

ARNE HARMS

Fortifying breath in this moment of spray: face masks beyond COVID-19

As I write this, the face mask finally triumphs across Europe. Hitherto restricted to Asia, and figuring as a signifier of public health fallouts and a means of new rounds of racialisation, this uncomely thing promises a degree of normality in anything by normal times. This article thinks with, and through, these small, intricate things. Face masks highlight two dynamics which have salience well beyond the current pandemic moment: airborne mutualities and body fortification.

We live through a moment of spray in, what Mascot calls, an age of fallout. Air has become once again suspicious. I hear friends elaborating on how far viruses travel in droplet suspended in air, along which trajectories they move, and, ultimately, where safety lies. This resonates well with all too familiar notions of contagion, culminating in class segregation and the emergence of modern hygiene. Yet it also highlights profound ambiguities toward air, its temporal indices and the mutualities sustained through breathing. Breath and air elude control. To stop breathing is not an option. While the atmosphere continues figuring as a giant floating dump, failed by governance for being so vast, dynamic and elusive. Alongside concerns for radioactive fallout, air pollution or ungentle smell, the COVID-19 pandemic calls forth an obsession with spray. Spray's reach is limited: dangerous viral components die rather quickly and are trapped in clumsy ephemeral droplets. The obsession with spray culminates in the certainly justified impulse to disrupt airborne mutualities. Writing on a near future India, novelist Prayaag Akbar envisions attempts to seal off the air above residential enclaves in order to provide for airborne mutualities only among segregated caste-based communities. Stopping short of this grand gesture, the present moment is one of small devices promising to segregate the air by way of filtering out or keeping in. If filtering spray involves denying generalised airborne mutualities, it still bolsters a small fraction thereof. Updating Sahlins, free floating air flags the most intimate circuits of mutuality: I am closest kin to those whose air I breathe, nuclear families and flat mates, perhaps.

To deny airborne mutualities through a face mask operates at the level of the individual body. Steering clear from class segregation and social engineering, these little devices seem unburdened by power. But as means of fortifying bodily edges, they carry a politics. Updating sex, breath becomes a hinge, as Foucault had it, between individual and population bodies. The fortification of body openings marks the individualisation of health policies and yet another marketable biopolitical intervention. Fortification is the burden of the individual, and is eligible for convenient policing, while reinforcing the modern fiction of treating the body as a separate whole. Metonymically, air masks flag larger trends of foolproofing futures by way of fortifying, securitising and technopolicing borders and crossings.

Alerting to mutualities, airborne and otherwise, spray holds potential to those striving for planetary wellbeing and justice. It warrants critical attention, and not oblivion once this moment of face masks passes.

Arne Harms 
Institute of Anthropology
University of Leipzig
Leipzig 04109
Germany
arne.harms@uni-leipzig.de

KIM HENDRICKX

Contagion and memory

Observing voices claim that times are troubling, when they really mean that times are interesting. Interesting to analyse society when it supposedly lays bare its hidden structures.

When our so-called routines sit sadly, beaten and broken, in the pale dawn of the biggest breaching experiment since ‘breaching’ was termed. Seeing it that way, social science and capitalism have seldom sat closer. But COVID-19 is not an experiment, even though it sounds like one. Do people with lost income offer an ‘opportunity’ to observe ‘the weak points of the economy’? Is the triage of patients a ‘test case’ for the ‘resilience of the health care system’? Talk of resilience and opportunities turn inequalities and tragedies into solvable problems: next time we’ll do better. And we probably will, in the richer parts of the world, with more masks and tests, decent medical equipment and homes to comfortably quarantine in. Like sheltering for a storm and waiting still for it to pass.

Meanwhile, the virus brings many stories. One is about bats and deforestation; about the nonhuman in political negotiation. Yet my own taste for more-than-human ecologies didn’t prepare me for humanness lost. When I hear that people lose their loved ones and they cannot start remembering. So let’s think about memory. Our policies are forever fleeing into the future until the present catches up with us. The system’s weaknesses are hastily scrutinised in order to run faster with a new plan. But the plan leaves little place for practising memory. When the news came of a virus in China, we were merely reminded of infectious disease touching worlds where our memory doesn’t reach. We know about SARS and avian flu, Ebola and Zika, and we know that honourable experts and billionaire philanthropists have been warning for worse. But just ‘knowing’ doesn’t enlarge our memory; it doesn’t constitute collectives for sharing memory; it doesn’t cultivate responsibility. We didn’t take any sign seriously because our memory halts at national borders, even though our economic goods know better.