

# Zoom's worst side-effect? Staring at yourself

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Larry Ryan

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In the time it takes me to close the 47 unread tabs on my browser, it will be coming up to a year since we were all forced to swap face-time for Zoom. That is, the pandemic brought an end to faltering, overly long, in-person meetings, and gave us faltering, overly long, video gatherings on Zoom. Or the GoogleMeetHangout. Also accidental WhatsApp group calls. And, for barely 15 seconds, Houseparty.

Throughout this year of video conferencing, I've spent a lot more time than I would care to staring at my own face. My awful, actually maybe not too bad, mainly just really, really average face.

It's hard not to get almost hypnotised by our faces as we bounce from Zoom call to Zoom call. Broadcasting from our makeshift little home offices with nowhere to go, there isn't much else to distract us. We're supposed to be listening to a colleague or a family member, but our gaze starts to fall on the box with our own head in it. Despite the years of selfies, we're not quite used to so much relentless live footage of our own faces. It took many of us until the second lockdown to realise that you could get rid of your own screen from the array of Zoom heads. Hide self-view. But then, once we did that, we started to wonder-worry what we were actually doing with our faces while we tried to listen intently to whoever was speaking. Show self-view.

The first thing I noticed that I didn't like about looking at myself was that I seemed to talk out the side of my mouth. It's as if I'm not fully able to open it; words get caught on the way out. Sometimes when gossiping with a friend I will talk with an exaggerated stage-whisper out of the extreme side of my mouth, like a taxi driver saying something risqué over his shoulder, but seeing it thrown back to me on screen was chastening.

It was then that I focused on the bottom half of my face. I've long disliked my impending double-chin – your family jowls, your Mitch McConnell. But I was gaining a new, terrible perspective on it. I took to covering my chinless chin with my hand, hiding that sucker in faux concentration. I hoped colleagues and friends and family couldn't see the ensuing skin-sagging horror hanging below. But mainly, I hid it so I couldn't see it. Of course, presumably most people weren't really paying much attention to me. They were doing what I was doing.

I adjusted the screen often, pushing it forward and back, vainly hoping I would find the perfect angle and light. Why did I look so wan compared to everyone else? Maybe I just needed one of those influencer lights you hear so much about. (Is there a tax break for them?) But light can only do so much.

I am, of course, exaggerating. I don't actually hate my face. Well, I do, but not *that* much. It's more a minor architectural eyesore than an industrial blot on the landscape. I suppose my point is that we all shouldn't be seeing ourselves for so long, so often. It's not natural.

The intense focus of the past year – on our own faces, on our own walls, on our own screens, on our own cooking – has seemed unrelenting, inescapable. There is no release valve, or gentle way to ease ourselves away from this focus.

There is a line in Dana Spiotta's 2001 novel *Lightning Field* that has always stayed with me, or rather, that I quote tritely from time to time: "The truth of things was revealed in their destruction." Since the pandemic began we have seen versions of this play out on scales big and small. Concepts that were taken as a given; values, ideas and institutions held to be certain, were all splayed and squeezed to their limit, their strengths and truths tested and traced, many altering in ways we didn't all envisage.

Sitting at my laptop, day by day, Zoom by Zoom, I saw the truth of my face. There's a mental vision I had of this face before I was so endlessly confronted with the reality: one better proportioned, more angular. In fact, I almost got a photo of it, or something close to it. Back at the last New Year's Eve party pre-pandemic – PP – someone took a picture of me almost how I would like to be. I'm smiling, my jaw and chin vaguely defined. I'm holding a drink. I'm in company. It feels optimistic. It was all downhill from there.

This past year, we have all been stuck staring at these video screens: speaker, gallery, fullscreen, share screen, pin, remove pin. But mainly, if we're honest, we've been looking at ourselves. Our pandemic mirror.

It has felt almost like one of those intense acting methods, where a teacher with a dramatic scarf and a coterie of former theatre-kid acolytes insists on "breaking down" his students' characters so they can be later built back up as blank-slate performers. Except the teacher's plan doesn't extend beyond the deep navel-gazing and breaking down part.

After an extremely long stint, it looks like we might be slowly emerging out of the pandemic – stretching, blinking into the light, touching our faces. We can't be sure how we'll feel, beyond the initial blessed relief. But we'll surely be changed in ways we can't fully chart yet. I will be happy, though, to not be looking at my own face quite so regularly. Leave meeting.