

CLOSE-UP-NESS

MASKS, SCREENS, AND CELLS

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SCREEN
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The pandemic reshapes not only our habits, but also our environment. It does so by supporting the creation of existential bubbles –often in the form of restrained cells– in which we shrink our range of action, but also in which we can feel safe. And it does so mostly thanks to two media that the pan-

demic brings to the fore and that deeply affect their users' spatial perception: the mask and the screen. I will start from these media and their ability to remediate our usual spatial coordinates, and then conclude with the bubble and the cell as an increasingly mediated form of spatiality.

THE MASK AND THE SCREEN

We cannot think of the pandemic without thinking of the *mask*. It is no longer the beak-like mask filled with aromatic items that doctors wore during the historical plagues; it is a surgical mask, a N-95 model, a scarf on the nose and mouth, or a personalized facial cover. Aimed at reducing both our exposure to the virus and the possibility of spreading it, the mask is a further layer between us and the surrounding world. It works as a filter and a protection: it holds the dangerous droplets, and, in this way, it purifies the air that we breathe. While crossing a dangerous space, we create a safe zone around us that keeps the disease away from us and people close to us. On the other hand, the mask also works as a signal: while hiding our face, it displays our care for ourselves and for others –not to mention, particularly in the USA, our political affiliation. It speaks on our behalf, to say so.

The pandemic is equally epitomized by the *screen*. The screen is the surface that allows us to stay in touch with whom and what we would otherwise have lost. We no longer go into a classroom: we attend a seminar on our computers. We no longer support our team from the stands of a stadium: we watch the game on our TV set. And we no longer take part in our usual meetings in-person: we attend them on video chat. When the pandemic began, our lives moved on to the screen: it is there that now we can enjoy contact with others and the world. Like the mask, the screen is a display: it puts in sight the impermanent images that act as a proxy for what we no longer experience in person. And, like the mask, the screen is also a filter and a protection: not by chance, prior to its visual connotation that emerged only at the end of the 18th century¹, the word ‘screen’ designated “A contrivance for warding off the heath of a fire or a draught of air [...] A partition of wood or stone [...] dividing a room or building in two parts” and “An apparatus used in the sifting grain, coal, etc.” (Murray, Bradley, Craigie, & Onions, 1914, p. 272). The screen of our optical devices, from the TV set to the computer, preserves this idea of filter and protection: what appears on the

surface is just an image that selects only few traits from reality and does not expose us to a direct engagement with it. Through the screen, we breathe a 'purified' world.

The mask and screen do not only share crucial features, but they also provide mutual compensations. Thanks to the mask, we can safely move around and experience in person what on screen we experience by proxy. And thanks to the screen, especially in online conversations, we can drop the mask and look at each other's faces naked. Each medium can take on one part of the work from the other and exempt it from its duties, with mutual relief. The most significant consequence is that the surcharge of mediation with reality required by the pandemic can stop at some point. From this point of view, the mask and screen are swappable.

Their intimate complicity becomes even clearer if we look at the ways in which they elicit a deep redefinition of the space around us. Indeed, the mask and the screen 'remediate' the sense of 'closeness' and 'distance' in our social interactions: while reframing the ways we cope with whatever or whomever we encounter, they reshape the setting in which we perform our actions—in a word, they reshape our 'environment'.

CLOSENESS AND DISTANCE

Four simple examples can help us to grasp this process. During the pandemic, we can still meet other people in-person, yet we are recommended, and sometimes required, to do this under two conditions: to wear a face covering, and to keep a social distance of six feet. These two rules, which ultimately respond to common sense, nevertheless spoil the idea of 'being together': we are close to someone else, but not as close as we could, or even should, be. The mask and six feet of distance are a barrier that the muffling of the sound of the face covering further enhances: we are together but split. Hence a contradictory situation: while approaching somebody, we feel a gap that we are unable to fill. In a word: we

experience 'a distance within a closeness'. The reiterated protests against face covering and the recurring claims that the pandemic brings with it a loss of freedom (Agamben, 2020)² uncover the difficulty to cope with a spatial contradiction more than a real political question. Masks imply a conundrum: when wearing them, proximity also means separation.

Second example. Despite the pandemic, we can decide to meet people without wearing a mask, in an attempt to restore an intimacy otherwise lost. We get rid of a barrier—and we get rid of a spatial contradiction. Proximity not only returns to being what it was, but it even radicalizes itself: now it relies on an act of removal—we dropped the mask—and therefore it conveys the sense of a 'closeness within a closeness'.

Third example. If we practice a self-isolation, our contact with the outside world depends on our internet connection—be it provided by a router, a cable, or a hotspot. What happens when this connection is lost? Literally, we are disconnected: we can't reach what or whom we want, and this condition puts us in a state of distress, if not of discomfort. Whom or what we are looking for may not be too far from us, but the limitations in mobility bolstered by the pandemic make almost impossible to find a remedy for this persistent separation. We experience 'a distance within a distance'. The blank screen of our computers or the blank display of our smartphones bear witness to this situation: they denote a radical severance in space and cyberspace (Rancière, 2008)³. Finally, we can encounter our colleagues, friends, teachers, bosses, and so on, thanks to platforms like *Zoom* or *Microsoft Teams*. These platforms allow conveners to be physically distant yet visually close. On our screens, we can address interlocutors that, while not actually present, nevertheless are fully within view and react to our presence. Karin Knorr Cetina (2009) calls these encounters "synthetic situations" because, unlike face-to-face encounters analyzed at length by Goffman, they include both real and virtual elements. I am less interested in the comparison with live encounters, and more in the arrangement of settings. Indeed, in these situations we deal with the merging of two different spaces. The space of the other, to which we do not belong, comes

to us, and pops up on the screen in front of us; once on the screen, this space is subsumed by our own space, eliciting what Shaun Moores (2004) appropriately calls the “doubling of the place”. When this imbrication of spaces is perfected, we can address somebody who is not here and yet is here, at least virtually; with the consequence to ultimately experience ‘a closeness within a distance’. Such a remediation of the distance reverses the logic of our first case: if the mask was an obstacle in a potentially intimate situation, inserting a barrier between two entities ready to meet, here the screen is a bridge towards somebody or something that is not—and will never be—at hands, but becomes in some way attainable.

In these synthetic situations, the ‘closeness’ that we experience ‘within a distance’ depends more on the configuration of the image on the screen than on the image’s mere content. In an online conversation, in most cases, a large section of the screen’s surface is occupied by the face of my interlocutor. Indeed, it is the scale of this face that ultimately creates the strong sense of intimacy that sustains my conversation (Doane, 2003; 2009). Relocated on screen, and stripped of its mask, a face must be big, if it wants to be near to me. In other words, to defeat distance in a synthetic situation, we need close-ups. As consequence, closeness becomes ‘close-up-ness’.

CLOSE-UPS

Film theorists frequently discussed the very nature of close-up—a typology that found its apex in shots in which a face or an object filled the entire frame, but that applied to all shots in which the represented reality was offered in a relevant scale, consequently including also wide close-ups and medium close shots. Among these theorists, Jean Epstein offered a suggestive first-person depiction of the impact that close-ups had on spectators in his 1921 essay *Magnification* (Epstein, 1921/1988). The opening of the essay is stunning: “I will never find the way to say how I love American close-ups. Point blank. A head suddenly appears on screen and drama,

now face to face, seems me personally and swells with an extraordinary intensity. I am hypnotized” (Epstein, 1988, p. 235). Such an intense implication of spectators is elicited by the apparent abolition of any distance: “The close-up modifies the drama by the impact of proximity. Pain is within reach. If I stretch out my arm, I touch you, and that is intimacy” (Epstein, 1921/1988, p. 239). A particularly intense relationship is established between the screen and the auditorium: “The close-up is an intensifying agent because of its size alone” (Epstein, 1921/1988, p. 239). What emerges, is a sort of a communion with what is represented on the screen: “Never before has a face turned to mine in that way. [...] It is in me like a sacrament” (Epstein, 1921/1988, p. 239). Yet, while filling the gap between the screen and spectators, close-ups also put spectators in a state of isolation. “Wrapped in darkness, ranged in the cell-like seats, directed toward the source of emotion by their softer side, the sensibilities of the entire auditorium converge, as if in a funnel, toward the film. Everything else is barred, excluded, no longer valid” (Epstein, 1988, pp. 239-240). Spectators are at once fused with the images—which work as a proxy for objects still distant—and severed from the world—which retreats from spectators’ attention.

Epstein offers a helpful description of the dynamics that close-ups activate. On the one hand, he confirms what we already found in synthetic situations: close-ups bring our interlocutors on screen near to us, despite the fact that they are not—and will never be—physically present. This is why we experience a closeness in the distance. On the other hand, Epstein adds a crucial note: while absorbed by the images on the screen, we are also cut off from the world around. This creates a second distance: the immediate reality retreats, and it is no longer present to us. Synthetic situations practice also this second distance. When we are at the computer the setting is largely accessible, yet during online conversations this availability becomes partial. We immerse ourselves into our exchange, restricting our primary environment to the screen, and we put the remaining space ‘on reserve’, allow-

ing it to intervene only when the interaction with the screen requires it. Hence the creation of some sort of distance from our surroundings, which do not disappear, but withdraw⁴. This separation from the physical context—common both to cinema and to synthetic situations—brings to the fore a new crucial aspect: the emergence of a 'bubble' in which we can be at once in intimacy with an image and momentarily disengaged from the world. The bubble, as we will see, is a quite common spatial arrangement; 'this' bubble—the one that close-up creates—in some way is more peculiar. It has the characters of a 'cell', and as such it raises further questions.

BUBBLES AND CELLS

The idea of bubble is not new in Media Studies: it suffices to recall Michael Bull's analysis of the "mobile and privatized sphere of communication" that users of "mobile sound system, mobile phones, and personal stereo" build around them, while crossing the city (Bull, 2004). Peter Sloterdijk (2011; 2014, 2016) expanded this idea of sphere to all the spaces in which we live—and praised the current emergence of an aggregation of small spheres like foam instead of the all-inclusive globes represented by State, Nation, Humanity, and God⁵. More modestly, we can consider a 'bubble' as an enclosed sphere of experience that includes one or more elements engaged in a specific action and excludes the surrounding elements that do not directly affect this action. Consequently, a bubble relies at once on an inside and an outside, marked respectively by a closeness—the elements inside are in some way fused together—and a distance—the elements outside are suspended and no longer at hand.

The convergence of proximity and separation is crucial for the creation of a bubble. As we have seen, this is what we experience when, in front of a screen, we feel near to something that is absent at the expense of our immediate context. But we experience this convergence also when, wearing a mask,

we feel split from what or whom we are approaching. In both cases, closeness and distance work in concert, with the effect of creating a space of familiarity as opposed to a space that remains detached. Bubbles take shape precisely when these two spaces convene, just separated by an invisible border. Proximity and distance intersect—thanks to the presence of tools or media like the screen and the mask—and by doing so they create a peculiar spatial configuration.

I add that the infiltration of one element into the other makes this intersection even more iconic. A screen allows a closeness to creep into a distance, and in turn creates a split with the surroundings; wearing a mask allows a distance to creep into a closeness and shows that surroundings are not at hand. Such an insinuation is a sort of blow that literally inflates the bubble. We see a space of intimacy arising from a space of exclusion, and vice versa. In this sense, screen and mask are bubble-makers precisely because they put in conflict proximity and separation, instead of simply enhancing them. By letting one element infiltrate into the other, they give way to micro-situations in which we feel either a sense of commonality despite a detachment, or a detachment in a moment of possible fusion. Suspended between an interior and an exterior, in both cases we end up living in a bubble. Yet, there is another, more specific aspect that we must take in account. Let's go back to Jean Epstein: in order to underscore spectators' separation from the physical context, he speaks of "cell-like seats" in which they sit. 'Cell' is the right word: the bubble experienced by those who are in front of a screen or who wear a mask has all the features of a cell. Its space is minimal: it tends to include individuals and what immediately surrounds their bodies. It is a space of confinement: movements are limited, either because of the need to stay onscreen, or because of the need to respect social distancing. It is a modular space: its configuration is continuously reiterated, thus connecting the different cases. And it is a vital space: despite limitation, it allows us to pursue goals, to perform deeds, to accomplish tasks, and to express ourselves (Sloderdijk, 2016)⁶.

We can get a good idea of a cell-like space by attending a meeting on *Zoom*. All of the participants are portrayed in small vignettes next to each other like as in a beehive—except for the rectangular rather than hexagonal shape. These vignettes reveal only the face of the participants and a reduced part of the place from where they are speaking—a part that can be further concealed by artificial backgrounds added to the image. Such a reduction of the space reflects the rules of the game: in order to demonstrate engagement with the conversation, participants must minimize the elements in sight and at the same time align themselves with others. In a word, they must occupy, and become, cells. Sometimes, the narrowing of the space is unbearable: in this case, participants replace their face with their name and take a break. And yet, everyday existence persistently infiltrates the twofold cell in which participants are depicted and in which they work. In the vignette, participants often accept to appear as they are in a time of seclusion—imperfectly dressed and not well combed. In the real space, they often allow the everyday activity to contaminate their online interaction—while discussing, they eat, pat puppies, instruct kids, let partner appear, and so on. Cells frame, but also bear witness of the dynamic of life.

What is true for the screen, it is also true for the mask. Anyone wearing a mask moves around in tight spaces: gestures must be careful and restrained, distances must be appropriate, movement must be limited. In exchange, she can look at herself, and even dialogue with herself, as she rarely can. The space of isolation is also a space of introspection.

This coincidence of limitation and vitality echoes the two connotations implied in the idea of cell. On the one hand, the cell evokes disciplinary practices. In Foucault, it is one of the constitutive elements of the Panopticon, and more in general, it is one of the outcomes of the spatial distribution that discipline promotes (Foucault, 1995, p. 167). On the other hand, a cell is the basic biological unit of all organism, and in this respect is the smallest unit of life. This twofold reference

is wholly pertinent when we speak of the pandemic, in which disciplinary and biological aspects inextricably merge. By calling the bubbles created by screens and masks 'cells,' we foreground the disciplinary and organic resonances that the health crisis has so dramatically uncovered.

MEDIA AND ENVIRONMENTS

To build bubbles is quite a common activity. I already recalled the sonic bubble that headphones, i-phones, boom-boxes, or loudspeakers can create in apparently open spaces. Bubbles equally emerge when we isolate ourselves from our immediate context and we focus on a book or a newspaper—indeed, here the page plays the same role as the screen. Or when we deny attention to what is happening around us, and turn our head elsewhere—this time, it is this body gesture that plays the same role as the mask. Sloterdijk reads the city as composed of myriad bubbles, with buildings, streets, and squares shaping the urban space as if it were a foam (Sloterdijk, 2016, pp. 564–626). Social networks and videogames, GPS and wearable media create another multitude of bubbles for our everyday lives. We largely spend our existence into bubbles.

Such a ubiquity does not diminish the significance of the bubbles, especially of the bubbles we have examined. First, bubbles are peculiar spatial arrangements. Especially when the separation from the exterior becomes thin, this arrangement looks quite different from what we are used to call a 'place': it creates a more flexible entity that is neither necessarily defined once forever, nor dependent on recognizable external landmarks. This is the case of the fragile cells tied to the mask and screen: they elicit a 'modulation' of space more than a rigid localization (Deleuze, 1992)⁷. Second, bubbles largely rely on media, including unconventional media like the mask. Indeed, in order to modulate the physical space, bubbles employ physical tools that mold

and re-mold the surrounding reality, and by doing this they directly intervene in our interaction with the world and others (Siegert, 2015)⁸. This capacity to mold reality and promote mediation makes these tools become media, and consequently provides the bubbles with a series of techniques and technologies that support their action.

By working at once on space and with media, bubbles express the logic of what I elsewhere called 'mediascapes', i.e. spaces affected or appropriated by a medium (Casetti, 2018). Invisible spheres, they participate in the visible process that gives a new shape to our milieu, and progressively transforms it in a technically-oriented site of mediation. At the same time, these bubbles testify how the interaction of media and space sometimes leads to apparently paradoxical solutions. We saw how, in an emergency, a screen can remediate a distance into a closeness-within-a-distance, giving way to a 'close-up-ness'. The bubbles of the pandemic genetically reflect the bending of space created by media in a situation of general stress. In this sense, these bubbles not only cast light on the progressive mediatization of our territory—a process that has always accompanied us— but also uncover some of the collateral spatial-media effects that a crisis and its trauma can elicit.

NOTES

1 A good example of the emergence of the visual connotation of the word “screen” are two notices, respectively in *Cobbett's Political Register* (Vol. 2, London, Cox and Baylis, 1802, p. 1053) and in *The Monthly Magazine* (87, June 1802, p. 488): referring to the patent granted to Paul De Philipsthal on January 26, 1802, the two notes speak of a “transparent screen,” while, quite curiously, the text of the patent published few months before in *The Repertory of Arts and Manufactures* (vol. 16, London, Nichols and son, 1802, p. 303-305) reads “transparent body”.

2 The recurring theoretical framework in which the pandemic has been discussed is its complicity with a state of exception: see the controversial contribution by Giorgio Agamben, “L'invenzione di una epidemia”, *Il Manifesto*, February 26, 2020. In this framework, the re-definition of the spatial-temporal coordinates of our settings did not get the attention it deserved.

- 3 The severance is never irremediable: as Rancière brilliantly demonstrated, it is often the premise of a sense of community to which we, nevertheless, belong. See Jacques Rancière (2008), *Aesthetic separation, aesthetic community: Scenes from the aesthetic regime of art. Art & Research*, 2(1), 1-15.
- 4 This process is probably intensified by the popular use of artificial backgrounds: in front of the screen, we “project” ourselves into a different environment, with the effect of enhancing the separation from our context. I thank Carolyn Jacobs for bringing this component to my attention.
- 5 See Peter Sloterdijk’s trilogy *Spheres*, respectively *Bubbles*, *Globes*, and *Foam*, translated by Wieland Hoban. (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2011, 2014, 2016). Original: Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären*: Bd. 1; *Blasen* - Bd. 2. *Globen* – Bd. 3. *Schäume*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998-2004). The praise of small spheres like foam is developed in the third volume of the trilogy.
- 6 Peter Sloterdijk offers a characterization of the cell-like space in his description of the one-room apartment. *Spheres. Vol. 3. Foam*, pp. 529-542
- 7 On modulation of spaces, see Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October*, Vol. 59. (Winter, 1992), pp. 3-7
- 8 From this point of view, screen and mask are the bearers of a set of *cultural techniques* aimed at categorizing, activating, and transforming space. On cultural techniques as embodied in tools and as agents of categorization of real, see Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, 1-18. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.

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