

Masks: The Face between Bodies and Networks

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I

Over the past year with increasing intensity an image has occupied the faces featured across media. From the Australian forest fires to the ongoing Covid-19 epidemic, a visual production of emergency, disease, epidemic containment, and security is materialised in a particular piece of protection: the mask. From gas masks to surgical masks, the covered mouth and nose has become a sign of affected bodies. In this short piece we trace the presences and functions of the masks that permeate our contemporary moment as a key proxy of cultural politics centred on the body. The mask articulates tensions between self and other, public and private, identification and obfuscation, contact and containment, inhabitability and uninhabitability, as well as contagion and immunity. The bans against the covered face in Europe are now giving way, acknowledging the medical necessity of covering the face. The emergent political stance to protect breathing must be set against a longer duration of measures of protection and harm, of breathing and denial of breath in ways that amplifies Achille Mbembe's recent point about the long history of attacking the respiratory tract, having constrained "entire segments of the world population, entire races, to a difficult, panting breath and life of oppression."^[1] Thus, this text argues that it is through contexts of immunity and air – breathability – that we come to understand the broader political stakes of the present as well as the histories in which the mask sits.

The mask tells a story in connection to, but beyond the scale of, the body. Let's call it network culture: connections, proximity, and communication have become both the rhetorical and operational backbone of contemporary culture's obligatory, and inflated, sense of staying in touch. The face value of what is measurable (facial recognition) and what is hidden (the mask as protection, as obfuscation, as medical means of containment) is at the centre of many measures that link the body to the contemporary technological dimension of network cultures. The body is a key scalar device through which issues that have to do with connection are experienced: whether it is more desirable aspects of connectivity like leisurely communication online or more overtly perilous ones like the infrastructure of travel through which pathogens propagate. Now this question is activated with the prospect of contact tracing apps emerging as data-driven insight into the trajectory of bodies and diseases. National contexts of governance and the digital platforms on which tracing is handled are two key contexts here.

Viral contagions include also other elements of social, political and economic repercussions. The mask is a regulatory device at the threshold of war, illness, the clinic, belief and other spatial, temporal, and epistemological arrangements where a body changes its status based on the mask one wears. Once a part of specialist use on the military front – like in chemical trench warfare in World War I – the mask gradually has become a key material object of modern cultures of protection and identification alongside the procedural uses of Personal Protective Equipment

(PPE).[2] The martial and the clinical do not only relate to each other on a symbolic level but also approximate procedurally: how the body is protected, exposed, regulated in a hostile environment.

II

The mask features as an object of debate in terms of different capacities of the bodies involved pending on which side of the mask you are facing. Masks not only protect bodies but also visually mark and differentiate them as well as their capacities to relate to one another. Biological, epidemiological and medical forms of advice and knowledge are the key in determining (effective) operations of healthcare and management of epidemics. Yet the mask undeniably also signifies immunity (as exception, as privilege, as exclusion) mobilised on a broader political level. The statistical calculation of herd immunity thresholds have become an inflamed part of the debates about the right measures of response, but the question of immunity is also a recurring term and a technique in defining groups, communities, insides and outsides.

Immunity defined as the capacity to distinguish between self and non-self is a key concept in contemporary political theory and philosophy, developed at length by Roberto Esposito.[3] How immunity itself should be defined and enacted on a political level is a prevailing question in these contexts, pertaining to the ways in which exceptions (immunity as being exempt from what is shared by the community or a privilege enjoyed on an exclusive basis) should be applied and regulated. Hostility in regimes of identification is itself a tool of governmentality, such as in the targeting of people without the right legal documents as well as targeting the Windrush generation as part of the Hostile Environment Policy of the past Conservative governments in the UK.

The dangerous overtones of the division between the known and the unknown continue when the discussion about immunity moves from the viral agents of infection to the affected people. This includes the range of racist and xenophobic attacks and slurs registered on a Wikipedia page as well as the emergence of “maskaphobia” in Britain especially targeting the Chinese community.[4] In discussions of health management the question of masks also includes the wider racialised public sphere, that crude division between the Other (mask) vs. Self. Indeed, in such terms, choosing to wear a mask or not translates into a choice between two bad alternatives:

Many Chinese students feel that the issue of the mask is the single biggest cultural shock they have ever experienced in the UK. They are now facing a dilemma and have to choose between two bad choices - insecurity (for coronavirus) and fear (for racism).

Stigmatisation via physical, visual cues such as masks builds up in relation to already existing racist infrastructures of emotion and affect. The racialised treatment of bodies of Muslim women in veil has been one core defining axis of political debate related to Europe and immunity (at which threshold of visibility can one be said to “belong” to

Europe?) only now it is problematised by the secular *necessity* of covering up the face with a mask.

The notion of the healthy body of the nation in contrast with that of the “outsider” migrant is central to the immunologic operative in international responses. Thus there are many subtle (and some less subtle) links between the non-human agent of the Covid-19 and the current refugee and asylum seeker crisis on the outer border of Europe, a zone of intensive humanitarian crisis of its own already. As voiced in recent writing emerging in critical legal studies and spatial justice by Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos the ethics of Covid-19 have to do with the positioning of bodies and their relations, thus implying that:

Covid demands an ethics of self-positioning (physically and at the same time ethically) in relation to other bodies, of removing ourselves from the collectivity that we might harm despite our best intentions, of thinking beyond the edge of our skin. Covid must be stopped from reaching the vast refugee camps across the world. Covid must remain a developed country disease where national health systems are generally better equipped to deal with the crisis. [\[5\]](#)

III

Covid-19 arrived at the scene intensifying an already existing crisis of air, breathing, and lack of breath that has become relatively mundane in urban areas, provoking different kinds of responses within the field of culture: consider here the para-medical approach of George Smudge in Gordon Matta-Clark’s 1972 pseudonymic performance, which offered fresh air with an oxygen mask, as a case in point.



Gordon Matta-Clark, *Fresh Air Cart* (1972).

From urban art performance to current cities, masks have been normalised in contexts of extreme air pollution in many global urban centres, but they have also already been in wide usage in contexts of mass protests and excessive use of tear gas as another expression of the bad air of urbanism.^[6] In other words, masks protecting from tear gas can also be placed in the story of modern weaponised policing of space, evident in its historical dimension of chemical warfare.^[7]

The politics of masks has been part and parcel in the broader democratic context of mass assembly since the late 1990s. Masks used for concealing one's identity and to protect oneself from teargas become one in certain contexts, as during the Gezi protest in Istanbul in 2013. Efforts by nation states and platform actors to push legislation against the use of masks as devices to hide identity has not stopped masks from becoming synonymous with unrest and protest globally. The Guy Fawkes mask is an obvious example of many visual techniques marking the body as *this body here, seen but unidentifiable*. Legislation controlling masks in the public sphere, especially in Europe, has historically not only been concerned with preempting dissent but also regulating religious signs such as the veil. The current shift towards enforcing the

wearing of masks is an interesting shift in this regard with the pandemic being an organising centre for the distribution of covered faces rather than theistic cosmologies.

The etymological root of epidemic as *epi-demos*, upon the people, is one apt reference point to understand the ways in which bodies, affects, social ties, and measures of protection and modelling meet as part of the contemporary context of contagions. Alongside other key material symbols and actual architectures of contagious events, such as the cruise ship, the quarantine home, the hospital ward, the Zoom call (and its dubious, leaky security standards), and the empty urban streets, the mask is thus one object through which to read contemporary contagions as telling tales of social relations as they are revealed but also stretched at the moment of crisis.

The appearance and proliferation of masks allow us to look at different historical conjunctions in which such dynamics might be manifest. After the death of a physician who refused to wear a mask during the pneumonic plague epidemic in Manchuria, 1910–11, a doctor reported that

panic reigned everywhere, and perhaps for the first time in this period...members of the public in all stations of life understood the true significance of this dreadful pest in their midst... [and] the simple protective gauze-and-cotton masks began to make their appearance among the workers... Perhaps during the panic the inhabitants showed undue precaution, in that almost everyone in the street was seen to wear one form of mask or another, though not all of them were worn in the proper way. Some of these masks were to be seen suspended loosely from the ears, while some were even worn around the necks like amulets.[\[8\]](#)

Although our brief notes concern the contemporary moment, the present may be meaningfully read against such historical precedents that feature as narratives that might help to make sense of which thing protects what body, and how and by whom is the priority of bodies decided. The story of the current pandemic will be shaped by the heterogeneous distribution of protective measures like masks (as well as facts and rumours around them) as much as the contagiousness of the infection. What spreads is a whole cascade of words, images, materials, viruses, protective measures, policy statements, and reactions in this media ecology of masks where the anthropological, the medical and the mediatic fold as a Kleinian surface of insides and outsides, skins and masks.

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[1] <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe/>

[2] https://www.who.int/medical_devices/meddev_ppe/en/.

[3]<https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Immunitas%3A+The+Protection+and+Negation+of+Life-p-9780745649139> + <https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/baos>

[4]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xenophobia_and_racism_related_to_the_2019%E2%80%9320_coronavirus_pandemic; <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/mar/17/chinese-students-flee-uk-after-maskphobia-triggered-racist-attacks>

[5] <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/13/covid-the-ethical-disease/>

[6]<https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/yigit-soncul-on-masks-and-emergency-in-turkey/>

[7]<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3619-made-in-usa-anna-feigenbaum-discusses-tear-gas>

[8] As quoted in Ann G. Carmichael's text "SARS and Plagues Past" <https://www.mqup.ca/sars-in-context-products-9780773531932.php#!prettyPhoto>.