot thereby functions as a simulation of the character's perspective in order to illustrate her inner state to the viewers. It could thus be said, that the subjectively inflected POV shot does the work for us and supplants empathic simulation; we don't have to imagine how the character's vision would change from drinking a bottle of wine as the scene does it for us. Subjectively saturated POV shots depict the character's own imagination as in their (day) dream, visualisation or a hallucination that is detached from the character's 'real' world and vision. All these three types of subjective POV shots are generally used only in a few scenes of the entire film, which is otherwise shot 'objectively' from the third-person perspective of the director and audience.

Third-person perspective is usually called an 'objective shot' within film studies and seems to be an essential factor of the viewer's ability to empathise with the characters on the screen. In cognitive film theory and conjunctions of empathy and film studies, there is a consensus that cinema's affective strength lies its capacity to depict people in movement — with all their motor and facial expressions. In their article 'Embodying Movies' (2012), neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese and film scholar Michele Guerra observe:

At its very beginning cinema embodied a form of modernity shaped by sensation and by a new ability to empathize with a virtual and self-moving environment. In the early phase of film, the body had a huge importance as a stimulus, and many movies within the so-called "cinema of attractions" were animated by the desire to address directly the audience by means of the body, emphasizing gestures, facial expressions, or recurring to some stylistic solutions such as for instance eye-contact.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, pg. 150.

<sup>85</sup> Gallese and Guerra 2012, pg. 197.

This highly resonates with the way Theodor Lipps explained empathy. The authors, therefore, maintain that cinema provides embodied viewing since it provides *signs of emotions* like gestures and mimetic expressions. The first-person perspective is thus generally used to sparingly in addition to the dominant third-person perspective in order to clarify the subject's mental state.

There are, however, films that are composed of POV shots only, most renowned examples being Robert Montgomery's *LADY IN THE LAKE* (1947). Yet films created completely from POV shots lose that sense of embodiment to some extent; the viewers are not able to see the protagonist's facial expressions and their bodily movements. Unlike computer games and virtual reality, the embodiment is not even substituted by interactivity, since the film viewer's body is not engaged in any way with that of the protagonist's (with the exception of 4D cinema perhaps). The prolonged POV shot then exposes cinema's rootedness in the monocular and disembodied vision of the camera obscura. Nonetheless, it does mediate the spatial perspective of the character very thoroughly and that is perhaps why action-saturated films like *HARDCORE HENRY* (2015), where the object of interest is almost always at the vantage point as underscored by the pointed gun. While the sparingly used POV shot has the capacity to strengthen our empathy for the character, a film shot solely from the protagonist's POV fails to provide the viewer the embodied experience of the character's experience. The film critic Julio L. Moreno asserted this already in 1953 in his essay 'Subjective Cinema: And the Problem of Film in the First Person':

The "first-person visual" is an attempt to copy the mere externals of a literary technique, and the results obtained are precisely opposite to those desired. If what is sought is more complete identification between the spectator and the protagonist, film has its own means of achieving this, without the necessity of borrowing literary devices.<sup>86</sup>

Meanwhile the medium of computer games — sometimes also called 'interactive cinema' — has approached embodiment differently. Computer games come closer to the stereoscope model of vision more than film does, because the medium transfers the moving image into an interactive environment. Very much like the stereoscope, the resulting spectacle only exists if the player interacts with the medium. What the player finds in the computer game medium is a rich mode of subjective vision, since the game is coproduced by the player, who becomes the subject of play and at the same time a key element of the final object. This is enhanced in first-person perspective games, where the player is in control of the playable character's or avatar's movements and decisions. The

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<sup>86</sup> Moreno 1953, pg. 358.

first-person perspective allows the player to fully understand the other's 'place', including the spatial and temporal location as well as the idiosyncratic qualities of the virtual and/or fictional environment. First-person games emerged in the 1970s with first-person shooter games like *MAZE WAR* (1973) or *SPASIM* ('space simulator,' 1974) as computer graphics were able to emulate a three-dimensional space. But it was only the 1990s that saw a boom in this genre with the development of *WOLFENSTEIN 3D* (1992) and *DOOM* (1993).

Essentially, the first-person game can be perceived as a simulation of another's perspective, comparable to the one our imagination creates during empathy. It is interesting that some game designers actually focus on making their games embodied with the aim of facilitating empathy. For example, the art-game designer and self-proclaimed "Interactive Empathy Expert" Chris Solarski promotes using 'primary shapes' to influence the (embodied) emotions audiences feel while consuming a certain cultural product and its narrative.<sup>87</sup> Solarski's primary shapes are grounded in platonic solids: the sphere, the cube and the pyramid (tetrahedron). On a 2D surface, these translate to the basic shapes of the circle, the square/rectangle, and the triangle. Solarski maintains that these primary shapes are "basic components of humankind's instinctual and universally understood visual language."<sup>88</sup> The circle evokes grace, positivity, continuity, movements; the square evokes balance, strength, restraint, tranquillity, rest; the triangle force, instability, aggression, tension, pain. According to Solarski, these shapes are read by our unconscious since they are derived from nature's designs. Solarski gives examples of the rounded shape of the dolphin's body allowing them to swim efficiently, the tall tree that needs to stay vertical to the ground, or the sharp teeth some animals have to bite through food or other objects.<sup>89</sup> Solarski, therefore, prompts designers to incorporate these primary shapes into their games in order to elicit desired emotions in the audience through (embodied) empathy.<sup>90</sup> Solarski's approach to empathy is highly reminiscent of Robert Vischer's belief that the jagged (triangular) shape of the mountains makes us uneasy and that the eyes prefer circles and horizontal eyes as these forms mirror the bodily forms.

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<sup>87</sup> In his Google TechTalk titled *VR/AR: A Renaissance Art Form* (2019), he illustrates the embodied effect of primary shapes by inviting his audience to imitate Barack Obama's curvy signature and Donald Trump's jagged signature in order to juxtapose the two resulting affective states. The user thereby feels herself into the subject by physically acting out their movements; this connection is established by the 'primary shapes' which are supposedly expressed and read universally.

<sup>88</sup> Solarski 2017, pg. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Solarski acknowledges these primary shapes can be expended by secondary shapes like the semicircle, the sand rectangle, and the rounded-arch triangle (see fig. ), yet "the more we dilute these primary shapes, the more specific our audience becomes;" i.e. our reading becomes dependent on cultural context.

<sup>90</sup> In his 2017 book *Interactive Stories And Video Game Art: A Story Telling Frame Work For Game Design*, Solarski applies the three primary shapes to the dynamic composition of a computer game, which includes character shapes and poses, lines of movement, environment shapes, pathways, dialogue, framing, audio, and player gestures.

Furthermore, Solarski highlights the first-person camera view for its ability to “create a heightened sense of player-character empathy because the player’s perspective aligns with that of the playable character.”<sup>91</sup> However, many first-person exploration games with non-confrontational gameplay suffer from what Solarski calls “gesture-narrative dissonance” as the aggressive camera panning transposed from the first-person shooter is in opposition to the calm atmosphere of the exploration.<sup>92</sup> Yet Solarski praises how a game like *GONE HOME* (2013) expresses the playable character’s trepidation by combining suspense horror and teenage romance genres “so that players empathize with the protagonist even though the objects of their fears are not the same: players fear for their own safety during their lonely wanderings and the protagonist fears the loss of their loved one.”<sup>93</sup> Solarski concludes his book by stressing the importance of spiritual transformation that is at the centre of any great story; the audience empathises with emotional needs rather than their materialistic goals and wants. A great narrative game should thus subject its players to an emotional journey conveyed through physical gestures, which are the essence of all interactive media.<sup>94</sup> The key method of achieving player-character harmony and empathy is thus by allowing players “to physically embody the character’s movements, even if the action is abstracted to swipes of the finger on a smartphone or controller.”<sup>95</sup> According to Solarski, physical and emotional states (most often struggles) of the player should mimic those of the playable character when possible, otherwise, the universal language of the primary shapes should be incorporated into the product’s dynamic design to engender player-character empathy in an *embodied* way.

For Solarski, the ideal game would be one which employs controls so aptly that “players experience disassociation from their own body and project their sense of self onto the on-screen avatar. The controller fades from their conscious as they become immersed in the virtual world.”<sup>96</sup> Arguably, virtual reality might be able to mediate such an experience even better than computer games, since the movements represented in the visual environment are often a result of the same movements of our body, not merely equivalent movements. This is perhaps why Chris Milk talked about *HOW VIRTUAL REALITY CAN CREATE THE ULTIMATE EMPATHY MACHINE* (2015):

“[Virtual reality] connect’s humans to other humans in a profound way that I’ve never seen before in any other form of media. And it can change people’s perception of each other. And that’s how I think virtual reality has the potential to actually change

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, pg. 21-22, 62.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, pg. 95-96.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, pg. 163.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, pg. 182.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, pg. 19.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, pg. 100.

the world. So, it's a machine, but through this machine we become more compassionate, we become more empathetic, and we become more connected. And ultimately, we become more human."<sup>97</sup>

Although Milk's speech is highly inflated, his premise of virtual reality (VR) as the ultimate empathy machine seemed to have been a sticky idea, as journalists, designers, marketers, and other technophiles have embraced the phrase quite readily. But what qualities of VR does Milk actually use to support his claim? Milk asserts: "[VR] is a very experiential medium. You feel your way inside of it. It's a machine but inside of it feels like real life, it feels like truth. And you feel present in the world that you're inside and you feel present with the people that you are inside of it with."<sup>98</sup> What Milk is essentially describing is the medium's capacity for creating 'immediacy'<sup>99</sup> or 'presence,'<sup>100</sup> as well as sensory and imaginative 'immersion.'<sup>101</sup> Milk shows the audience the camera his team uses for 'shooting' videos for VR and eventually also one of his projects called *CLOUDS OVER SIDRA* (2015), a virtual reality film about twelve-year-old Sidra in a Syrian refugee camp that was produced in collaboration with the United Nations. Milk thus generally works with *cinematic virtual reality* — basically a film in 360° view. The only interaction in cinematic VR is that the user can turn her head or body around to decide what she wants to focus her attention on. Although this allows the observer to fully understand the spatial relations and position in the virtual environment, cinematic VR is otherwise not so different from regular cinema in that the observer is bound to a single spot or to the edits and cuts of the video. But because of presence and sensory immersion produced by the medium itself, the VR employs subjective vision to submerge the viewer into the filmed space, making her a subject of viewing but also an intrinsic element of the product. The

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<sup>97</sup> Milk 2015, 9:38-10:15.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 5:42-5:59.

<sup>99</sup> Immediacy is a concept proposed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000). Immediacy describes the effort of certain media products to render the interface, the medium or the technology invisible in order to provide an illusion of unmediated reality. The authors put the cinematic subjective shot, as well as the computer game and virtual reality first-person perspective mode of spatial interaction in context with immediacy. Bolter and Grusin 2000, pg. 4, 22, 91, 98-99.

<sup>100</sup> Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton in 1997 most prominently define presence very similarly to Bolter and Grusin's immediacy as "the perceptual illusion of nonmediation." Ditton and Lombard 1997, n.p.

<sup>101</sup> In their article 'Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion' (2005), Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä divide immersion into three narrower types: sensory, challenge-based and imaginative. Sensory immersion thus generally occurs when large screens and loud/filtered audio of the game dominates our sensory input over that of the real world. Challenge-based immersion focuses on the satisfaction achieved from a balance of facing (physical, motoric, mental or cognitive) challenges and having the appropriate skills to tackle them (equivalent to the psychological concept of 'flow'). Imaginative immersion is a "dimension of game experience, in which one becomes absorbed with the stories and the world, or begins to feel for or identify with a game character." Imaginative immersion thus includes our emotional engagement with the characters, which, among other ways, can occur from empathising with the specific character. Ermi and Mäyrä 2005, p. 7-8.

assumed first-person perspective is, at least in the case of *CLOUDS OVER SIDRA*, not that of the protagonist, but merely your own; you view the person from your usual third-person perspective. The ‘ultimate empathy machine’ in this context then means that the observer is able to understand the daily life and experience of the protagonist by audio-visually perceiving the represented world as if the observer’s body was *actually in the environment* of the protagonist.

Even more so, in interactive VR experiences are strongly embodied, since they require users to move in the virtual space as they would in a real place. VR essentially marks a return of the stereoscope, in that the same technique of stereoscopic lenses is used in the VR oculi were previously used in stereoscopes. The act of immersing one’s field of vision in a different environment than one’s body actually occupies is heavily replicated and celebrated in VR. VR theory and advertising is thus filled with terms like ‘immersion,’ ‘presence,’ ‘embodiment,’ and of course also ‘empathy.’ Yet interactive VR somewhat resolves the issue that the original nineteenth-century stereoscope had; the stereoscope was static and purely visual, while VR perfects the binocular subjective vision and literally simulates the bodily experience of space you have in real life, allowing you to move through the space in a body that is at once virtual and your own. As was the case for the stereoscope, the sense of touch is still disassociated from what the users see — they cannot feel surfaces, materials or other tactile properties of the object in the virtual space. Based on the transposition of the body into a virtual body, role, and environment, many advocates of VR maintain that the experience is tied to empathy on a fundamental level. These beliefs seem to be very much a residue of the aesthetic theory of empathy created by Vischer and Lipps, which precisely highlighted movement, projection, and occupying the body and location of another being. But what is perhaps even more interesting that the actualisation of the project of perfecting the first-person perspective as an embodied, subjective, and interactive user experience is that around the time the project seems to have reached its climax, the study of empathy reemerged after a almost eighty years of rest. The following section will therefore examine the theories and studies that emerged in the 1980s and how they reflect the embodied first-person perspective in computer games and virtual reality.

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### **3.3 Simulation**

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Interest in the study of empathy resurfaced at the beginning of the twenty-first century after a rather long pause. New empathy studies emerged in the late 1980s — shortly after the first-person perspective in computer games and the medium of virtual reality became popular. The resurrection was led by the so-called “simulation theory” that emerged

based on three key texts: Jane Heal's 'Replication and functionalism' (1986), Robert Gordon's 'Folk psychology as simulation' (1986) and Alvin Goldman's 'Interpretation psychologized' (1989). The founding texts asserted our imagination plays a key role in our understanding the inner states of others, since we reproduce their perspective and experience as our own. In his *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences* (2006), Karsten Stueber considers simulation theorists "today's equivalent of empathy theorists" because their approach is very similar to that of the earlier writings on sympathy, *Einfühlung* and empathy. In simple terms, simulation theory states that we simulate the perspective of others based on their witnessed or self-reported experience, rather than applying some kind of a theory ('folk psychology' or 'common sense') to understand their behaviour and intentions as 'theory theory' proposes.<sup>102</sup> My mind thus *simulates* the mind (with all its cognitive, bodily and sensory intricacies) of another person. The term 'simulation' as a descriptor of this process originates from Gordon's article. Despite the fact they are rather sceptical of the simulation theory, Alison Gopnik and Henry M. Wellman synthesise the general operation of the simulation process in the following way:

We feed perceptual inputs appropriate to the other's situation (e.g., what he can see or touch or hear) to our own mind. By running our mind through this contrived, imaginary situation we simply experience the mental state that would result in that situation. Then we attribute that state to the other person. We simulate the other person's mental state by running a working model of a mind - our own mind - in a simulated situation and seeing what the model yields.<sup>103</sup>

Gordon maintained that the simulation system runs "off-line," because it does not lead to any natural output, and thus "its 'decision' isn't actually executed but rather ends up as an anticipation, perhaps just an unconscious *motor* anticipation, of the other's behavior."<sup>104</sup> This emphasis on movement is not only reminiscent of Robert Vischer's *Einfühlung*, but became a major component of the theory once it attained its 'scientific proof' in the form of mirror neurons. In 1991, a research team at the University of Parma found that certain neurons in the brains of monkeys activate both when the monkey performs a specific movement as well as when the monkey simply watches someone else do the same motion. The mirroring effect of these neurones is also sometimes read as the unconscious capacity of the brain to simulate the actions of others without exerting any

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<sup>102</sup> I will not discuss theory theory of empathy here, since it does not conceptualise understanding 'from the inside' and thus does not relate to the first-person perspective to any considerable extent. For my self-critique of such omissions, see the concluding chapter. For a detailed explanation of theory theory and comparison to simulation theory, see Gopnik and Wellman 1994.

<sup>103</sup> Gopnik and Wellman 1994, pg. 276.

<sup>104</sup> Gordon 1986, pg. 170, original emphasis.

movement of its own body; this simulation is supposed to help our mind understand the witnessed actions.<sup>105</sup> Mirror neurons seem to have been already predicted by Robert Vischer, when he asserted that “kinesthetic stimulus does not always and necessarily lead to actual movement, but always to the idea of it.”<sup>106</sup> Vittorio Gallese, the co-author of the pilot studies on mirror neurons, added depth to this approach of embodied interpersonal relating in his article ‘Bodily selves in relation: embodied simulation as second-person perspective on intersubjectivity’ (2014). Gallese formulates a body-centred conception of inter-personal connection: “When relating to others, we also experience them as bodily selves, similar to how we experience ourselves as the owners of our body and the authors of our actions.”<sup>107</sup> Ultimately, Gallese concludes that the discovery of mirror neurons “allowed the possibility to conceive intersubjectivity and social cognition from a novel neuroscientific perspective that emphasises the crucial role of the acting body.”<sup>108</sup> Mirror neurons along with the simulation theory thus revitalised the concept of empathy in a way that substituted the purely cognitive process of perspective-taking for an embodied one.

According to Corrado Rizzolatti and Giacomo Sinigaglia in their book *Mirrors in the Brain—How Our Minds Share Actions and Emotions* (2006), empathy requires “the capacity to understand the emotions of others, to read signs of pain, fear, disgust, and joy in their faces and body language.”<sup>109</sup> Although mirror neurons do not necessarily lead to sharing emotions, they do *enable* such processes by forcing us to read the expressions of someone else’s inner state *from the inside*. In their other collaborative publication ‘The functional role of the parieto-frontal mirror circuit: interpretations and misinterpretations’ (2010), Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia expand their established theory by locating mirror neurons in so-called “mirror mechanisms.” A mirror mechanism is

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<sup>105</sup> In their findings published in the 1992 article ‘Understanding motor events: a neurophysiological study,’ Giacomo Rizzolatti and coworkers claimed that certain neurons in the premotor cortex of Macaca monkeys lit up both when the monkey executed goal-oriented hand-object movements themselves as well as when the monkeys only watched the experimenter do the same meaningful movements. In their 1996 publication ‘Action recognition in the premotor cortex,’ Rizzolatti’s research team finally coined the term “mirror neurons” to distinguish their discovery, while concurrently rendering its significance and utility largely equivocal. According to these studies, mirror neurons described a part of the monkey’s brain which responds to certain meaningful, motor, hand-object actions (like grasping, holding and tearing a banana) regardless of whether these actions are performed by the monkey or only witnessed. The “mirroring” thus implies less that monkey sees, so monkey does (i.e. that the neurones would activate when the monkey would physically mimic the actions of others), but rather that the neurons reflect the neurones of the other, who is the only one physically performing the movement. We will come back to this idea of virtual imitation of the mind in the context of simulation theory of empathy in the following section. Although the transfer of results from animal experimentation to humans does not occur over night, Rizzolatti’s team was well aware of the possible implications of monkey’s mirror neurones for humans. They specifically noted that the monkey’s brain segment where mirror neurons have been registered is homologous to the Broca’s area of the human brain, which is responsible for speech production. Di Pellegrino 1992, pg. 179; Gallese 1996, pg. 607.

<sup>106</sup> Vischer 1994, pg. 99.

<sup>107</sup> Gallese 2014, pg. 5.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, pg. 8.

<sup>109</sup> Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2006, pg. 177.

essentially the process of mirror neurons converting the observer's sensory experience of the behaviour of others into a motor code of the same behaviour in the observer's brain.<sup>110</sup> One of such mirror mechanisms "allows an individual to understand the action of others 'from the inside' and gives the observer a first-person grasp of the motor goals and intentions of other individuals."<sup>111</sup> In other words, we understand the motor actions of others not from a detached, objective, third-person perspective as a visual input "from the outside," but rather from an embodied, subjective, first-person perspective "'from the inside' as a motor possibility."<sup>112</sup> Fundamentally, the mirror mechanism is responsible for helping our brain understand the intentions linked to specific motor actions as if they were performed by our own body; we experience the motor behaviour of others from the first-person perspective of our body.

The whole notion of a simulation strongly reflects computer games as a medium, where users can experiment in a virtual and safe environment. Aside from embodiment, simulation theory also tries to examine the spatial implications of empathy. For example, Gordon is interested in the spatial consequences of simulation theory, since "simulating often does require imaginatively 'putting' oneself in the other's place, at least in the literal sense of 'place': that is, transporting oneself in imagination to the other's spatial or temporal location."<sup>113</sup> Yet this transportation is only *our own reconstruction* of someone else's "spatial perspective;"<sup>114</sup> we thereby project our own beliefs and generalisations onto the environment, despite trying to imitate the point of view of another subject. Gordon, along with other simulationists, considers this spatial perspective-shifting an indicator that we consider "the other," whose mind we are trying to read or with whom we empathise, as a subject. By imagining to see from the 'place' of the other subject, we then try to identify "the situational cause or 'object' of the other's action or emotion."<sup>115</sup> Prior to the simulationists, empathy was not significantly tied to space or the exact spatial location and viewpoint of the subject. Meanwhile, the spatial relations of the subject towards the environment, especially in term of objects of interests, are key in computer games and virtual reality. This is because the main component of the first-person perspective in such interactive media is that it allows users to explore the space according to their own will, or rather according to the movements of their bodies (e.g. moving a mouse or turning the head). Looking for objects as sources of emotions is especially key in first-person shooter games, where players must be constantly observant and nervous of

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<sup>110</sup> Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2010, pg. 264.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, pg. 265.

<sup>113</sup> Gordon 1992, pg. 13.

<sup>114</sup> Gordon 1986, pg. 170.

<sup>115</sup> Gordon 1992, pg. 25.

emerging enemies. No wonder that computer games and virtual reality have become so popular as carriers of the first-person perspective, through which users can virtually or physically take on the body of another and endure their bodily and emotional experience concurrently with the protagonist.

The idea of the mind or perception feeding input to the body, which then runs a simulation and produces certain affect is also reminiscent of how computer games and VR operate — simulation theory essentially turns others into avatars or playable characters, as they experience the actual affect, while the player/empathiser receives the affect only as a mirror reflection or simulation. The notion of experiencing empathy ‘from the inside’ and occupying the body of another person within the simulation of the mind is somewhat replicated in the emphasis on sensory immersion especially in VR experiences. The entire emphasis of this conception of empathy on an embodied, immersive, first-person experience within the safety of a simulation is very close to the first-person perspective products that were popular at the time, when simulation theory and mirror neurons emerged. I, therefore, believe that the way the first-person perspective in media developed as a subjective, interactive, and bodily mode of consumption, which culminated the subjective vision of the stereoscope, helped scholars to return to the embodied empathy proposed by Vischer and add a more contemporary, systemic, and machine-like dimension to the concept. Ultimately, the re-emergence of the study of empathy occurred as first-person computer games became a part of mass culture, the same way as the development of empathy as a philosophical concept was preceded by the popularisation of first-person novels.

Furthermore, one cannot ignore the technophilic choice of words like ‘simulation,’ ‘feed,’ ‘input’ and ‘output,’ ‘motor,’ ‘off-line’ — a type of linguistic “systems esthetic” to borrow Jack Burnham’s terminology — that pervades this theory. Even the term mirror neurons renders our brain and mind as a type of very basic technology; mirrors are additionally used in single-lens reflex (SLR) cameras for previewing shots. It might be helpful here to refer to Sherry Turkle, a professor of social studies of science and technology and an expert in people's relationships with technology. In roughly the same time that simulation theory was gaining momentum, Turkle published her key book *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (1984). Turkle considers the computer as a so-called “evocative object;” “like a Rorschach inkblot test, is a powerful projective medium,” and as such, “what people make of the computer speaks of their larger concerns, speaks of who they are as individual personalities.”<sup>116</sup> Turkle therefore asserts that we project our consciousness onto computers, which thereby become our *second selves*. This intertwining of our minds with technology essentially renders computer

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<sup>116</sup> Turkle 1984, pg. 14-15.

systems as our second nature: “behind increasing interest in computational interpretations of mind is an equally nervous preoccupation with the idea of self as machine.”<sup>117</sup> Although the common inquiry takes form of “Will machines think like people?” Turkle proposes that we should rather ask, “whether people have always thought like machines.”<sup>118</sup> Empathy, at least in the way it has been theorised by the simulationists and nineteenth-century theorists, would certainly have us lean towards answering the aforementioned inquiry affirmatively. This indeed suggests that computers and computer-based media have influenced the way scholars think about mind-related phenomena like empathy and that computer run similarly to human minds. If we take on Turkle’s notion of the machine as our second self, we can certainly consider the first-person perspective in computational media like computer games and virtual reality as a method of aiding, mediating or even supplanting empathic simulation, or at least simulating a comparable process.

The events and media products in the nineteenth and the twentieth century have generated a conception of empathy and design of the first-person perspective that is significantly marked by embodiment. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, new discoveries about the properties of human vision have prompted the production of objects like the stereoscope, which simulated the first-person perspective. The stereoscope and the devices found in optical illusions have in turn changed the position of the audience and engendered a new mode of viewing practices. This novel ‘subjective vision’ required the human body to complete the final product, creating an embodied, non-referential, and fragmented final image. At the end of that century, Robert Vischer followed by Theodor Lipps created a new concept — *Einfühlung* (eventually translated into English as empathy) — which theorises interpersonal relations and sharing of feelings in terms of aesthetic and kinaesthetic terms. *Einfühlung* along with subjective vision have prompted media to develop an embodied and interactive first-person perspective, which made its way from photography through cinema to reach its potential in computer games and virtual reality. The first-person interactive simulations became popular culture in the last two decades of the twentieth century. At the same time, a new theory of empathy emerged: simulation theory, which strongly reflected the properties of first-person computer games and VR. Simulation theory also attained scientific grounding in mirror neurons, which further strengthened the idea of empathy as an embodied experience.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, pg. 24.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, pg. 24.

## 4. Similarity

### 4.1 This Could Be Me

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the embodied empathy and first-person perspective has been slowly substituted for a new collective-oriented approach. With the advent of social media and networking sites like *MYSpace* (2003), *FACEBOOK* (2004), and *TWITTER* (2006), the status and mood updates marked a large revival of the first-person diary form, except that the entries were intended to be read publicly similarly to first-person novels in the eighteenth century. But social media change the game significantly, since readers can engage and react to the posts, directly expressing their agreement and compassion as well as disagreement and spitefulness. *YOUTUBE* (2005) adds to this dynamic via audio-visual expression, engendering the rise of 'vlogs' (video blogs), where the author records her life and experiences with the intention to share them with an audience. Another predominantly visual platform is *INSTAGRAM* (2010), which nonetheless moves away from the website base and rather embraces the mobile application status. This played a crucial role in the establishment of the first-person perspective photography as a popular aesthetic of mobile photography. The vast availability of smartphones and other lightweight and portable capturing devices has made it incredibly easy for users to document their lives. As discoveries in optics led to subjective vision in the nineteenth century, so have twenty-first-century technological advances engendered new patterns of audiovisual auto-mediation of one's experiences and activities recorded from the first-person perspective.

Although this thesis has mostly dealt with fictional works, I will turn to predominantly non-fictional examples in this section. This is because during the beginning of the twenty-first century the first-person perspective has been most prominent on social media. This does not mean we have entered the realm of 'reality,' as social media content is highly curated, constructed, and performative. So while I have largely omitted autobiographical work from my analysis, I will refer to '*automedialität*', a term proposed by Christian Moser and Jörg Dünne, to justify why I choose to investigate such products now. *Automedialität*, or 'automediality' as it is translated to English, is an interdisciplinary approach to life writing that takes into account "the full range of artistic and technological media applied to the task of self-representation."<sup>119</sup> In the framework of *automedialität*, "the object of self-representation is always a fictional construct - an 'other' self, a persona - and that every self-representation therefore contains an element of autofiction."<sup>120</sup> This blurring of the real and the fictional is culminated on social media

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<sup>119</sup> Moser 2019, pg. 247.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 255.

and the internet at large as users are forced to “compete for attention and recognition among users,” which incentivise the digital representations of the self to be “performative, exhaustive and expository in character.”<sup>121</sup> For this reason, I do not conceive of the self-representation on social media to be any more ‘veracious’ than a character in a movie. In this chapter, I will thus investigate the first-person perspective in action camera videos, Instagram photography, as well as recent documentary practices. The underlying social dimension of these first-person perspectives will prove to be essential for explaining the ‘episteme of similarity,’ which seems to have arisen at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In 2004, amidst the rise of social media platforms, the waterproof GoPro HERO 35mm camera was developed; this camera was made for surfers, who wanted to record their own skill and craft either for themselves or to share with others. Initially, the GoPro camera was intended to be strapped to the surfer’s wrist, but a few years later GoPro developed a greater variety of mounts, including the head/helmet strap. The action camera use spread from surfing to other sports like skiing and mountain biking. GoPro thereby gave rise to ‘action cameras’ that are usually worn on the subject’s body or gear in order to record their skilful as well as perilous activities. First-person videos produced by mounting the action camera on the user’s head, helmet, or chest eventually became popular uploads on *YOUTUBE*. The first-person videos filmed by wearable action cameras produce rather subjective, sensorially immersive, and embodied viewing experiences. Similarly to first-person computer games and VR, the first-person action camera videos produce embodied experiences; when the mountain biker falls off his bike face into the mud, so does the camera and, ultimately, so does the audience by extension. Nevertheless, the embodiment is not so extensive, since the viewer is not physically involved in the action by the medium, as is the case for the point-of-view shot in cinema.

The lack of interactivity in the experience itself can nonetheless be alleviated if the viewer is at least somewhat physically familiar with the presented sport or action. These videos are thus aimed primarily at viewers, who have a similar ‘motor repertoire’ to be able to fully appreciate the presented experience. Action cameras are also specific in their fisheye perspective, which captures a wider curved image that helps create a more visually immersive experience. This means that the wide image loosely mimics the central as well as the peripheral scope of human vision and the camera movements depend on the subject of action; this mode of recording allows the viewer to perceive the action approximately to the way the actual subject sees it in real life. This is especially important, since action cameras are generally employed to record the authors’ fast movement across space, which usually involves endangerment and therefore also requires the performer to

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, pg. 254.

be skillful. In juxtaposition to cinema, the subjective shot of the action camera videos works here exactly because it is actually subjective —it is not simulated by positioning the camera in the place of the character, but it is produced simultaneously as the subject lives out the experience. The author’s participation and skill in the experience are crucial for action camera videos, as the manufacture of the technology push in their advertising through such slogans as: “Prove you did what they said you couldn’t” or “Be a hero.” The action camera videos are therefore uploaded onto *YOUTUBE* and *INSTAGRAM* firstly to display, establish, and validate the author’s *heroic* prowess and secondly to enable the terrestrial audience to get a taste of the experience from the first-person perspective of the heroine herself.

The first-person perspective is present on social media not only in the form of action camera videos, but also in more casual photography. In ‘Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self,’ the historian of photography Alise Tifentale and cultural analyst Lev Manovich conceptualise the selfie as as “a photo showing person(s) participating in some situation, being present in some space, or having an experience.”<sup>122</sup> While in the traditional selfie the subject is looking towards the camera so that her face is visible, the so-called “anti-selfie” shows the subject’s body, but not her face. Tifentale’s and Manovich’s examples of the anti-selfie genre include examples such as: the author of the *INSTAGRAM* account looking away from the camera into a landscape or another environment, the author’s free hand gesturing to a place, and the author’s body as a part of an arrangement of objects (figure 7). Anti-selfies are generally taken by the author



**Figure 7** Lev Manovich, a montage of anti-selfie examples, (<<https://goo.gl/photos/9Vw5Kk8iZSsj7fqYA>> [15 April 2020]).

<sup>122</sup> Tifentale and Manovich 2018, pg. 181.

herself (approximately from her point of view, but closer to the photographed object) to depict the subject's experience. Concurrently, the author also marks her own participation in that experience by including some part of her body — hand(s), leg(s), torso, but not the head or face — in the frame. Unlike the selfie, the primary object of the first-person photograph is the experience itself, yet this experience is appropriated by the subject. Similarly to the shadow in early photographs, the author of the *INSTAGRAM* account is at once the active subject of viewing and concurrently also the object being viewed, as her body becomes a part of the captured event or flat-lay. However, the author of the anti-selfie does not necessarily have to be the author of the *INSTAGRAM* accounts, but in such cases, the actual photographer stays invisible assuming an 'objective' third-person position.

Ultimately, the first-person video and photograph form a narrative of the YouTuber or the Instagrammer. Tifentale and Manovich point out that anti-selfies are often juxtaposed in the photographer's *INSTAGRAM* gallery with other selfies, portraits, or third-person perspective photos taken by the author to record the author's experiences over time.<sup>123</sup> This is true also of Instagram accounts that often upload their action camera footage. Tifentale and Manovich liken these resulting Instagram galleries to modern fiction films:

Some shots show the hero, while others do not—and together, they construct a coherent story as seen by a narrator. In films, such a narrator can be an outside omnipresent consciousness or a person in the story, referred to in Film Studies as "viewpoint character." The Instagram's visual narratives represent the second type of narration, with the account's author functioning like a viewpoint character.<sup>124</sup>

Curated subjective *YOUTUBE* and *INSTAGRAM* accounts are equivalent to films focused on a particular protagonist, in which first-person action videos and anti-selfies would be veridical or even subjectively inflected point-of-view shots. The account authors are thus the 'hero' of the narratives they present publicly for others to consume. Of course, these accounts often have large followings, but most viewers will have never personally met the author of the account nor will they have any proof that the influencer presents her life in a 'veracious' way. Hence, the distinction between real and fictional is often blurry on such narrative social media accounts, which often occupy a liminal position between a friend, a celebrity, and a fictional character. Either way, the follower consumes the serialised story (in the sense of the word, as well as in the *INSTAGRAM* channel sense of 'Stories') of the protagonist, consuming a new 'episode' each day in the form of posts, Stories, and live broadcasts, or (re)watching older ones. This serialisation of the account's author is not unlike that of a television character or a comics hero; the author then emerges as an

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, pg. 182.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

'influencer,' inspiring other how to live their lives, where to travel and what products to buy. In a way, the first-person action videos record the subject in a fast perilous experience like free-riding and mountain biking are a visual revival of the sixteenth-century picaresque novels. Meanwhile, the curated *INSTAGRAM* accounts that include anti-selfies depicting the subject sitting at a café with coffee and cake, reading a book in bed, visiting a prospect or a place during travelling in general, and other more serene activities are a resurrection of the eighteenth and nineteenth century first-person novels.<sup>125</sup>

Nevertheless, first-person perspective content on social media is markedly different from earlier versions of the technique, since they include meta-data, like the person's location, time and date of the upload, hashtags, likes and comments as Tifentale stresses in her chapter 'The Selfie: More and Less than a Self-Portrait' (2018).<sup>126</sup> Tifentale therefore claims that the selfie distinguishes itself from older painterly and photographic self-portraits in that "[t]he means of the making of the selfie and conditions of its circulation are equally important elements as the image itself."<sup>127</sup> First-person content is generally produced with the intent to be shared with others, since it captures a subjective experience, which the author wants others to know about. This is especially the case for influencers, who use the first-person perspective not to depict quotidian experiences, but rather those that are rare or even unattainable for the average follower. This is what makes first-person action videos so attractive, as the terrestrial viewer can perceive the rather perilous, but extremely skilful experience from the hero's perspective. Similarly, we can for a moment embody the influencer sitting in a high-end restaurant holding a cup of coffee with a Cartier watch on his wrist through his first-person anti-selfie. But more importantly, the follower can interact with the hero by hitting the like button, commenting under the post or investigating the linked location on the map. The amount of people interacting with the content via likes and comments helps to spread the content and thereby make the account author more renowned and strengthens their role model status. It is thus essential for the content to be likeable, admirable or *sought-after*.

The virtual participation in the presented scenario and the identification of the audience with the subject of the first-person perspective is a key component of the new approach. The author of the first-person perspective therefore tries to involve her audience in her own experiences, as Tifentale contends:

By not displaying the author's face, these photos clearly signal their goal—to show person's participation in a situation or an experience. By including a part of the body of a person who is in this situation/experience cut by a frame, a photo includes you in

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<sup>125</sup> The diary being also one of the older modes of first-person narration, *The Diaries of Anne Frank* have actually been recently adapted to vlogs on *YOUTUBE*.

<sup>126</sup> Tifentale 2018, pg. 45-46.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 46.

the experience. You are not the disembodied eye observing the world from the distance, as in Renaissance perspective, but the body that is part of the pictured world.<sup>128</sup>

The smartphone user's body is, of course, familiar with picking up the phone and aiming it at less than an arm's length at the object of her interest; this experience is then documented and often shared with others via social media. The practice of viewing such images is then also embodied to some extent, as the body in the first-person perspective image becomes an extension of the viewer's body. But these first-person perspectives on social media are not meant to facilitate embodiment per se, but rather envisioning, as viewers are expected to participate, at least in their imagination, in the presented experience. The main idea behind the way these first-person perspectives are created and consumed is no longer about understanding or embodying another being, but primarily about *identification*. The images express a certain identity of the subject, which the target audience either shares or aspires to have. This is especially why influencers are so good at making their audiences buy products, as well as why advertisers themselves are increasingly using the first-person perspective in their campaigns. In other words, the first-person perspective tries to elicit *the feeling that the viewer and subject are the same, or at least could be the same*.

This sameness implicit in current media representations of the first-person perspective is also reflected in current empathy theory. Shannon Spaulding, a philosopher of the mind, maintains that empathising by simulating the mind of another person is more likely to be successful when the empathiser is *similar* to the subject. According to Spaulding, empathy as perspective-shifting or simulation is first and foremost inwards oriented and self-centred, as we first imagine our own experience and then project it onto the subject. This is because "we figure out what we would think and feel in a particular situation and attribute that to the target."<sup>129</sup> In other words, the more the subject is similar to the empathiser, the more likely it is that the simulation will be closer to the person's actual mental and physical state. By similar Spaulding means that the empathiser and the subject resemble each other in terms of internal characteristics — values, beliefs, and desires — and external traits — age, race, and gender. Spaulding further contends that "we also use our mental states as an anchor and adjust the interpretation based on how similar the individual is to us," implying the empathiser even configures her simulation based on the extent of similarity between her and the subject.<sup>130</sup> This does not mean that the empathiser must have similar life experiences as the subject. On the

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Spaulding 2017, pg. 17.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

contrary, studies have shown that if the empathiser went through similar situations in their life, they might interpret the subject's emotions differently and attain a different affective state.<sup>131</sup> The connection is thus based not so much on the experience people might share, but the extent to which they are similar as people. In other words, empathy, as it's currently conceptualised, is founded in the extent to which the bodies, minds, and identities of two people are a mirror image of one another.

Furthermore, Spaulding highlights that the external and internal similarity between the empathiser and the subject is also closely tied to their social position and group belonging. Spaulding maintains that "those who we perceive to be like us are categorized as part of our in-group, and those who we perceive to be unlike us are categorized as part of an out-group."<sup>132</sup> It is therefore easier for people to empathise with a person, who is perceived as a member of their "in-group," than with someone, who is assumed to be from an "out-group."<sup>133</sup> The following section will expand on this entanglement of empathy and group identity by exploring the first-person perspective as an expression of a collective — first-person plural — identity.

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## **4.2 First-Person Plural**

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The idea of empathy facilitated by external and internal correspondence is supported by empirical evidence, which further emphasises the importance of social belonging in the process of empathy. According to the findings of Silke Anders and colleagues, "empathic responses towards unknown others are modulated by behavioural similarity, and partly support with [sic] kin-selection theories of human social behaviour."<sup>134</sup> Anders et alia thereby suggest that people more readily and strongly empathise with people, who they perceive as akin to themselves, because that is how humans are programmed to build and protect their families, tribes, and even species. This entanglement of empathy and group identity, along with the worse ability to empathise with "out-group" members has been fervently explored in philosophy and psychology in the last decade.<sup>135</sup> In 2019, philosophers Thomas Szanto and Joel Krueger edited an entire special issue of *Topoi* journal about this topic, primarily asking: "To what extent does empathy enable joint agency, emotional sharing, and the emergence and maintenance of group and social identity?" and "Conversely, how do shared emotions, social identity, or group

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid, pg. 36.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, pg. 17.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Anders 2020, pg. 5.

<sup>135</sup> See, for example, Tarrant, Dazeley and Cottom, 2009; Coleman, Verrochi, and Williams 2013; Fourie, Subramoney, and Madikizela 2016; Paterson, Brown, and Walters 2019.

membership modulate or bias empathic understanding at both the interpersonal and the intergroup level?"<sup>136</sup> One of the contributors, Thomas Fuchs, contends that empathy is "a paramount medium of establishing group cohesion," because "sharing each other's emotions is an important presupposition for identifying with others, for it means not only feeling the same emotion, but also includes *reciprocal* awareness of jointly participating in an emotional experience."<sup>137</sup> Fuchs claims empathy reenacts and safeguards what he calls the "we-identity;" i.e. the values, beliefs, and traits that the members (the individual 'I's) of the group (the collective "we") share, against which the "they-group" is consequently created.<sup>138</sup>

The relationship of the first-person singular 'I', the first-person plural 'we', and empathy is expanded upon by another contributor to the special issue, Dan Zahavi, who grounds himself in Edmund Husserl's theory of phenomenology and intersubjectivity. Zahavi compares becoming a part of a group to adopting the perspective of another person during empathy; neither ever leads to an extension of one by the other, complete fusion, or eradication of difference. Instead, one perceives themselves as a part of "us," where the difference between the individual and others is present, but is withdrawn into the background, allowing the shared emotions and identity traits to come through.<sup>139</sup> Furthermore, Zahavi explains that the belonging to a specific group, to a particular 'we' cannot be experienced from the perspective of a collective body of some kind, since any experience can only be perceived from one's first-person perspective. Zahavi therefore contends that "the we, the first-person plural, is not an entity observed from without, but rather something experienced from within in virtue of one's identification with and participation in a certain group."<sup>140</sup> The first-person singular is thus always the only way of accessing the *imagined* first-person plural.

This is precisely why first-person perspective media now have a strong social dimension: they are generally made for particular communities. For example, an action-camera recording of mountain biking is made for other mountain bikers, who know the skill and peril connected to the sport. Police body-cam recordings are primarily supposed to be (re)viewed by members of the police force. Advertising employing the first-person perspective expects the audience to recognise the problems, experiences, and the environments presented as their own, or at least relatable.<sup>141</sup> First-person perspective

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<sup>136</sup> Krueger and Szanto 2019, pg. 153.

<sup>137</sup> Fuchs 2019, pg. 244.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 244-245.

<sup>139</sup> Zahavi 2019, pg. 255-256.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 256.

<sup>141</sup> In the case of advertising, some examples can be indeed intended for identification or striving for membership in a certain social class or community. But many first-person perspective adverts actually present an empty carrier to be filled by the viewer's mind and body. The 'we' of such advertising is thus the 'we' of the target consumers.

anti-selfies are created according to the specific aesthetic norms of an online photography community. The Christchurch terrorist's live-stream of his mass shooting was made for people with similar extremist aims and values. The audiences are thus not intended to empathise with a completely different person, but rather perceive the subject as similar to themselves and strengthen the connection they have with the particular group they are a part of. Hence, the new uses of the first-person perspective aim to establish and signify social belonging, rather than offering the perspective of the Other. The 'I' of the first-person perspective therefore represents the identity of the plural 'we.'

This is perhaps why documentaries about a certain community created by one of its members are often framed by the first-person perspective. The subjective mode of filming caught speed in the 1980s in opposition to the 'objective,' disinterested, third-person voice that has since the very beginning, apart from a few avant-garde exceptions, prevailed in cinema and documentary history especially. In the introduction to her edited collection *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary* (2012), the documentary filmmaker and scholar Alisa Lebow explains that "'first person film' is foremost about a mode of address: these films 'speak' from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position."<sup>142</sup> The author of such a first-person documentary is thus, once again, both the spectating subject and the object of the spectacle. However, for Lebow, the 'first-person' does not necessarily entail the recording or simulation of someone's first-person spatial perspective, but rather making the author's involvement and participation in the film's content and production conspicuously visible. Despite the subjective nature of such films, Lebow emphasises that first-person films are not primarily or explicitly autobiographical, since the main focus is not on the individual per se, but on the community and the individual's place within it. This is because, as Lebow highlights, the expression of individuality and subjectivity is never isolated and rather implies an embeddedness in a community, a society, a plurality of 'I's that make up the 'we' as "[t]he first person grammatical structure can be either singular or plural."<sup>143</sup> This type of subjectivity is parallel to the 'visual milieu' of photographers on *INSTAGRAM*, as well as the (sports) communities the authors of action camera videos are a part of. Hence, first-person films are often about a community or a social phenomenon in which the author somehow participates.

An example of a first-person film would be *4.1 MILES* (2016) created by the Greek director Daphne Matziaraki. In the short documentary, Matziaraki follows a coast guard captain and his crew on his daily mission to save refugees precariously crossing the 4.1 miles of sea from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos. Instead of trying to understand

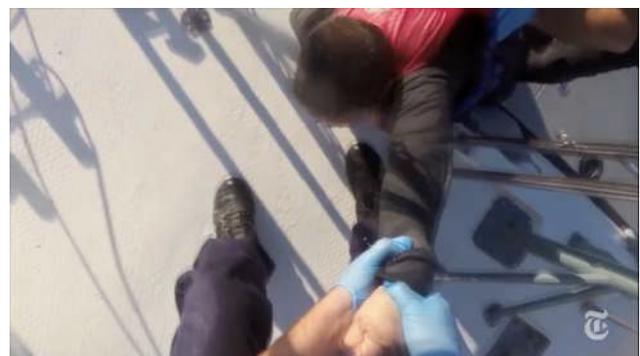
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<sup>142</sup> Lebow 2012, pg. 1, 4.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, 2-3.

the refugees from their perspective, Matziaraki focuses on the coast guard captain and the community of Lesbos dealing with the influx of migrants and refugees onto the small island. Matziaraki shoots most of the film with a hand-held camera, resulting in a shaky, immediate, first-person perspective footage of the raw experiences the author witnesses. Florian Lippert, a cultural studies scholar, further observes that “[t]he line between documenting and participating is, however, crossed from the outset of the film, when Matziaraki follows a crew member's order to “put the camera down” and hold a crying baby that has just been rescued from an overcrowded vessel.”<sup>144</sup> In a later mission, Matziaraki mounts the camera on her body to be able to actively help the ship crew pull refugees onto the boat, while still filming the struggles of the coast guards and the refugees (figures 8 and 9). Lippert uses *4.1 MILES* to illustrate how certain authors use “cultural self-reflection,” meaning they consciously reflect on the cultural frames in which their narratives have emerged, in order to question and subvert them from the inside.<sup>145</sup> Although Matziaraki remains visually invisible for the greater part of the documentary, the instability of the camera frame and her participation in the events create an embodied perspective of the crude reality of the ‘refugee crisis.’ Matziaraki uses the subjective technique to underscore her embeddedness in the ‘refugee crisis’ not only as a Greek citizen, but also a European and ultimately ‘Western’ one; Matziaraki is inherently entangled in the crisis regardless of whether she actively pulls the refugees from the sea. Intended for a Western audience, *4.1 MILES* is about Matziaraki’s experience on Lesbos and the subjective framing of the film exposes that the author’s ‘I’ is a part of a larger ‘we.’ But this ‘we’ inherently frames the refugees as the ‘they,’ reiterating the trope of othering imposed on refugees and migrants by many ‘Western’ politicians and mass media.

Another example where the first-person implies a ‘Western’ gaze is the action camera recording made by the terrorist in Christchurch, New Zealand in March 2019. The terrorist documented and live-streamed his attack using a wearable camera strapped to



**Figure 8 and 9** Captures from *4.1 MILES* (2016), Daphne Matziaraki (<<https://vimeo.com/185717440>> [18 November 2020]).

<sup>144</sup> Lippert 2018, pg. 126.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 95.

his helmet to produce an aesthetic equivalent to that popularised by first-person shooter games. The viewer of the recording thereby watches the shooting from the perspective of the terrorist. Furthermore, the centre of the frame is dominated by the pointed gun, which kills the visitors of the mosque. The first-person shooter aesthetic thereby dehumanises the Muslims, rendering them as targets to be terminated for the sake of winning the non-existent game.<sup>146</sup> While Matziaraki makes a statement about helping refugees get to Europe, the terrorist denies the assumed immigrant's right to live. Nonetheless, similarly to Matziaraki, the terrorist also uses subjective vision to frame his audience as a 'we' that is primarily 'Western.' However, the terrorist's *desired* 'we' is composed solely of white people. The terrorist thereby uses the first-person perspective in order to dehumanise and other the visitors of the mosque, his victims, as the non-white, non-Western, non-desirable 'they,' for which the author and 'ideal viewer' have not empathy.

Documentary researcher Aaron Guthrie observed already in 2013 that the development of cheap lightweight cameras in a social media age where everyone is a filmmaker and at the same time also the audience has led to a popularisation and normalisation of the first-person perspective documentary film-making.<sup>147</sup> Although the first-person perspective is applied globally and in a variety of contexts ranging from skiing, having an espresso, to documenting the plight of refugees and their rescuers, it has come into critique as a reiteration of the Western gaze as a method of othering. The application of action cameras especially has not passed unnoticed, as visual culture theorists Lee Rodney and Adam Lauder criticise the oppressive gaze produced by the GoPro camera:

Rather than producing new or different perspectives, as the company claims, the proliferation and circulation of this material tends towards the reproduction of familiar tropes from the cinematic lexicon of gazes and their attendant forms of power and objectification. From the early modern god's-eye view of the panopticon to the colonial and masculinist fetishisation of control, the perspectival promise of the GoPro brand reproduces the familiar trope of the singular, masculine, controlling visual subject of Western history.<sup>148</sup>

Although the authors focus on drone-videos in their article, I feel that labelling the audiovisual first-person perspective as solely Western is a bit dangerous. While this description definitely holds true for the recording of the Christchurch mosque shooting, I would be, for example, interested in the applications and aesthetics of the first-person in

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<sup>146</sup> Hrehorová 2019, pg. 4-6.

<sup>147</sup> Guthrie 2013, §7.

<sup>148</sup> Lauder and Rodney 2018, pg. 80-1.

non-Western products. Would these cultural works render Westerners as a 'they', for which the non-Western audience would also lack empathy?

The pitfall of delineating a 'we' that inherently creates a 'they' as engrained in the first-person plural mode of representation and viewing has been already pointed out by Thomas Fuchs in his investigation of mechanisms of exclusion and the limits of empathy. Fuchs warns that "the radical separation of a "they-group" from the "we-group"

leads to a lack or withdrawal of extended empathy towards the discriminated group, that means, a refusal to take the other's perspective and imagine what he is living through. [...] spontaneous feelings of empathy towards outgroup members are suppressed or dissociated by the perpetrators through adopting attitudes of self-detachment and self-reification. Thus, the failure of recognition and empathy leads not only to a dehumanizing view of the victims, but also to a dehumanization of the perpetrators themselves.<sup>149</sup>

This is precisely what the terrorist's recording does: the first-person shooter aesthetic dehumanises Muslims into targets or non-playable character, while objectifying the author of the video himself into an avatar. Additionally, only viewers, who share the same values, traits, and heritage as the terrorist and perceive Muslims as a radically separate 'they-group' will identify with the terrorist and have no empathy for the victims. However, viewers who will not feel as members of the same 'we-group' as the terrorist or will not have contempt for Muslims, will most probably empathise with the victims and perceive the terrorist as an Other. Fuchs' theory thereby not only describes the implications of empathy in exclusionary practices, but concurrently can be effectively applied to the highly problematic use of the first-person perspective.

Coincidentally, the special issue 'Empathy, Shared Emotions, and Social Identity' of which Fuchs' article is a part of was published on the exact same date as the Christchurch mosque shooting took place. I am, of course, not trying to create a conspiracy theory here, but simply observe the temporal coexistence of on one hand, a first-person perspective as a representation of a particular social identity, and on the other, an increased interest in the implications of empathy for intra- and inter-group dynamics. The focus of recent applications of the first-person perspective and conceptualisations of empathy move away from embodiment that has been at the basis of both during the previous two centuries. Instead, the emphasis is now on the similarity between subjects; similarity in terms of personal and physical traits as well as beliefs and values. In terms of the first-person perspective, this presentation of bodies and their identities represents, reenacts, and reinforces the group identity of which the author is or presents to be a part of. Meanwhile empathy studies begin to warn that this strengthening of the group

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<sup>149</sup> Fuchs 2019, pg. 248.

identity can be done at the expense of creating hatred towards another out-group or they-group, which can cause inability or unwillingness to empathise with people outside of the we-group. It is, of course, a question, to what extent this decreased ability to empathise with dissimilar people might be influenced by algorithms and social bubbles within social media, which surround users with *more and more of the same* opinions, values, and people. Ultimately, both the first-person perspective and empathy itself are being questioned for its narcissism and possible exclusionary consequences.

Since the 2000s and the rise of social media, documenting one's life and sharing the records on various platforms has become commonplace. This widespread 'automediation' brought back the first-person singular form of diaries and autobiographies only to make the cinematic POV shot and the computer game first-person perspective a mainstream aesthetic of presenting one's experiences. First-person photography and videos blended with third-person perspective exposure of the subject on carefully curated accounts place the author into a narrative and turn them into a character with which the audience can identify. These 'influencers' then present experiences and lifestyles viewers can aim for, making these accounts perfect for advertising. The first-person perspective in anti-selfies and action camera videos are aimed at viewers, who are already quite similar to the author. This similarity is also taken up by current empathy studies, which show that people more readily and easily empathise with people, who share the same behavioural and physical traits, including sex, race, age, beliefs, morals, and values. Concurrently, the influencers manifest a specific social status or a behaviour particular for a certain social group. The first-person perspective then becomes a representation of a collective identity; the first-person singular 'I' stands for the first-person plural 'we.'

This move towards a collective identity is taken also in empathy studies, as scholars ponder over the implication of empathy for establishing a social group and its limits. But any first-person plural also creates a third-person plural, where the latter often serves as a negative for the former. Empathy scholars, therefore, warned that empathy or the dynamic between the first-person singular and plural can eventually become a mechanic of exclusion, if the 'we-group' is perceived as radically different from the 'they-group.' This reification and impermeable demarcation of an *I qua we* against *them* appeared also in the applications of the first-person perspective, most salient being the recording of the Christchurch mosque shooting. The recording of the attack created by the terrorist himself reinforced the stance of white supremacy and objectified Muslims as a 'they-group' with which members of the terrorist's 'we-group' are unable or unwilling to empathise. Clearly, there are parallels — particularly the similarity of subjects and representing a social identity that can turn into a practice of exclusion — between the way first-person in media and empathy studies developed over the last twenty years.

## 5. Conclusion

As planned, this thesis has launched the project of establishing an understanding of the first-person perspective across media. I have mapped the various forms and applications of the first-person perspective as a representation of someone's real-life human experience of the world from the locus of that person's mind and/or body in order to mediate their perception, thoughts, sensations, and stories. Based on this original definition of the first-person perspective, I have identified various examples of the design across a variety of media. When one confides or confesses their experiences, feelings, and/or thoughts to a fellow being, the addressee essentially consumes a first-person perspective, making conversation the most basic form of the phenomenon. Subsequently, theatre remediates these confessions in dialogues and monologues. The first-person singular typical for direct speech is also transcribed into diaries, letters, autobiographies, and fictional narratives, in which the narrator and character are one and the same. In photography, the image is made subjective by including evidence of the author's body, usually in the form of a shadow, mirror reflection, or including a part of the author's body into the frame. Cinema manifests the first-person perspective by representing a character's field of vision, change in sensory perception, mental projection, or presenting parts of the character's body from the locus of the character's eyes. Computer games employ the first-person perspective by placing the players into the virtual body of an avatar or playable character and allowing them to control the movements and actions of that virtual character. Virtual reality extends this approach by fully submerging the user's vision and hearing into the virtual environment and blurring the distinction between their body and that of the virtual vessel. Each medium connects the body and mind of the spectacle and the spectator in different ways and to varying extents. However, the first-person perspective in itself does not inherently guarantee empathy, compassion, or sharing of emotions.

My understanding of the concept of empathy, as the state of contracting the same or equivalent feelings of another being resulting from unintentionally 'catching' the emotions of another or by consciously imagining the experience of the other being, goes beyond the term *Einfühlung* conceived within the framework of nineteenth-century German aesthetic theory. I have shown that the roots of the concept as I have defined it can be tracked across various other terms, theories, and contexts. The history of the concept of empathy is therefore traced all the way to the use of the term sympathy in sixteenth-century natural philosophy. In that context and time, sympathy was conceived as a universal force of harmony that turns like into like. Consequently, the terms sympathy was used to explain the attraction of magnets, spread of contagious diseases, as well as sharing of emotions. Sympathy eventually matured into a mainstream concept during the

eighteenth century, when it began to be perceived in terms of imagining the subject's point of view or having the signs of their suffering reflected in one's mind. The German term *Mitleid* (translated into English as compassion, pity, or literally 'suffering with') was discussed in a similar manner as a co-vibration of the sufferer and the spectator. In the late nineteenth century, the term *Einfühlung* (literally 'feeling into') was coined to describe the unconscious projection of the body onto external forms in response to sensory and/or kinaesthetic stimuli. The German word *Einfühlung* was translated into English as empathy and engendered a strongly embodied understanding of the phenomenon of emotion sharing and perspective-taking.

Throughout this thesis I have not only explored how bodies and minds of different people (real and fictional/virtual) can be connected through media, but primarily how different *bodies* of knowledge have been *connected* throughout history. This exploration has been guided by the question: what is the historical interrelationship between the development of the first-person perspective in media and empathy studies? This question was answered in a chronological order, beginning in the sixteenth century and running all the way up to the most recent developments. The span of over four hundred years has been divided into three smaller segments — what could be in Foucault-ian manner called epistemes — based on the prevailing trend in empathy studies and the first-person perspective: 1600-1800, 1800-2000, and from the 2000 onward. The first period is dominated by concord; through empathy or the first-person perspective one learned about the other's life and perspective of the world and thereby understood their point of view, which led to harmony and a *cordial* relation. The second time segment can be characterised by embodiment since early nineteenth-century discoveries in optics have promoted a subjective and embodied mode of viewing, while also engendering an understanding of empathy grounded in the embodied perception of sensory and kinaesthetic stimuli. The last twenty years are marked by similarity, as scientist show people are more likely to empathise with subjects they perceive as similar and/or a part of the same social group, while the first-person perspective became a representation of behaviour, beliefs, or values of a specific social unit. This does not mean each of the three characteristics was not present in the other periods; that is, of course, not so. All three are in one way or another at the essence of the concept of empathy and the design of the first-person perspective. The categories simply identify the dominant focus of each time period.

The 'episteme' of *concord* was engendered primarily by the reemergence of ancient Greek texts that included Plato's discussion of sympathy ('*sympatheia*') during the sixteenth century. Sympathy was understood as a force ensuring harmony in the entire universe and was responsible for causing similarity between people; this included passing diseases, emotions, and morals. As plagues soared through Europe, *cordial* relations and

*conversations* especially were perceived as possible instances of being physiologically and psychologically affected by the conversant. This idea rendered dialogue — the simplest form of communicating the first-person perspective — threatening to one's purity. This understanding of sympathy was then reflected in period plays, most prominently in the dialogues and monologues of Shakespearean dramas. While the sixteenth-century understanding of sympathy influenced conversations and theatre as two early versions of the first-person perspective, theatre in turn heavily affected the way sympathy continued to be conceptualised, explained, and described. During the eighteenth century, also known as 'the age of sympathy,' theatre served as a crucial example and proof of sympathy. Furthermore, the empathiser/sympathiser was labelled as a 'spectator' and 'beholder,' while the subject of the original emotions was marked as a 'spectacle' and 'actor.' Some theories of sympathy went on to state that the practice involves an exchange of positions, whereby the spectator becomes the spectacle, since the former imagines the situation *from the perspective* of the latter. This perspective-shifting was introduced into the concept of sympathy at the same time as first-person novels — narratives written in the first-person singular form the point of view of a particular character — were taking up the role of popular culture. First-person novels and conceptualisations of sympathy not only corresponded to each other in terms of perspective-taking and sharing of emotions, but both also conspicuously spread and increased in popularity in temporal coincidence. In the course of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and the eighteenth century, the concept of sympathy and various forms of the first-person perspective influenced each other reciprocally, both revolving around mental and *emotional concord* and *understanding* between two beings.

This focus on harmony was substituted for *embodiment* in the nineteenth century due to a shift in observation practices. New discoveries in human anatomy separated the body into distinct systems, which led to the establishment of optics as a separate field. Consequently, this field produced devices that took advantage of the new findings about the properties of human vision and presented optical illusions. A new form of the first-person perspective emerged in the form of a stereoscope, which required the viewer's body (eyes) for completion of the spectacle. This 'subjective vision' engendered by the new first-person perspective device contributed to a leap in empathy studies. The new term 'Einfühlung' was coined to embed empathy into aesthetics and explain the emotional effect of certain spectacles as a relation (agreement or disagreement) between the object and the body. The study of empathy was abandoned shortly after this new direction, only to be resurrected in philosophy and neuroscience in the 1980s and the 1990s. This is also the time when the embodiment and subjectivity in the first-person perspective reached its full potential via interactive simulations. As computer games and virtual reality literally put users into the shoes of characters and allowed them to look into

virtual environments through their eyes, the simulation theory of empathy was developed, to describe the process of empathy in comparable terms. This conceptualisation of empathy as a response of the body to observed or imagined stimuli was further supported by the discovery of mirror neurons. Mirror neurons are conceived as scientific proof of the simulation theory, and even of empathy in general, since they activate both when the subject's body makes a movement as well as when the subject only perceives someone else performing the movement. The defining feature of the manner in which empathy has been theorised and the first-person perspective has developed across media during the nineteenth and twentieth century is an emphasis on the location and sensory experience of the body.

Since the emergence of social media and lightweight capturing devices (including smartphones), a new episteme is beginning to take shape as both empathy studies and first-person perspectives are increasingly preoccupied with *similarity*. The first-person perspectives in photography and videos on social media is increasingly marked by a demonstration of an identity representative of a specific social group. Consequently, the first-person singular becomes a manifestation of the first-person plural. The target viewers are thus not supposed to be confronted with a completely different perspective that could enrich their repertoire of viewpoints, but rather ought to see *themselves in the subject* of the first-person perspective. Comparably, theorists of empathy have recently started to claim, that people more readily and easily empathise with others, who they perceive as similar or as members of the same social group. Scholars have also warned, that when the identity of the first-person plural 'we' is created against the third-person plural 'they', then empathy or lack thereof towards the Other can turn the phenomenon into a mechanic of exclusion. Similarly, the first-person plural in cultural products is also criticised in media studies for reinforcing an aesthetic of oppression, control, and narcissism. This thesis has thus ultimately arrived not only at the limits of what empathy and the first-person perspective can do to create a more connected society, but also what are the perhaps inherent dangers and 'side-effects' of the two phenomena. However, it is still too early to know how the 'episteme of similarity' will further change empathy studies and applications of the first-person perspective.

Although I have successfully answered the research question and fulfilled my objectives, the resulting research nonetheless suffers from several limitations. Due to the historical breadth against a shortage of research time and scope of the project, I was forced to be very selective in my discourse analysis and discussion of examples. Although I did choose primary sources representative of broader themes and trends in particular eras, an expanded version of this thesis ought to include a greater number of analysed texts that would create a stronger support for the presented claims. On that note, the research would also benefit from examining examples that diverge from the prevalent

stream. This also applies to the omissions I made due to my focus on the parallels between the first-person perspective and empathy studies. The biggest omission was made in terms of the 'theory theory of empathy,' an approach to empathy that was popular prior to the creation of the simulation theory of empathy and continues to be advocated by some scholars. Furthermore, the scope of this thesis in regards to chosen cultural examples, discourse, and theory was limited only to sources in English and German, and my approach was overall grounded in a 'Western' perspective. It was beyond the scale and timeframe of this thesis, as well as my language barriers, to answer the central question in a global approach. I, nonetheless, believe that the question could benefit from tracing the entanglement from different knots geographically by examining the various linguistic and cultural permutations of the term empathy beyond the English and German tradition, and the West overall. It would be very interesting to see how empathy was conceptualised and developed throughout history in these cultures and whether the concept was also influenced by the first-person perspective in media. Even more so, it would also be valuable to know whether the first-person perspective is as prominent outside of the Western tradition and how it has been applied in these contexts.

Speaking of future work on this topic, there are several inquiries and avenues my research opens up. On the basis of my conclusions, there does seem to be a link between the first-person perspective and the conceptualisation of empathy. But it remains unclear, how the actual affective state of empathy is connected to the first-person perspective. The first immediate question is whether the first-person perspective is able to facilitate or even substitute the process of empathy. Another conspicuous inquiry is whether the first-person perspective or its specific applications can have the effect of making consumers more empathetic. In regards to violence, how does the execution or witnessing of virtual violence from the first-person perspective in media correspond to such an experience in real life? How is the self and one's ability to empathise affected by such potentially traumatising or desensitising virtual experiences? The relationship between empathy and the first-person perspective could also be further examined in terms of epistemology, phenomenology, and ontology; what are the parallels and differences in how empathy and the first-person perspective generate and frame knowledge? How the two 'unlock' the consciousness and sensory experience of another being? What these phenomena are exactly and how their existence relates to one another? It would also be interesting for media studies and psychology to investigate the role of empathy as a characteristic of human nature in the production of first-person perspective works. Is the continuous use and consumption of the first-person perspective perhaps propelled by our inherent desire to empathise with other people? Or does rather lack of empathy provoke creators to generate more compassion within the society via the first-person perspective? Beyond

the philosophical and psychological avenues of future research, there is also the more debated societal relevance of the relationship between the first-person perspective and empathy. Are we indeed in a crisis of empathy, as Sherry Turkle claims? If so, how is the simulated empathy in the form of the first-person perspective affecting the situation? While the first-person perspective has already collected a decent amount of critique, empathy still holds a favourable position in most debates. But based on the possible issues and negative consequences of empathy exposed in the last chapter, should empathy in itself really be perceived as marker of a compassionate society? In other words, should empathy be sought after? Or are perhaps both empathy and the first-person perspective in themselves egoistic, narcissistic, and self-centred? I hope that this thesis will spark interest and impel other scholars to pick up these loose ends and further expand our knowledge about the fascinating relationship between the first-person perspective and empathy.

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